

Bridge Tracker

Check the safety of bridges you cross

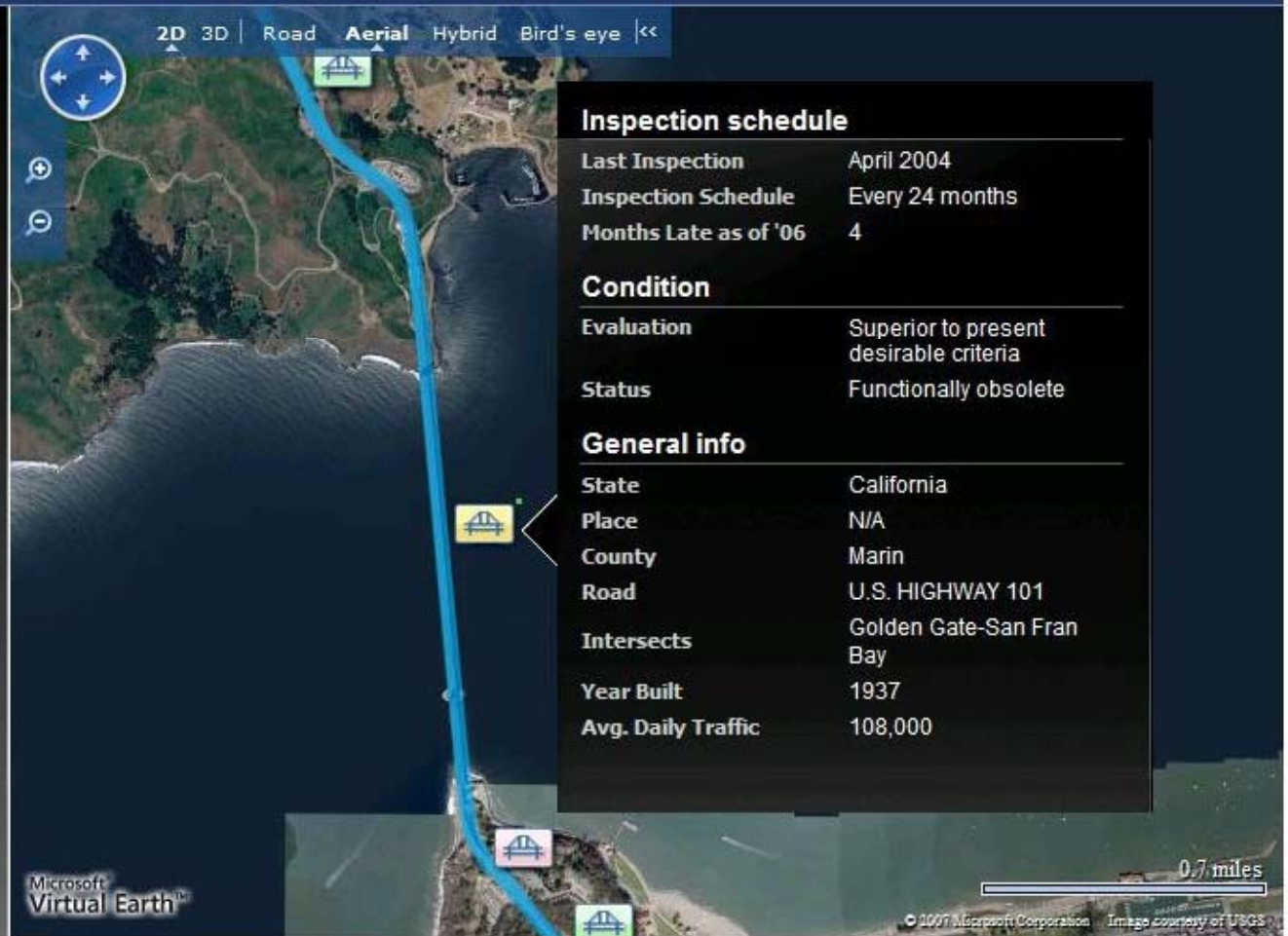
This map shows the condition and inspection dates for more than 100,000 bridges in the U.S. that are crossed by at least 10,000 vehicles per day. The records come from the latest National Bridge Inventory, as analyzed by msnbc.com. Inspections through 2006 are included. Only bridges, on/off ramps and overpasses within .2 miles of your chosen route are shown. The locations were provided by state departments of transportation. Some states are more accurate than others in mapping their bridges.

For the full story on bridge inspections, go to <http://bridges.msnbc.com>.

Start location

[help](#)

End location



2D 3D | Road **Aerial** Hybrid Bird's eye <<

Microsoft Virtual Earth™

0.7 miles

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Inspection schedule

Last Inspection	April 2004
Inspection Schedule	Every 24 months
Months Late as of '06	4

Condition

Evaluation	Superior to present desirable criteria
Status	Functionally obsolete

General info

State	California
Place	N/A
County	Marin
Road	U.S. HIGHWAY 101
Intersects	Golden Gate-San Fran Bay
Year Built	1937
Avg. Daily Traffic	108,000

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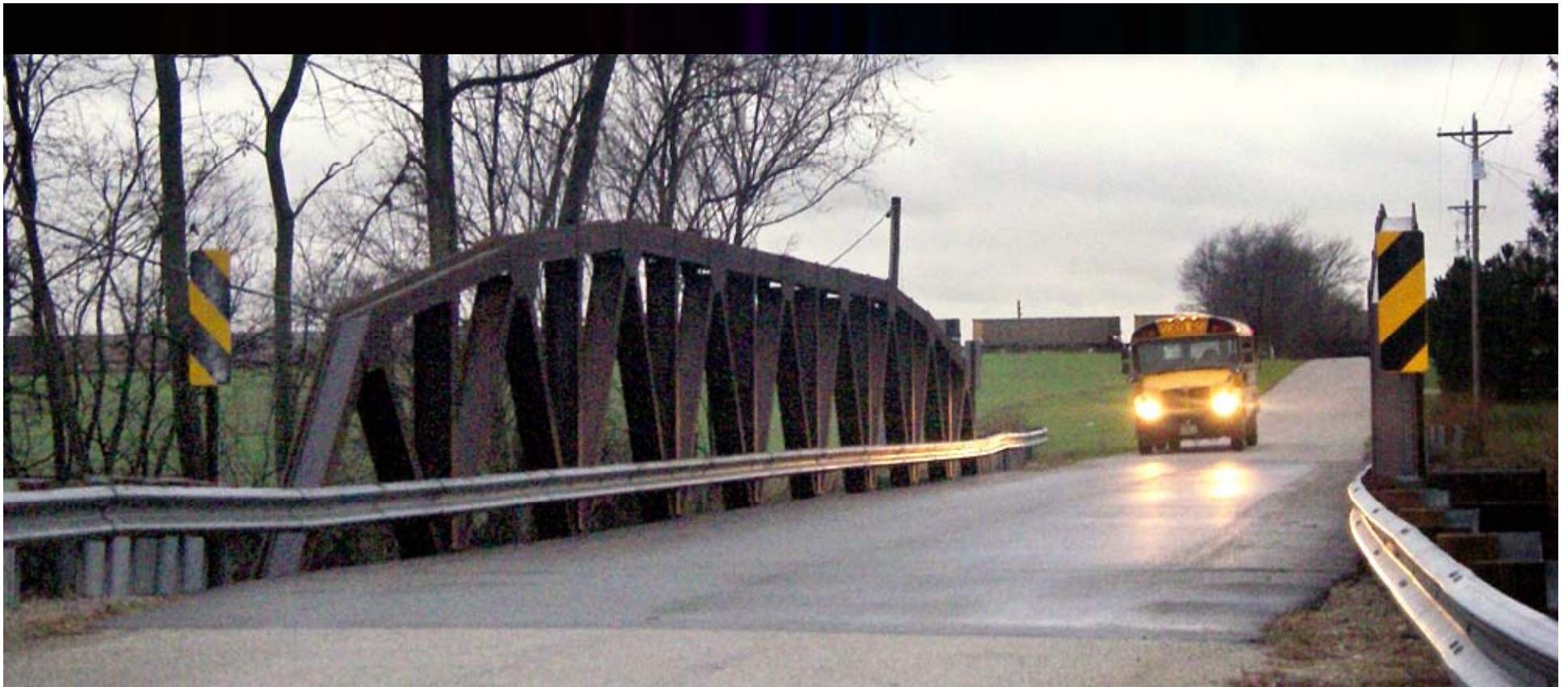
bridges.msnbc.com

Raw data for a single bridge...

```
0692700521210010100404100000GOLDEN GATE-  
SAN FRAN BAY U.S. HIGHWAY 101 04-MRN-101-  
L.01 999900000101000000101013749120012228  
36000641323212193706001080001999003350001  
001121067109999A5531331100300101891280502  
7903032032018902849999N0000N0000008165713  
9492N585381027423040424NNN065486006549098  
22919991N210000056000202Y817990020200000N  
N1190212070722FC11930720971220589
```

... that's a year late for inspection





A school bus on its morning run approaches a 107-year-old steel truss bridge near Circleville, Ohio. The fracture-critical span was one of at least 17,000 bridges in the U.S. that went more than two years between inspections. The county engineer said he saved about \$200 by putting off its checkup.

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Bill Dedman / msnbc.com

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After the Minneapolis bridge collapse, msnbc.com set out to investigate the state of inspections.

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Find bridges along a route

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Enter new route

Route options

Start location

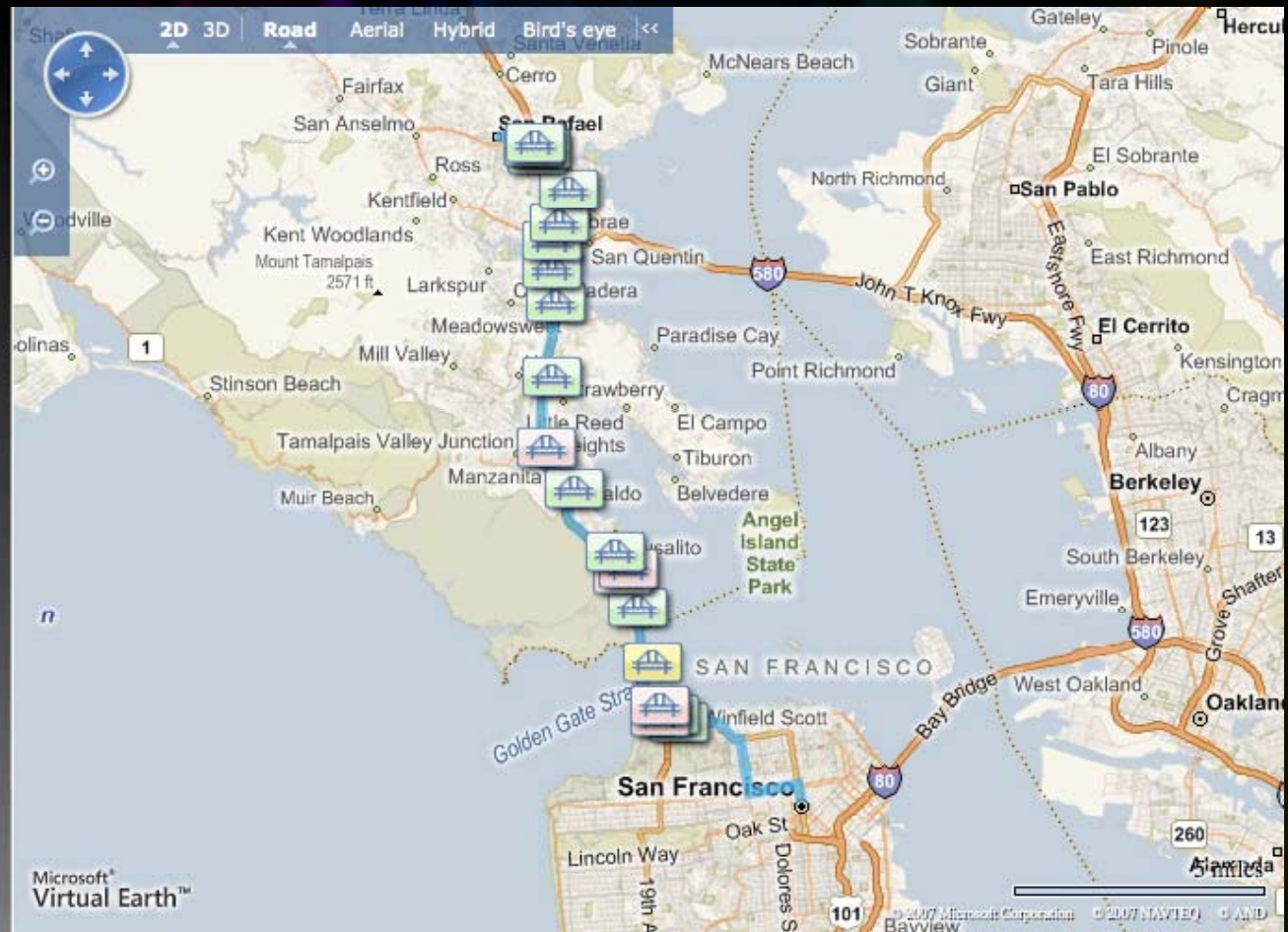
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San Francisco, California

End location

San Rafael, California

GET ROUTE



See details on condition, inspection



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Enter new route

Route options

Start location

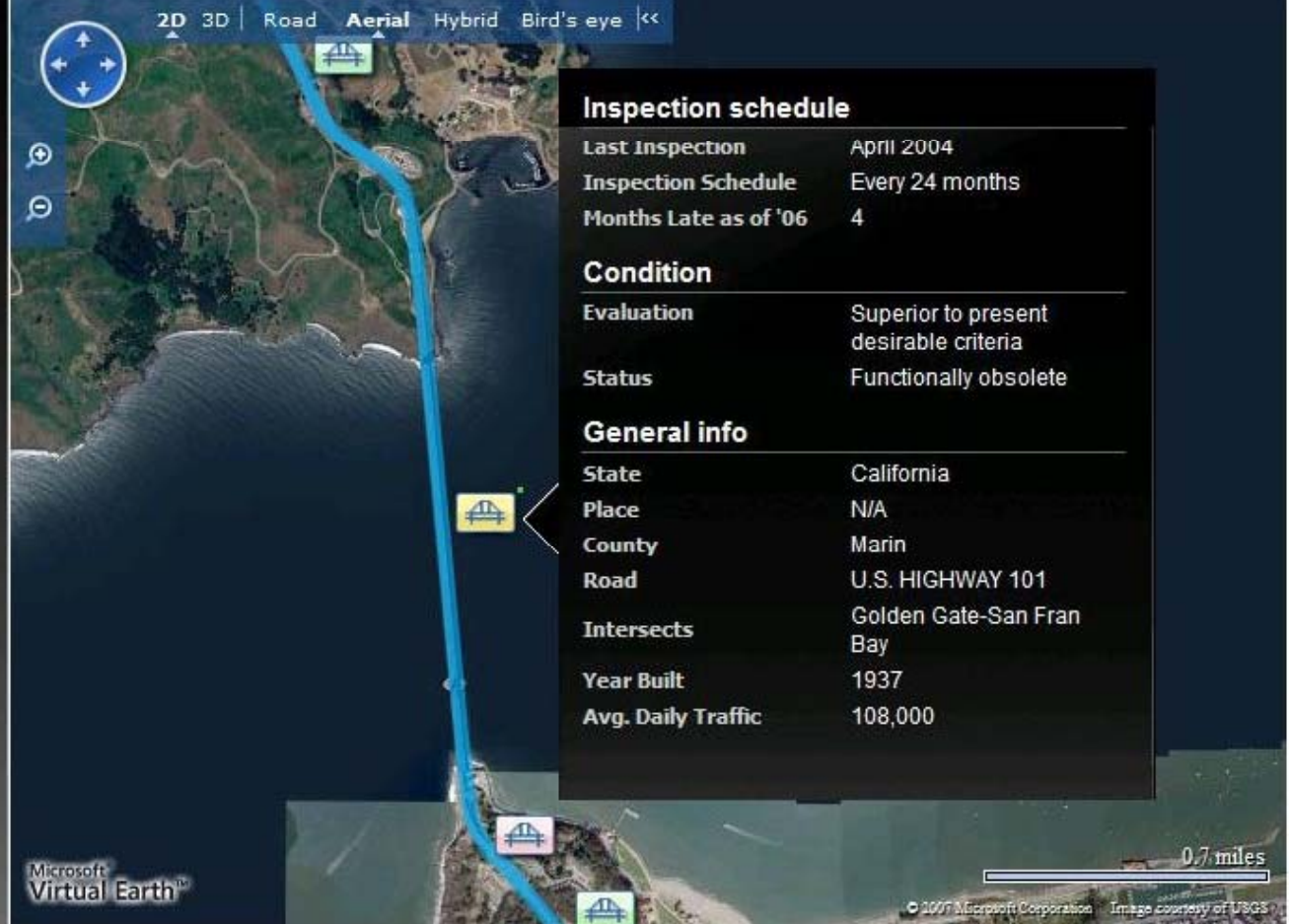
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San Francisco, California

End location

San Rafael, California

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Navigation: Enter a new route

Enter new route

Route options

Start location

[help](#)

End location

GET ROUTE

Navigation: Filter on bridge condition

Enter new route

Route options

Start location

[help](#)

End location

GET ROUTE

Enter new route

Route options

Filter by:

☒ status

☐ inspection schedule

☒ Not deficient

☒ Functionally obsolete

☒ Structurally deficient

[What do these mean?](#)

months late
as of 2006

 0

 1-12

 >12

Navigation: Filter by inspection late

Enter new route

Route options

Start location

[help](#)

End location

GET ROUTE

Enter new route

Route options

Filter by:

☒ status

☐ inspection schedule

☒ Not deficient

☒ Functionally obsolete

☒ Structurally deficient

[What do these mean?](#)

months late
as of 2006

 0

 1-12

 >12

Enter new route

Route options

Filter by:

☐ status

☒ inspection schedule

☒ On time

☒ 1-12 months late

☒ More than 12 months late

months late
as of 2006

 0

 1-12

 >12

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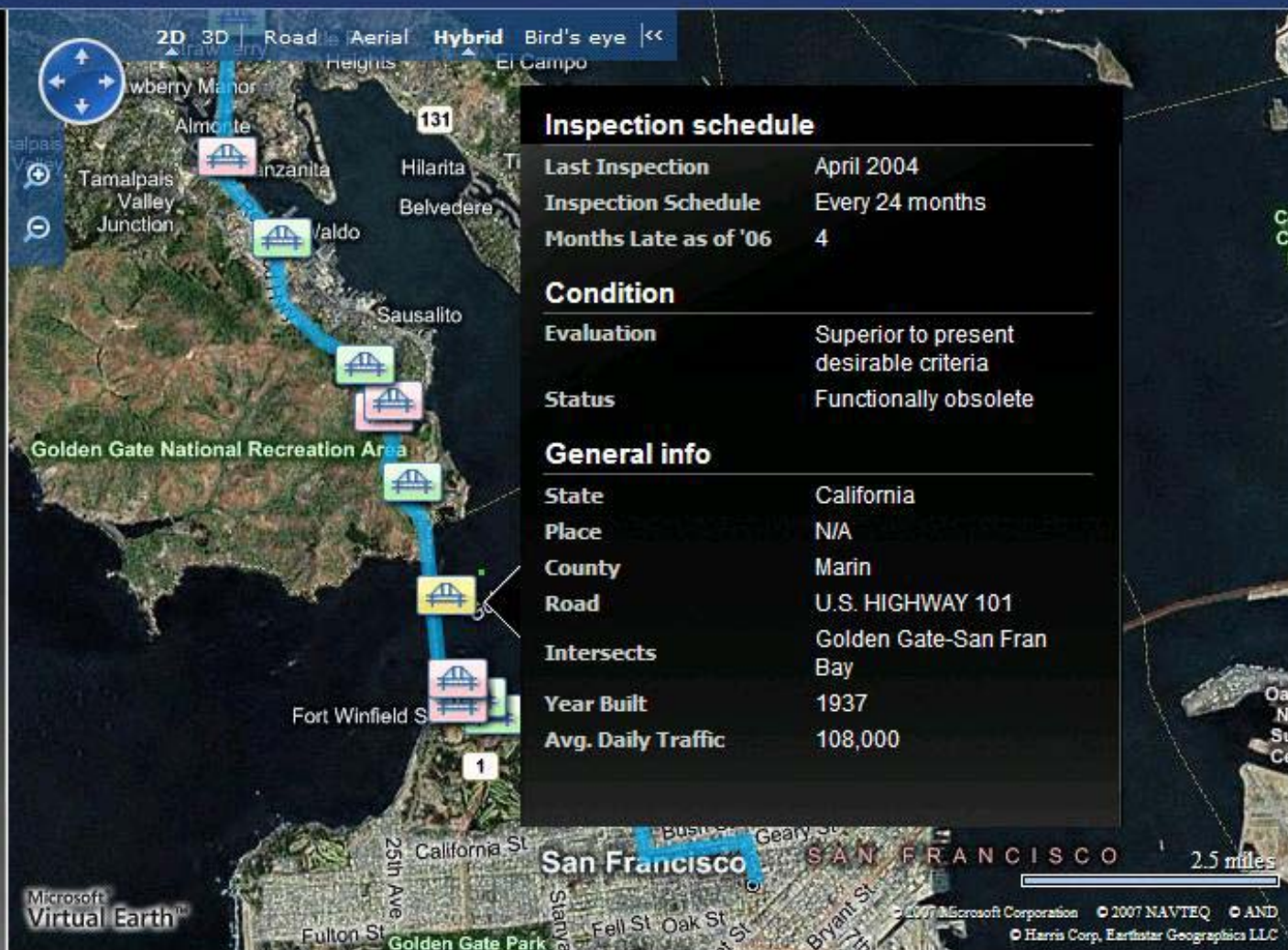
Route options

Filter by: ☒ status ☐ inspection schedule

- ☒ Not deficient
- ☒ Functionally obsolete
- ☒ Structurally deficient

[What do these mean?](#)

months late as of 2006  0  1-12  >12





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Msnbc.com special report



Bill Dedman / msnbc.com

Late bridge inspections put public at risk

After the I-35W bridge in Minneapolis collapsed, msnbc.com set out to investigate the state of inspections. The findings are alarming — at least 17,000 bridges did not receive federally mandated bi-annual checks. Bill Dedman reports. [Full story](#)

Bridge Tracker: Check the bridges you cross

Decision '08 in Politics

Giuliani set to quit, back McCain

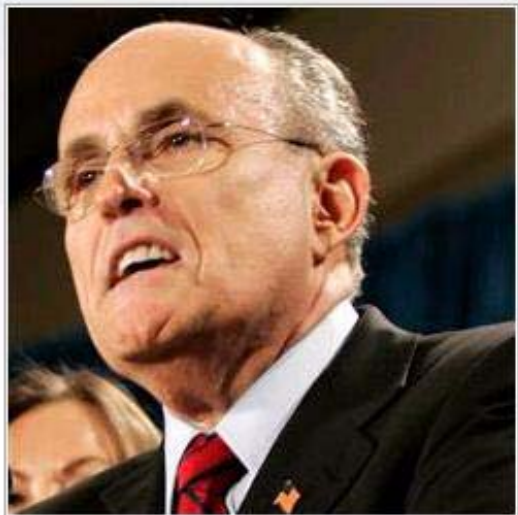
Following a disappointing finish in Florida, NBC reports that the former New York mayor will endorse John McCain today, signaling an end to his campaign. [Story](#) | [Video: Watch concession speech](#)

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Late inspections of bridges put travelers at risk

At least 17,000 spans didn't get a two-year checkup, msnbc.com finds



Bill Dedman/msnbc.com

A school bus on its morning run approaches a 107-year-old steel truss bridge near Circleville, Ohio. The "fracture-critical" span was one of at least 17,000 bridges in the U.S. that went more than two years between inspections. The county engineer said he saved about \$200 by putting off its checkup.

FIRST OF TWO PARTS

By Bill Dedman
Investigative reporter
MSNBC
updated 6:15 a.m. ET, Wed., Jan. 30, 2008



Bill Dedman
Investigative reporter

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PICKAWAY TOWNSHIP, Ohio — At 8:25 every weekday morning, Jim and Judy Little stand on their front porch to make sure their granddaughter, Shelby, gets safely on the school bus that takes her to her elementary school. Then they watch as the bus drives across a bridge that, at the beginning of the school year, was more than a year late for its safety inspection.

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In fact, at least 17,000 bridges in the U.S. went more than two years between safety inspections, according to federal records analyzed by msnbc.com. These newly released records from the National Bridge Inventory include inspections through 2006. Although Congress in 1971 ordered rigorous standards for inspecting bridges every 24 months, the records reveal a system in which the buck is passed down from federal to

Interactive



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Check the bridges on your route. Enter a starting point and destination to see the condition and inspection dates of spans you cross.

About this series

Part 2: Lax enforcement
Federal agency lets states delay inspection of bridges in poor condition.

Bridge Tracker
Use our map to check the condition and inspection dates of bridges you must cross.

Which states are behind?
State-by-state ranking shows where bridges fell behind on inspections.

Where the bad bridges are
Despite slight improvement, one in four bridges is deficient or obsolete.

Methodology
How msnbc.com crunched the data, calculating which bridges were late for inspection.

Video

Conflicting priorities
In Ohio, Pickaway County Engineer Robert Parker is ignoring state

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Late bridge inspections put public at risk

At least 17,000 spans didn't get a two-year checkup, msnbc.com finds

FIRST OF TWO PARTS

By Bill Dedman

Investigative reporter

updated 6:15 a.m. ET, Wed., Jan. 30, 2008

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In fact, at least 17,000 bridges in the U.S. went more than two years between safety inspections, according to federal records analyzed by msnbc.com. These newly released records from the National Bridge Inventory include inspections through 2006. Although Congress in 1971 ordered rigorous standards for inspecting bridges every 24 months, the records reveal a system in which the buck is passed down from federal to state to local governments, without penalty for those that fail to protect the public.

Bridges reported past two years since their last inspection include the obscure, crossing the Dangerous River in Alaska and Bayou Funny Louis in Louisiana, and the heavily traveled, carrying traffic on Interstate 5 in Los Angeles and Cicero Avenue in Chicago.

Fame is no guarantee of an on-time inspection. San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge is being checked now, nearly a year behind schedule.

The bridges reported missing a two-year inspection include 1,411 on interstate highways. That's three out of every hundred freeway bridges.

Take a drive across America on Interstate 40 from Barstow, Calif., to Wilmington, N.C., and you'll cross 2,563 bridges — including at least 167 that went more than two years between checkups.

Bridges can slip years beyond their due date, such as a Minnesota bridge crossing the Mississippi at Sauk Rapids, just an hour upriver from the one that fell. When msnbc.com asked why the 65-year-old bridge went four years without an inspection, state officials said it had been scheduled to be replaced, but when the demolition was delayed no one put it back on the inspection list. It checked out in satisfactory condition the week after the Minneapolis collapse, and was closed in October when a new bridge opened.

All told, an estimated 107 million cars and trucks per day cross rivers, streams, highways and railroad tracks on bridges that missed their two-year inspection. That works out to about 1,200 trips per second.

You can check the inspection dates and condition ratings of more than 100,000 heavily traveled bridges using our interactive map.

Wide variation among the states

The collapse of the Interstate 35W bridge in Minneapolis reminded Americans that aging bridges are at risk. One out of four bridges in the nation is labeled as deficient or obsolete. In the new records including inspections through 2006, 25.0 percent of bridges are labeled as either structurally deficient or functionally obsolete, a slight improvement from 25.4 percent in the previous year, according to msnbc.com's analysis. These bridges are not necessarily unsafe, but a deficient bridge needs significant attention, and an obsolete one doesn't meet current design standards.

But without the billions needed to fix all the bridges, a driver can only hope that at least all the bridges are being inspected regularly.

The records, however, show that 2,728 bridges that had already been labeled as deficient or obsolete went more than two years since their inspection.

Some reassurance is found in the records. The great majority of the nation's 592,000 vehicular bridges — 97 percent of the total — were inspected within two years, according to the new records. That is, the bridges met the federal standard when msnbc.com gave states the benefit of the doubt, assuming that every bridge was inspected immediately after the inspection records were collected. That's why we say "at least" 17,203 missed the two-year inspection. [Read more here about the records and msnbc.com's method of analyzing them.](#)

Still, it's little comfort that most bridges are inspected on time, if you cross one of the overdue bridges on your way to work or the grocery store.

Nearly half the states make it look easy. Four states — Delaware, Georgia, Nevada and Tennessee — were perfect, reporting that they inspected every bridge within two years. Another 19 states managed to report fewer than 1 percent of their bridges sliding beyond two years.

"No bridge should ever be late," said Ben Rabun, assistant to the chief engineer at the Georgia Department of Transportation.

Other states fell far behind. The worst rates, not counting bridges owned by federal agencies, were in:

- Hawaii, where at least 46.5 percent of all bridges went beyond two years;
- Rhode Island, 27.5 percent;
- Arizona, 26.7 percent;
- New Mexico, 17.4 percent;
- West Virginia, 12.2 percent;
- Illinois, 11.5 percent, and
- the District of Columbia, 11.5 percent;

'There's no penalty'

Although federal regulations assign to states the responsibility to make sure bridges are inspected on time, an official at the Federal Highway Administration said it has been at least 15 years since it has used the only disciplinary power it has: withholding highway funds for late inspections. (The official was allowed by the agency to speak only if his name was not published.)

Besides, the official said, withholding money might be counter-productive, making it harder for local governments to afford the inspections.

In Ohio, "As far as I know, there's no penalty," said Robert E. Parker, the county engineer elected by the voters of Pickaway County, Ohio, just south of Columbus. Parker explained that he postponed the inspections of 76 bridges, including the one crossed each weekday by Shelby's school bus, saving about \$200 per bridge.

Parker has a financial incentive to delay inspections. Because the money to inspect bridges comes from the same pot as the money to fix them, he said, he scrimps on inspections so he'll have a bit more for repairs.

"Nobody is saying we aren't going to get federal highway funds or state highway funds," Parker said, "so that's why we do it the way we do it."

His 76 bridges blew past a 12-month inspection deadline under Ohio law, the toughest law in the nation, then missed the federal 24-month deadline. Finally he paid a consultant to inspect the bridges after about 29 months each. One of the bridges is 107 years old and known to be vulnerable.

The Littles send Shelby, a fifth-grader, on the bus over a 25-year-old steel bridge crossing Scippo Creek, which is prone to flooding when debris backs up at the bridge. The bridge was inspected in mid-September 2007, 29 months after its last inspection, Parker said. He would not provide the results of that inspection, but its previous report shows it to be "satisfactory," one step below "good."

"The county is trying to save \$200 instead of inspecting it?" Jim Little asked incredulously, just after putting Shelby on the bus with 30 other children.

"It scares you."

'Errors and inconsistencies'

Even regular inspections can't guarantee that a bridge is safe. The I-35W bridge in Minneapolis was inspected on time, with inspections in June 2005 and June 2006. Investigators with the National Transportation Safety Board said in mid-January that they are focusing on a design flaw, a metal plate too thin to carry the load. Such a problem would not have been detected during inspections, which focus on wear, they said. The investigation may take months more to complete.

Nevertheless, regular inspections are intended to identify safety problems, hold down the cost of maintaining bridges and increase public confidence.

It can cost as little as \$50 for a visual inspection of a simple concrete culvert, or more than \$10,000 for a hands-on inspection of an older steel bridge.

Certified bridge inspectors climb over and hang under bridges made of iron, steel, stone, timber and concrete, checking every pin, pier, bolt, beam, brace, weld, truss, joint, splice, rivet, cable, girder, stringer, abutment and gusset plate, looking for rust, mold, cracks, scour, scaling, spalling, warping, corrosion, honeycombing, efflorescence, delamination and peeling paint, which can be caused by salt, wind, water, fatigue, friction, freezing, thawing, termites, fungi, earthquakes, chemicals, vibration, vegetation, barge strikes and mollusk borers, also known as shipworms.

Unlike elevators, bridges have no signs proclaiming, "Last inspected in ..."

So msnbc.com went to the records, asking for an updated copy of the National Bridge Inventory under the Freedom of Information Act. States and federal agencies submit these inspection records to the Federal Highway Administration. The new records, reflecting inspections through 2006, were submitted by the states in April 2007. Msnbc.com followed up with a survey of every state about inspection procedures.

The records aren't perfect. Although the Federal Highway Administration offered assurances that the records are "checked for errors and inconsistencies before being loaded into the database," several states thanked msnbc.com for pointing out mistakes in their records — errors that any modern data management system should have red flagged.

When Kansas provided latitude and longitude for mapping its bridges, for example, it placed 2,363 of them at the same location just a few miles north of the capital — not Topeka but Reykjavik, the capital of Iceland.

Kentucky officials didn't submit their inspection records at all this year, because of problems switching to new software, but promise that they have been keeping up with inspections.

In Pennsylvania, officials say they missed the deadline for data entry on many bridges. Most of the hundreds of bridges that they reported as being late were actually inspected on time, they said.

And several states objected to being held to the records they submitted in April. Bridges are being inspected every day.

Even if reporting of the bridge information sometimes lags, the National Bridge Inventory is the only comprehensive source of information on the health of the nation's bridges.

And many bridges do go years past their inspection due dates. In Wichita, Kan., 200 city-owned bridges went five years between inspections, from 2002 to 2007. No penalty was levied.

"We acknowledge that the city had fallen behind the formal inspection process, as had most Kansas communities," the city public works director, Chris Carrier, said in a press release when the inspections were finished in December. "However, because of our ongoing maintenance efforts, the safety of Wichita motorists has always been assured."

'We don't have responsibility'

State departments of transportation across the nation told msnbc.com that many of the overdue bridges were not their problem, because the bridges are owned by counties, cities or towns.

When Arizona officials were asked why some bridges were late, the answer came back: Those bridges are in Phoenix.

"Responsibility for the bridges remains with the local jurisdictions," said spokesman Doug Nintzel of the Arizona Department of Transportation.

In Ohio, "under state law we don't have responsibility for those bridges," said Scott Varner, spokesman for the state Department of Transportation. "I'm not saying that to wash our hands of the responsibility, but our ability to take action is limited by state law."

But the federal regulations are explicit: While states can delegate to local governments the task of bridge inspection, they cannot delegate the responsibility. States are responsible for every bridge within their borders, aside from those owned by federal agencies and private individuals.

States own overdue bridges, too. The greatest number of bridges that were reported past 24 months were owned by states (7,961), followed by local government (6,276), federal agencies (2,939), and other owners (27).

Hawaii, the state with the worst inspection record, also has one of the highest rates of deficient or obsolete bridges. Transportation officials said they leave bridge inspections to districts and counties, which employ no full-time bridge inspectors and rely mostly on contractors. "Many factors account for the late inspections," state transportation officials said in a statement, "including lack of manpower, lack of personnel to concentrate primarily on bridge inspections, personnel performing dual duties with unclear priorities, poor timing of procurement for consultant services, etc."

The officials said this week that Hawaii is catching up on inspections, down from 500 overdue bridges to about 100, with a goal of being caught up in February. And the state is considering a new approach: "The only changes we are discussing and evaluating at this time is to emphasize that the bridge inspections should be done in a timely manner and given the priority that it demands."

Rhode Island, with the second worst inspection record, also ranks second in bad bridges, just behind the District of Columbia. State officials in Rhode Island said their inspection delays stemmed mostly from a decision to hand bridge inspections over to contractors. That meant the state went from 12 in-house bridge inspectors in 2000 to only three in 2007. It fell behind during that transition. The state also had delays inspecting bridges over Amtrak railroad tracks, but recently reached an agreement with Amtrak to get those checked, they said. As of this week, officials said they have 80 past-due bridges, down from 199, and should be caught up by the end of February.

In San Francisco, the Golden Gate Bridge is running nearly a year behind schedule, but for good cause, an official said. The previous inspection started in June 2004, and continued for nine months until March 2005. The next inspection began on time in March 2006, but stopped, blocked by construction to bolster the bridge against major earthquakes. Inspection resumed in March 2007, and is expected to be finished early this year.

The 70-year-old landmark is closely watched and has workers on it nearly every day, said Mary Currie, spokeswoman for the Golden Gate Bridge, Highway and Transportation District. On its previous inspection, it scored 7.4 out of 9 points on its overall structural evaluation, or "better than present minimum criteria."

'Two years' doesn't mean 24 months

Several states have redefined the concept of lateness, apparently with federal acquiescence.

In Maine, when Gov. John E. Baldacci announced in August that all bridges are inspected "every two years," his statement didn't mention that state records showed 86 bridges had not gotten that timely checkup.

Maine transportation officials said they had been considering a bridge as "on time" if it was inspected during the same calendar year as its due date. So a bridge inspected in January 2005 became past due, under the federal rules, in January 2007, but Maine wouldn't consider it late until a full year later, when the calendar turned over to January 2008.

Baldacci also appointed a task force to study the state's bridge program. Its recommendations were announced in November, including this one: The state should start inspecting its bridges every 24 months. Just as federal regulations require.

Why hadn't the state been following the rules? "We just continued to operate the way we have," said Ben Foster, assistant bridge maintenance engineer for the Maine Department of Transportation.

Besides, he said, the state's program was recertified each year by the Federal Highway Administration. "We got nothing from them saying you must comply now."

Maine was by no means the only state to boast incorrectly of two-year inspections. In the days after the Minneapolis collapse, nearly every state department of transportation put out a similar press release.

The national association of transportation officials gave them the language: "States carefully examine every bridge at least once every two years," said a statement in August by Jerome F. Williams, chairman of the public affairs committee of the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, and director of the Rhode Island Department of Transportation, which in April had submitted records showing one in four bridges not meeting that test.

The association no longer makes that claim. After an interview Monday with msnbc.com, the association amended Williams' statement on its Web site. Now it says, "Except where federal exemptions are granted, states are required to inspect bridges on the National Bridge Inventory at least once every two years."

Uninspected bridges are not necessarily dangerous, the association said in a press release this week. "Even if an inspection falls outside the 24-month period, that alone is not an indication that the bridge is unsafe for public travel, or cause for public alarm. States take immediate action on bridges with critical needs."

In New Mexico, Gov. Bill Richardson, then a presidential candidate, said in a press release that bridges are inspected "every two years." His state had reported 636 bridges that hadn't been checked within two years.

And in Ohio, the Department of Transportation reassured the public: "Ohio law requires that every bridge in the state be inspected every year."

The press release didn't mention that the state's records showed 2,068 Ohio bridges overdue for that inspection.

Taking responsibility

Texas officials say they take to heart their responsibility for every bridge within the state's borders. Because many counties are too poor to do the inspections, the state Department of Transportation does it for them.

"We inspect every bridge with rubber tire traffic over it," said department spokesman Chris Lippincott. "The public on the highway doesn't give a damn whose bridge it is."

State officials in Kansas, which has more than 130 local governments inspecting bridges, say they need to find a better way, perhaps taking over more of the inspections. After the Minneapolis collapse, the Kansas Department of Transportation started discussions with cities and towns. The price: A change might require

holding back some highway money that has been passed down. A task force is scheduled to start meeting in February.

"We're not doing what we should be doing to comply with the federal law," said Jerry T. Younger, Kansas deputy secretary for engineering.

"And, frankly, not doing what we can to reassure the public about the safety of the bridges."

Although the National Bridge Inspection Standards require every bridge to be inspected at least every 24 months, states can get permission to extend the schedules for certain types of bridges, such as newer bridges in excellent condition.

About half of the 17,000 bridges that were reported going past 24 months between inspections may have such permission. Those 8,314 bridges are listed by their states on schedules longer than 24 months, but the records also show that thousands of these bridges violate federal guidelines for such lax treatment, because they are too deteriorated, too old or too busy to qualify for delayed inspections.

The federal highway administrator, J. Richard Capka, would not agree to an interview about bridge inspections. A spokeswoman for the Federal Highway Administration, Nancy Singer, said Capka would not talk because twin investigations are under way, by the inspector general of the U.S. Department of Transportation as well as the federal Government Accountability Office, to determine whether bridge inspections and funding are adequate, and because the investigation of the Minneapolis collapse is continuing.

Singer also said that the National Bridge Inventory isn't used to monitor inspections but exists primarily to hand out federal highway money to fix the neediest bridges. The real work of monitoring inspections is done by highway administration staff working around the country, using the live data kept by states. But she said that the information in the National Bridge Inventory is extracted from those working databases, so if a bridge was reported overdue in the national file, it was overdue in the local file, too.

Several state transportation officials said in interviews that, although they want to do the right thing, there's not enough money to inspect all the bridges on time. They don't lack for staff — in response to msnbc.com's questions, every state said it has sufficient inspectors, when counting outside contractors. But some said they lack for money to pay those contractors and supervise all the counties and communities that own bridges.

"It is a function of funding, ultimately," said David Severns, the assistant chief structures engineer for Nevada, one of a handful of states with a perfect record.

"I don't think there's anybody who gets up in the morning and says, 'I want to have unsafe bridges.'"

"My wife and my kids drive over other people's bridges, too."

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Feds let states delay inspections of bad bridges

Loophole allows giving infrequent checkups to spans in poor condition



Brendan Smialowski for msnbc.com

One of the bridges that missed a two-year inspection date in 2007 is at South Capitol and M streets in Washington, D.C. This bridge is on the federal highway administrator's direct commute to work. You can use our map to check the bridges on your route.

SECOND OF TWO PARTS

By Bill Dedman

Investigative reporter

MSNBC

updated 6:07 a.m. ET, Thurs., Jan. 31, 2008



Bill Dedman

Investigative reporter

• Profile

• E-mail

Bridge safety leaped to the top of the agenda of federal highway administrator J. Richard Capka in August, when 13 people died in the collapse of a bridge over the Mississippi River in Minneapolis. But even before the disaster, it would have been a personal concern if Capka had examined the bridges on the shortest drive from his home in suburban Virginia to his office in Washington, D.C. On the day the Minneapolis bridge fell, three of those bridges were overdue for their safety inspections.

The inattention to the bridges on the highway administrator's commute is not unique, according to an msnbc.com analysis of newly released records from the National Bridge Inventory. The records, which include inspections through 2006, show several failures in federal oversight of the system designed to ensure the safety of travelers crossing the nation's bridges:

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State-by-state ranking shows where bridges fell behind on inspections.

Where the bad bridges are

Despite slight improvement, one in four bridges is deficient or obsolete.

Methodology

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Feds let states delay bridge inspections

Loophole allows giving infrequent checkups to spans in poor condition

SECOND OF TWO PARTS

By Bill Dedman

Investigative reporter

updated 6:07 a.m. ET, Thurs., Jan. 31, 2008

Bridge safety leaped to the top of the agenda of federal highway administrator J. Richard Capka in August, when 13 people died in the collapse of a bridge over the Mississippi River in Minneapolis.

But even before the disaster, it would have been a personal concern if Capka had examined the bridges on the shortest drive from his home in suburban Virginia to his office in Washington, D.C. On the day the Minneapolis bridge fell, three of those bridges were overdue for their safety inspections.

The inattention to the bridges on the highway administrator's commute is not unique, according to an msnbc.com analysis of newly released records from the National Bridge Inventory. The records, which include inspections through 2006, show several failures in federal oversight of the system designed to ensure the safety of travelers crossing the nation's bridges:

- The Federal Highway Administration has allowed states to take advantage of a loophole in federal regulations, delaying bridge inspections to every four years instead of the two years normally required. While most states don't use this loophole, calling it unsafe, others drive a truck through it: Nationally, 30,000 bridges are listed on the delayed-inspection schedules, including 10,000 in Illinois alone and more than 3,000 on interstate highways.
- Bridges in poor condition have been allowed on these delayed timetables in violation of federal guidelines. Although federal and state officials are bound by law to closely monitor the schedules, their own records show thousands of bridges on delayed-inspection schedules — despite being too decayed, too long or too heavily traveled to qualify.
- "Fracture-critical" bridges like the Minneapolis bridge, which could collapse if one part fails, have remained on delayed-inspection schedules in violation of federal regulations. The records show 622 of these vulnerable bridges on four-year timetables.
- Even after the deadly collapse in Minneapolis, the haphazard system of inspections continued, with federal authorities choosing not to require re-inspection of more than 18,000 fracture-critical bridges. In a survey of every state by msnbc.com, only six states and the District of Columbia said they began to recheck all their fracture-critical bridges. The rest checked only the few hundred bridges of the particular deck-truss design used in Minneapolis.
- Federal agencies that own bridges have some of the worst records for on-time inspections. Nearly 3,000 bridges owned by U.S. government agencies went more than two years between checkups.

Improvements follow calamity

Historically, improvements in bridge inspection have followed bridge failures.

On Dec. 15, 1967, 46 people died when the Silver Bridge collapsed into the Ohio River at Point Pleasant, W.Va. After this calamity, Congress ordered the U.S. Department of Transportation to establish a regime for bridge inspection. The National Bridge Inspection Standards went into effect in 1971 but were limited to bridges on the federal highway system. In 1980, the inspection rules were extended to all public bridges more than 20 feet long.

On June 28, 1983, three people died in the collapse of the Mianus River Bridge on the Connecticut Turnpike (Interstate 95) in Greenwich. The death toll could have been higher had the bridge not fallen in the middle of the night. The collapse focused attention on fracture-critical bridges. The U.S. has more than 18,000 such bridges, built from 1832 through 2007. In response, inspection standards were established for fracture-critical bridges, and special inspections began in 1988.

In April 5, 1987, 10 people died when the Schoharie Creek Bridge on the New York State Thruway was washed away. Federal investigators blamed erosion caused by a poor design, but said that a contributing

factor was inadequate oversight of inspections by state and federal officials. Afterward, the highway administration set standards for underwater inspection of bridge piers and abutments for erosion, or "scour."

The collapse in Minneapolis on Aug. 1, 2007, of the I-35W bridge, which injured more than 100 people in addition to causing 13 deaths, has refocused attention on bridge safety.

Although legislation is pending in Congress to increase funding to fix the worst bridges, and to require the Federal Highway Administration to monitor state inspection programs more closely, that legislation does not address several problems identified by msnbc.com in the national bridge records.

A loophole expands

In 1988, the Federal Highway Administration provided a loophole in the National Bridge Inspection Standards, allowing states to seek permission to put certain bridges on inspection schedules as long as 48 months, twice the usual 24-month standard.

The idea, according to the federal regulations, was to delay the inspection of low-risk bridges, leaving more time and money for attending to the worst bridges.

The loophole was supposed to be tightly drawn, available only for shorter, newer, low-traffic bridges in healthy condition.

And the federal regulations require that the bridge schedules be carefully monitored, pruned after every inspection. If bridges deteriorate or traffic grows, bridges are to be moved back onto the regular schedules.

Most states have chosen not to use the loophole, keeping all bridges on a two-year schedule. Several state officials told msnbc.com that they consider use of the loophole unsafe — and not much of a time saving. Only 16 states reported more than a handful of bridges on long schedules.

"There shouldn't be any bridge in the country that is more than 24 months," said Bob Healy, deputy director of the bridges office at the Maryland State Highway Administration, which has no bridges on delayed schedules. "The cycle should never exceed 24 months."

Although the highway administration said that approximately 20,000 bridges are on longer inspection schedules, records from the bridge inventory through 2006 show 30,571 bridges on such schedules. That's one out of 20 bridges across the nation.

Illinois reported 10,839 bridges on longer inspection schedules, or 42 percent of its inventory. That has risen from 6,200 when the state got federal permission in 1995.

Arizona has 3,276 bridges, or 47 percent of its total, on longer schedules. But it limits the exemption to culverts, the concrete structures that tend to be shorter, more stable and, in case of failure, less deadly.

Connecticut highway officials made a U-turn last summer, with Gov. M. Jodi Rell putting all bridges back onto inspection schedules of two years or less.

"Several months prior to the collapse in Minnesota, Gov. Rell directed the Connecticut DOT to bring all bridges into a 24-month or shorter inspection cycle," said state transportation spokesman Kevin Nursick.

"Basically, better to err on the side of caution and inspect more frequently."

Bad bridges on slow schedules

While the extensions were designed for only the newest and best bridges, thousands of ineligible bridges are on delayed-inspection schedules.

Here's how it works: Criteria are negotiated between the federal and state governments for putting a bridge on a schedule for delayed inspection. What gets approved is not a list of bridges, however, but a list of criteria. As conditions of individual bridges change, the rules require states to put them back on the regular

two-year schedule.

When msnbc.com compared the federal guidelines to the actual inspection records, we found 1,630 ineligible bridges on the delayed-inspection schedules. Many bridges violated more than one guideline:

- **Length:** 164 bridges where the longest span exceeds 100 feet.
- **Load:** 103 bridges with weight-carrying ratings less than the state minimum.
- **Low clearance:** 27 bridges with clearances above or below the bridge that are less than 14 feet, making them susceptible to damage by trucks.
- **Channel:** 889 bridges rated below a satisfactory score in channel quality, including the channel protection system, which keeps a bridge from being washed away. These include 733 delayed bridges rated fair, 133 poor, 15 serious, one critical and seven failed.
- **Substructure:** 134 bridges rated below satisfactory in the substructure, which includes piers, abutments and footings. These include 118 delayed bridges rated fair, 13 poor, one serious, one critical and one failed.
- **Superstructure:** 107 bridges rated below satisfactory in the superstructure, which includes beams, girders, trusses, cables. These include 95 delayed bridges rated fair, eight poor, three serious and one critical.
- **Deck:** 265 bridges rated below satisfactory in the deck, which includes the roadway and expansion joints. These include 203 delayed bridges rated fair, 57 poor, four serious and one failed.
- **Culverts:** 114 culverts rated below satisfactory. These include 94 delayed culverts rated fair, 12 poor, two serious, three critical and three in imminent failure.
- **Untried types:** Seven bridges of unusual designs with little performance history.

In addition, thousands of bridges violate other criteria that vary from state to state, including the traffic levels allowed on bridges.

'Safety is our number one priority'

Officials from several states thanked msnbc.com for pointing out the problem.

"After Minneapolis, someone was going to ask the inspection question eventually," said Oklahoma's transportation spokeswoman, Terri Angier.

Illinois has felt comfortable putting more than 10,000 bridges on delayed schedules because it has relatively good bridges, said Mike Claffey, spokesman for the Illinois Department of Transportation. Although the records show that one out of six bridges in the state is either deficient or obsolete, that's still one of the lowest rates in the nation.

"We believe this program allows us to focus on bridges that are most in need of closer attention," Claffey said. "Safety is our number one priority."

However, in neighboring Wisconsin, where bridges are slightly better, not a single bridge has been placed on a schedule longer than two years.

Claffey also said that Illinois was conservative in selecting bridges for delayed inspections, choosing only those that are rated "good," when the federal guidelines would have allowed delays for bridges that rated a step lower, or "satisfactory."

But the records show that not all of the Illinois bridges on delayed timetables meet the criteria that the state agreed to. The records include 456 bridges that violate those criteria, including some in "serious" condition.

Claffey said that a "computer logic error" allowed these bad bridges to remain on delayed timetables. Those bridges were moved back to two-year schedules after msnbc.com pointed out the problem and are now being inspected, he said.

Rules differ

Why don't all states set their computers to flag any bridge that doesn't qualify for the loophole?

Nearly every state uses bridge-management software called Pontis, which is licensed from the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials. In Arkansas, officials said that their previous in-house software would automatically change the inspection schedule when a bridge's condition deteriorated, but "there are no such internal checks in Pontis. The checks must be done manually," said Randy Ort, spokesman for the Arkansas State Highway and Transportation Department. Association officials said, however, that states have the ability to set the software for such monitoring, although the software doesn't ship with that feature enabled.

Federal authorities say they have checked bridge timetables only sporadically. Although the Federal Highway Administration does not require its district staff to review the entire database to see which bridges are out of compliance, as msnbc.com has done, an agency official said it does periodic "spot checks" for the annual reviews of state inspection programs. Those checks have been optional, not required, said the official, who was allowed by the highway agency to speak only if his name was not published.

Even when the rules for delaying inspections are followed, those rules are negotiated state by state and vary considerably.

For example, the traffic limit. The loophole was designed to be limited to only low-traffic bridges.

But while federal highway officials allowed Oklahoma to delay inspection only for bridges with traffic below 5,000 vehicles a day, they approved a looser standard of 15,000 vehicles a day in West Virginia, 30,000 in Illinois and Colorado, 50,000 in Connecticut, and 100,000 in Washington state, according to approval letters provided to msnbc.com by the Federal Highway Administration under the Freedom of Information Act.

If the strict 5,000-vehicle rule from Oklahoma were applied nationally, the bridge inventory shows 8,590 bridges on longer schedules that wouldn't be eligible for delayed scrutiny.

Or consider erosion control. Inspectors check bridges for scour, the dangerous erosion that can undermine piers. Again, Oklahoma has the strictest criteria, with delayed inspections allowed only for bridges with no history of or present signs of significant erosion. Applying that conservative rule to the nation's bridges, the records show 4,122 bridges on delayed-inspection schedules that wouldn't be eligible.

Finally, the design of bridges eligible for the loophole varies considerably.

Several states took a conservative approach, receiving federal permission to delay inspections only for low-risk concrete bridges or culverts. That's the approach in Arizona, Arkansas, Mississippi, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota and Texas.

But a much broader list of bridge types was approved for the loophole in California, Colorado, Illinois, Oklahoma and West Virginia. Again, even those relaxed rules have been violated. For example, Illinois reported on delayed timetables 26 old-fashioned bridges made of wood timbers.

Fracture-critical bridges not checked

Federal regulations forbid delaying inspections for fracture-critical bridges like the fallen Minneapolis bridge — the kind with a lack of redundancy in design, so that a single failure in a load-bearing part can cause the entire bridge to collapse.

These bridges aren't necessarily in poor condition, but they're vulnerable. Even a three-legged stool in good condition will fall if one leg is broken.

Yet msnbc.com found 622 fracture-critical bridges in the National Bridge Inventory that are on schedules for delayed inspection.

After the Minneapolis collapse, the phrase "fracture critical" was heard so often that the public may have assumed that states rushed to inspect all their fracture-critical bridges. But most states did not, and federal officials didn't require it.

In the survey of state transportation departments by msnbc.com, only the District of Columbia and six states

— Minnesota, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, South Carolina and Utah — said they were re-inspecting every fracture-critical bridge after the disaster.

The rest of the states re-inspected only the few hundred bridges of the design used in Minneapolis, the continuous steel deck truss, as was recommended (but not required) by the Federal Highway Administration.

Federal regulations already required fracture-critical bridges to receive a special hands-on inspection every two years, with no exemptions allowed. That's in addition to their routine inspections. This was a federal guideline until January 2005, when it became a regulation, which has the legal force of law.

But the National Bridge Inventory from 2006 shows that 1,513 fracture-critical bridges went longer than two years between special inspections. In other words, 8 percent of the 18,566 fracture-critical bridges in the nation were reported as missing their two-year checkup.

Again, several states said that a difficult transition to the Pontis software could be to blame, making fracture-critical bridges appear to be overdue when they were inspected on time.

As the records were submitted, the worst on-time rates of completing the special fracture-critical inspections within two years were in Utah (at least 60 percent past due), Alaska (45 percent), Delaware (38 percent), Maine (34 percent), Colorado (27 percent), California (23 percent), New Hampshire (22 percent) and Texas (21 percent). In addition, 10 percent of federally owned fracture-critical bridges were delinquent.

Federal agencies have many overdue

Federal agencies are among the least-attentive owners of bridges, with 2,940 bridges reported as not receiving a routine inspection within two years. That's 35 percent of 8,332 federal bridges. Only two states — Hawaii and Rhode Island — have worse compliance records.

For example, while Virginia's Department of Transportation has a spotless record of inspecting bridges on time, it can't control the federal bridges within the state, including several on the Blue Ridge Parkway, which the National Park Service reported as being overdue for inspection.

The Federal Highway Administration has little power to persuade other federal agencies to act, the federal official said. Threatening to withhold money wouldn't work, he said, because hardly any federal agencies receive federal highway funds.

The worst record was at the Forest Service, which owns the most federal bridges: 54 percent of its bridges went past two years. The Bureau of Indian Affairs reported 46 percent exceeding the two-year standard. This is surprising, the federal highway official said, because the BIA is the only federal agency that receives highway money.

The administrator's commute

Highway administrator Capka would not agree to an interview to discuss enforcement of bridge regulations. A spokeswoman, Nancy Singer, cited twin investigations of the agency's bridge program by the inspector general of the U.S. Department of Transportation and the federal Government Accountability Office, as well as the continuing investigation of the Minneapolis collapse.

Out of curiosity, we checked the bridges on the direct route from Capka's home to his office.

After crossing the Potomac River and the Jefferson Memorial on Interstate 395, Capka would cross the Washington Channel on the Francis Case Memorial Bridge. That bridge was last inspected in January 2005 and was due for re-inspection in January 2007. It wasn't inspected until December, 11 months late, the District of Columbia's transportation department confirmed. More than 160,000 vehicles cross the bridge per day.

The highway administrator would then stay on the Southwest Freeway (I-395) as it crosses over Fourth Street Southwest. That bridge was due for inspection in May 2007, but it didn't get checked until October, five months late. The bridge was being repaired during the summer while it was still open to traffic, so it did receive attention though not a formal inspection, a D.C. official said.

And finally, after switching to I-295 and exiting onto South Capitol Street, Capka would make a left over an overpass at M Street, a block north of the new ballpark for the Washington Nationals. The M Street bridge was due for inspection in July 2007 but was checked in October, three months late.

D.C. officials did not respond to several requests for the latest inspection reports for these three bridges. But in their previous inspections, the overall condition of each bridge was scored "equal to present minimum criteria," or 6 out of a possible 9 points.

About one out of every nine bridges in D.C. went beyond the two-year inspection cycle, a small contributor to the 17,000 bridges nationally that the records show weren't examined within two years. D.C. spokesman Erik Linden said inspections were delayed by bridge repairs, by problems with a contract with the inspection company, and by delays in agreements to inspect bridges over railroad tracks.

But the biggest problem is a "tremendous need" for more money to repair and inspect bridges, Linden said. In the nation's capital, 61.3 percent of the bridges are classified as structurally deficient or functionally obsolete, a higher rate than in any state, according to msnbc.com's analysis of the new records. Nationally, 25.0 percent of bridges carry these designations.

Authority unused

When msnbc.com first asked the Federal Highway Administration if it has ever withheld funds from a state or federal agency for failing to inspect bridges on time, the agency said, in a written answer, "In the extreme case, federal-aid funds can be withheld."

When asked if it has ever actually used that power, the agency spokeswoman said, "Yes." But she added: "The information would have to be obtained through FOIA," referring to the Freedom of Information Act.

Finally, the anonymous highway administration official acknowledged in the interview:

"To my knowledge, and I've been in the bridge program for 15 years, I don't recall a state reaching the point of losing federal aid funds. This is considered a last resort. We find that most issues can be resolved through discussions with the state.

"I don't want you to think that we're just sitting here on our thumbs."

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Which states fell behind on bridge inspections?

Msnbc.com analysis ranks the states on timeliness of safety checks

MSNBC

updated 6:15 a.m. ET, Wed., Jan. 30, 2008

BY THE NUMBERS

Which states fell behind on bridge inspections?

These are the state-by-state results of an msnbc.com analysis of bridge inspection records reported by the states. The latest National Bridge Inventory includes inspections performed through 2006.

States are ranked by the share of bridges that were reported as going more than 24 months since their last inspection.

The table also shows the share of bridges in each state that were reported as late for inspection, when bridges were judged against their individual inspection schedules. Finally, it shows the bridges that states have placed on schedules longer than 24 months between inspections.

Click  to send an e-mail to that state's highway department.

Rank	State	Total bridges	Bridges more than 24 months past inspection	Percent past 24 months	Bridges late for inspection by their individual schedules	Percent late	Bridges on schedules longer than 24 months	Percent on schedules longer than 24 months
1	Hawaii 	1,089	506	46.5%	506	46.5%	0	0.0%
2	Rhode Island 	723	199	27.5%	199	27.5%	0	0.0%
3	Arizona 	6,937	1,853	26.7%	530	7.6%	3,271	47.2%
4	New Mexico 	3,647	636	17.4%	24	0.7%	1,298	35.6%
5	West Virginia 	6,888	844	12.2%	27	0.4%	1,671	24.3%
6	Illinois 	25,746	2,973	11.5%	97	0.4%	10,839	42.1%
7	D.C. 	208	24	11.5%	24	11.5%	0	0.0%
8	Alaska 	988	80	8.1%	80	8.1%	0	0.0%
9	Colorado 	8,022	576	7.2%	68	0.8%	1,183	14.7%
10	North Carolina 	17,723	746	4.2%	746	4.2%	0	0.0%
11	South Dakota 	5,807	235	4.0%	6	0.1%	688	11.8%
12	Montana 	4,318	164	3.8%	1	0.0%	832	19.3%
13	Maine 	2,323	86	3.7%	89	3.8%	0	0.0%
14	California 	23,658	857	3.6%	566	2.4%	3,610	15.3%
15	New Hampshire 	2,417	78	3.2%	86	3.6%	0	0.0%
16	Kansas 	25,258	693	2.7%	1,090	4.3%	4	0.0%
17	Connecticut 	3,982	107	2.7%	1	0.0%	711	17.9%
18	Washington 	7,032	186	2.6%	100	1.4%	461	6.6%
19	Indiana 	18,266	479	2.6%	479	2.6%	0	0.0%
20	Oklahoma 	22,759	449	2.0%	350	1.5%	329	1.4%
21	Louisiana 	12,683	243	1.9%	288	2.3%	0	0.0%
22	Ohio 	27,570	527	1.9%	2,068	7.5%	0	0.0%
23	Utah 	2,704	47	1.7%	47	1.7%	0	0.0%
24	New Jersey 	6,190	105	1.7%	105	1.7%	1	0.0%
25	Arkansas 	12,322	196	1.6%	3	0.0%	471	3.8%
26	Texas 	49,733	743	1.5%	4	0.0%	4,337	8.7%
27	Pennsylvania 	21,876	243	1.1%	453	2.1%	7	0.0%
28	South Carolina 	9,150	83	0.9%	95	1.0%	0	0.0%
29	Wyoming 	2,766	17	0.6%	17	0.6%	0	0.0%
30	Iowa 	24,092	99	0.4%	153	0.6%	0	0.0%
31	Alabama 	15,484	41	0.3%	319	2.1%	3	0.0%
32	Nebraska 	15,266	40	0.3%	35	0.2%	0	0.0%
33	Michigan 	10,601	26	0.2%	37	0.3%	0	0.0%
34	Maryland 	4,939	9	0.2%	10	0.2%	3	0.1%
35	Vermont 	2,657	4	0.2%	4	0.2%	0	0.0%
36	Mississippi 	16,384	19	0.1%	22	0.1%	70	0.4%
37	Oregon 	6,623	7	0.1%	13	0.2%	7	0.1%
38	Florida 	11,477	11	0.1%	11	0.1%	0	0.0%
39	North Dakota 	4,349	4	0.1%	3	0.1%	472	10.9%
40	Minnesota 	13,115	11	0.1%	16	0.1%	0	0.0%
41	Missouri 	23,694	19	0.1%	20	0.1%	0	0.0%
42	Wisconsin 	13,677	4	0.0%	4	0.0%	0	0.0%
43	Idaho 	3,597	1	0.0%	2	0.1%	0	0.0%
44	Massachusetts 	4,924	1	0.0%	3	0.1%	0	0.0%
45	Virginia 	12,912	1	0.0%	0	0.0%	2	0.0%
46	New York 	17,193	1	0.0%	6	0.0%	0	0.0%
47	Delaware 	841	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
47	Georgia 	14,303	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
47	Nevada 	1,636	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
47	Tennessee 	19,568	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
N/A	Kentucky 	13,509	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
N/A	Federal bridges 	8,332	2,940	35.3%	2,893	34.7%	280	3.4%
	Total	591,958	17,213	2.9%	11,700	2.0%	30,550	5.2%

Notes: Kentucky did not submit its records. Bridges owned by federal agencies are not included in state figures.

Source: Msnbc.com analysis of National Bridge Inventory through 2006, as reported by states in April 2007.
Methodology: [How msnbc.com studied bridge inspections](#)
More: Where the bad bridges are, state by state

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Where the bad bridges are, state by state

Despite slight improvement, one in four bridges is deficient or obsolete

MSNBC

updated 6:15 a.m. ET, Wed., Jan. 30, 2008

There was a slight improvement in the share of bridges in the U.S. that were classified as either structurally deficient or functionally obsolete, according to newly released records from the National Bridge Inventory analyzed by msnbc.com.

The percentage of bridges that were deficient or obsolete was 25.0 percent in the newest records analyzed by msnbc.com, which include inspections through 2006. In the previous year, the percentage was 25.4.

These bridges are not necessarily unsafe, but they do have known problems.

Structurally deficient bridges need significant maintenance attention, rehabilitation or replacement. These bridges are restricted to light vehicles, require immediate rehabilitation to remain open, or are closed. A bridge is always rated as structurally deficient if it gets a rating of "poor" or worse on any of its three main components: deck, superstructure, and substructure.

Functionally obsolete bridges do not meet current criteria for deck geometry (such as lane width), load carrying capacity, clearance, or approach roadway alignment. Although functionally obsolete bridges are counted separately from structurally deficient bridges, most structurally deficient bridges are, by definition, also functionally obsolete.

BY THE NUMBERS

Where the bad bridges are

The share of bridges needing significant repair or replacement varies widely from state to state, according to newly released records from the National Bridge Inventory, including inspections through 2006. These are the results as analyzed by msnbc.com.

These bridges are not necessarily unsafe, but they have been classified by the bridge owners as structurally deficient or functionally obsolete.

States are ranked by the percentage of their bridges in these categories.

Click  to send an e-mail to that state's highway department.

Rank	State	Bridges	Structurally deficient	Functionally obsolete	Either deficient or obsolete	Percent deficient or obsolete	Percent in previous year
1	D.C. 	240	22	125	147	61.3%	62.9%
2	Rhode Island 	726	151	227	378	52.1%	55.4%
3	Massachusetts 	4,936	532	1,982	2,514	50.9%	51.5%
4	Hawaii 	1,096	147	348	495	45.2%	46.1%
5	Pennsylvania 	21,973	5,560	3,880	9,440	43.0%	42.3%
6	New York 	17,243	2,057	4,505	6,562	38.1%	37.9%
7	West Virginia 	6,947	1,041	1,503	2,544	36.6%	37.1%
8	Vermont 	2,680	488	464	952	35.5%	34.4%
9	New Jersey 	6,322	723	1,487	2,210	35.0%	35.7%
10	Maine 	2,351	337	466	803	34.2%	34.4%
11	Connecticut 	4,122	337	1,037	1,374	33.3%	33.4%
12	Kentucky 	13,585	1,332	2,922	4,254	31.3%	31.3%
13	New Hampshire 	2,292	215	489	704	30.7%	31.2%
14	Missouri 	23,750	4,199	3,095	7,294	30.7%	31.6%
15	Oklahoma 	22,847	5,401	1,590	6,991	30.6%	32.6%
16	Louisiana 	12,914	1,590	2,151	3,741	29.0%	29.7%
17	California 	24,128	3,117	3,825	6,942	28.8%	28.2%
18	North Carolina 	17,675	2,268	2,785	5,053	28.6%	28.8%
19	Washington 	7,657	408	1,634	2,042	26.7%	26.6%
20	Alaska 	1,214	146	177	323	26.6%	25.7%
21	Maryland 	5,029	357	974	1,331	26.5%	26.9%
22	Iowa 	24,188	4,850	1,434	6,284	26.0%	26.1%
23	Virginia 	13,200	1,199	2,223	3,422	25.9%	25.9%
24	Michigan 	10,682	1,468	1,294	2,762	25.9%	27.5%
25	Mississippi 	16,828	2,919	1,308	4,227	25.1%	26.0%
26	South Dakota 	5,910	1,215	259	1,474	24.9%	25.6%
27	Alabama 	15,592	1,732	2,144	3,876	24.9%	26.3%

28	Ohio	27,588	2,725	3,978	6,703	24.3%	24.6%
29	Nebraska	15,286	2,290	1,280	3,570	23.4%	24.0%
30	Arkansas	12,465	982	1,901	2,883	23.1%	23.8%
31	Oregon	7,218	530	1,132	1,662	23.0%	24.5%
32	South Carolina	9,188	1,235	806	2,041	22.2%	22.3%
33	North Dakota	4,393	699	249	948	21.6%	22.2%
34	Indiana	18,331	1,915	1,999	3,914	21.4%	21.7%
35	Kansas	25,174	2,803	2,365	5,168	20.5%	20.8%
36	Tennessee	19,719	1,275	2,760	4,035	20.5%	21.1%
37	Wyoming	3,007	385	228	613	20.4%	20.2%
38	Montana	4,957	462	541	1,003	20.2%	20.7%
39	Georgia	14,497	986	1,876	2,862	19.7%	19.7%
40	Texas	49,920	2,015	7,827	9,842	19.7%	20.3%
41	Idaho	4,089	345	446	791	19.3%	18.9%
42	New Mexico	3,835	393	293	686	17.9%	17.7%
43	Utah	2,838	228	254	482	17.0%	17.5%
44	Florida	11,561	278	1,683	1,961	17.0%	18.0%
45	Colorado	8,211	567	819	1,386	16.9%	17.0%
46	Illinois	25,784	2,391	1,818	4,209	16.3%	16.2%
47	Delaware	846	17	111	128	15.1%	15.4%
48	Wisconsin	13,762	1,276	789	2,065	15.0%	15.3%
49	Nevada	1,672	43	155	198	11.8%	12.0%
50	Minnesota	12,993	1,113	418	1,531	11.8%	12.0%
51	Arizona	7,368	177	605	782	10.6%	10.1%
Total		590,829	68,941	78,661	147,602	25.0%	25.4%

Notes: Kentucky did not submit its 2006 records, so its figures did not change. Bridges owned by federal agencies are included in state figures. Bridges where the status was reported as "not applicable" are excluded.

Source: Msnbc.com analysis of National Bridge Inventory through 2006, as reported by states in April 2007.

Methodology: [How msnbc.com studied bridge inspections](#)

More: Other state-by-state results

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How msnbc.com studied bridge inspections

Giving states the benefit of the doubt in our calculations

updated 6:15 a.m. ET, Wed., Jan. 30, 2008

Here's how msnbc.com studied the state of bridge inspections around the country.

We used federal records to calculate whether each bridge had been inspected within 24 months. We also calculated separately whether each bridge was overdue under the timetable for that particular bridge.

In making our calculations, we were careful to give the benefit of the doubt to the states.

Source of the records

Federal regulations require that bridges of at least 20 feet that carry vehicular traffic on a public road must be inspected at least every 24 months, unless the state or federal agency that owns the bridge gets a special exemption. Only bridges in sound condition are eligible for such exemptions. For bridges in poor condition, states can set stricter schedules.

Every spring, states submit inspection records from the previous year to the Federal Highway Administration, which uses the data to distribute money for repair of highways and bridges. The inspection records are stored in a database called the National Bridge Inventory.

After the Minneapolis Interstate 35 bridge collapsed in August, many news organizations used an earlier version of this database to describe the condition of the nation's bridges.

The file, however, was a year out of date. It included inspections only through 2005 for most states, as submitted in April 2006.

Msnbc.com asked the Federal Highway Administration for a new file, showing the inspections through 2006, as submitted in April 2007.

At first, the highway administration denied our request, saying that its practice was to wait until the following year to release the database. Msnbc.com argued that the database was a public record under the federal Freedom of Information Act. The highway administration relented on Sept. 17, posting the new data file online where anyone could see it. This is the first report based on those records.

The analysis

Nearly 600,000 bridges are listed in the National Bridge Inventory. They carry traffic over rivers, streams, highway overpasses, railroads and other obstructions.

One state, Kentucky, didn't send in its records in 2007, so we couldn't calculate how many of its bridges were inspected on time.

But for the rest of the nation, we have two pieces of information: the number of months between required inspections, and the month of its last inspection. If the bridge was on a 24-month schedule, and it had been inspected within 24 months, we called it on time. If it had been longer than 24 months, it was overdue.

The complication: Bridge owners are allowed some time for data entry. The federal regulations allow up to 90 days to enter the data, if bridges are owned by state or federal agencies, and 180 days for other bridges, such as those owned by counties and towns.

We didn't want to call a bridge overdue if in fact it had been inspected on time but the data just hadn't been entered. So we gave the full time allowed for data entry under the regulations, and an extra month for good measure.

To give every benefit of the doubt, we assumed that state and federal bridge had been inspected on Dec. 1, 2006. That gave the states a cushion: four full months to get the data entered before the April 1 deadline.

For example, in the case of a state bridge on a 24-month schedule:

- If the database shows its last inspection in December 2004, then it was due for re-inspection in December 2006. We assume it got that inspection, and therefore we listed it as on time.
- If the database shows its last inspection in November 2004, then it was due for re-inspection in November 2006. Because no re-inspection was reported, it was overdue by one month.

Local bridges get six months for data entry, so we assumed that they all were inspected on Sept. 1, 2006. That gave them a cushion: seven full months before the April 1 deadline.

That's why we say that "at least" 17,000 bridges didn't get their two-year inspection, because it's not likely that every bridge really did get inspected the day after the database cutoff.

Some records not included

Sometimes states submitted contradictory records. For example, a bridge might be listed as carrying a road, but also listed as having only pedestrian traffic.

And some states submit too many records, such as bridges too short to be covered by the inspection regulations.

We took the most conservative route, excluding any bridge that met any one of these conditions:

- No road on the bridge.
- Closed to traffic.
- 20 feet or less in length.
- Pedestrian or rail bridges.
- Number of lanes listed as 0.
- Privately owned bridges (other than those owned by railroads), or owner listed as unknown.
- Border bridges where the neighboring state has more than half the responsibility for maintaining the bridge.

That left 592,000 bridges to be studied.

Separate calculations for 'late' and 'past 24 months'

States can get federal permission to put some low-risk bridges on longer schedules, and may choose to put high-risk bridges on shorter schedules. Most notable is Ohio, which by law puts every bridge on a 12-month schedule. (That pushes up the rate of overdue bridges in Ohio, because it sets a higher bar.) Other states generally set short schedules only for bridges in poor condition.

Because of the federal exemptions, in addition to calculating how many bridges went past 24 months since their last inspection, msnbc.com also calculated which bridges were late for their inspection, judging them by the schedules that each state set for individual bridges. Of course, in a state that puts no bridges on long schedules, the calculations would work out about the same.

The records show that at least 11,714 bridges were late for their inspection, or 2 percent of the total. That's lower than the number that had gone more than two years since their last inspection: 17,218, or 3 percent.

Only four states had no bridges that were late for their inspection: Georgia, Nevada, Tennessee and Virginia. And a slightly different group of four states had no bridges that went past 24 months: Delaware, Georgia, Nevada and Tennessee.

The worst on-time rates, judging bridges by their individual schedules, were in these states: Hawaii (at least 46.5 percent), Rhode Island (27.5 percent), D.C. (11.5 percent), Alaska (8.1 percent), Arizona (7.6 percent), and Ohio (7.5 percent). When judged by bridges going past 24 months, the worst rates were in Hawaii (46.5

percent), Rhode Island (27.5 percent), Arizona (26.7 percent), New Mexico (17.4 percent), and West Virginia (12.2 percent).

Counties and towns owned the greatest number of bridges that were late (5,246), followed by states (3,291) and federal agencies (2,893). When judged by bridges going past 24 months, states owned the most (7,961), followed by cities and towns (6,276), and federal agencies (2,939).

On interstate highways, 630 bridges were late for inspection, or 1.1 percent of the nation's freeway bridges. And 1,556 went more than 24 months, or 2.8 percent.

Filling out the forms

Massachusetts highway officials didn't fill out the forms in the same way that other states do. Instead of filling in the schedule for inspection of a bridge (almost always 24 months in Massachusetts), the state highway department said it filled in a much lower number, making about 200 bridges look late for inspection, though they really were not.

We worked with the state to set the right inspection frequency for the bridges. Nearly all were set at 24 months.

Bottom line: Only three bridges in Massachusetts were overdue for inspection.

State-by-state files are available

In addition to our [online map](#) of heavily traveled bridges, msnbc.com is making available state-by-state files of all bridges in the nation, including inspection dates and condition ratings. To receive those files in Excel format, send a request to bill.dedman@msnbc.com.

URL: <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/22210326/>

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Ga. employee faked bridge inspections

Georgia employee could face charges; claimed to check 18 bridges in a day

By Bill Dedman
Investigative reporter

msnbc.com

updated 12:08 p.m. ET, Thurs., Feb. 7, 2008

A Georgia state employee could face criminal charges after admitting that he faked dozens of inspection reports for bridges that he never inspected, state officials said.

"We're confident that these bridges are safe, though not as confident as we were two or three weeks ago," said David Spear, spokesman for the Georgia Department of Transportation. "But all of these bridges were inspected two years ago, and we're checking them all now."

The fake inspections came to light after a review of paperwork showed a two-man team working at an impossible rate to meet an end-of-the-year deadline for inspections. In one case they claimed to have inspected 18 bridges a day, when 12 a week would have been the norm.

The supervisor of the crew, David Simmons, confessed that he and his partner falsified 54 inspection reports for bridges in metro Atlanta, Spear said. Eleven of those were vulnerable bridges known as fracture-critical, meaning one failure could cause the bridge to fall.

Simmons, an employee for 29 years, was told that he would be fired, but filed for retirement instead. He could not be reached for an interview.

His partner, Gerald Kelsey, did not admit to faking inspections, but didn't claim to have inspected the bridges either, officials said. He resigned his position, telling officials that the crew fell behind when Simmons took a lot of time off. Kelsey told the Atlanta Journal-Constitution that he was a "victim of circumstances."

Georgia was one of only four states to have perfect records for on-time bridge inspections in an investigative report published last week by [msnbc.com](http://www.msnbc.com). That report, following up on the fatal bridge collapse in Minneapolis in August, was based on inspections through 2006; so far, the admission by Simmons deals only with inspections in 2007, officials said, though they are checking records for the previous year.

"Obviously, there should never be an inspection late," Spear said. "But the pressure clearly was heightened by the end-of-the-year deadline coming up, and by the public attention that bridges have gotten since Minneapolis."

The false reports were red-flagged in late December by quality-assurance workers in the Transportation Department, Spear said. They noticed that many of the photos of bridges were time-stamped on the same date, too many to have been inspected. It appears that one or both of the inspectors was visiting the bridges, taking photos and then leaving.

The men were confronted on Jan. 22, and Simmons admitted that the reports were faked after the crew fell behind, Spear said. On the 24th, they were placed on administrative leave and were told they would probably be fired. On the 25th, Simmons, who had tenure as a longtime state employee, requested to retire. On the 30th, Kelsey, who did not have tenure, resigned.

The department says it plans to contest Simmons' retirement, and to pursue criminal charges. No federal document was falsified, Spear said, because the false reports had not yet been sent to the Federal Highway Administration.

"If there is any indication that there has been any criminal offense, we will absolutely pursue it," Spear said. "That decision is up to the attorney general's office."

One of 11 crews in the state, the men were responsible for inspecting 1,322 bridges over a two-year period, or about 13 a week. "It's an aggressive schedule, no doubt," Spear said, "but some of those are going to be culverts, which can be done quickly."

As in most states, bridge inspectors are not required to be licensed as professional engineers. Simmons and Kelsey were certified as bridge inspectors, meaning they had passed a federal course. The state says it will ask the Federal Highway Administration to revoke their certification.

Other inspectors will check the 54 bridges that Simmons admitted not inspecting, along with 68 other bridges that officials weren't certain had been checked after reviewing the paperwork. And inspectors will check the 278 bridges that the team still had on their list to examine.

Spear said the state has tried to be as forthcoming as possible, informing the Federal Highway Administration on Jan. 30, and calling local newspapers this week to announce the discovery.

"We are at least gratified that we detected it," Spear said. "Of course, this should never have happened. We're going to beef up some internal procedures, to add some people to quality assurance, and do more training for inspectors as well."

"We called in the other inspection teams and told them, 'If you have anything to tell us, you'd better tell us now.'"

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Bridge collapse revealed holes in fed data

Internal e-mails show confusion in the hunt to inspect similar spans

By Bill Dedman
Investigative reporter

msnbc.com

updated 8:38 a.m. ET, Fri., Aug. 1, 2008

When the I-35W bridge collapsed a year ago in Minneapolis, federal officials immediately requested an emergency inspection of every similar bridge in the nation. There was just one problem: No one knew how many there were.

At first, officials thought there were 756 steel deck truss bridges like the one that fell. That's how many they found in the official federal database of bridges, the National Bridge Inventory, which gets its records from the states. Then state engineers found 32 more to add to the list.

But when states started the inspections, they found that 280 of the bridges weren't steel deck trusses at all — including 13 bridges made of wood timbers. Another 16 no longer existed; a bridge in Pennsylvania had been closed in 1982. Another 11 were private bridges, not subject to federal inspection. One in New Mexico was a pedestrian bridge. And a bridge in Pennsylvania had been double counted; federal officials had placed an identical ghost bridge in Maryland.

By the time the survey was finished, the count of bridges of the same type as the Minneapolis span was down to 479, or 277 fewer than initially reported, according to internal e-mails from the Federal Highway Administration received Thursday by msnbc.com under the Freedom of Information Act.

All the steel deck truss bridges that could be identified did eventually receive their special inspection, almost all by Feb. 14. Only five bridges showed new significant problems.

But what about any bridges that might have been miscoded in the other direction and were still lurking in the database as another type of bridge? The federal e-mails don't address that question. The e-mails do, however, acknowledge a general weakness in the national system for keeping track of bridges: The "data is not as good as we thought," Thomas D. Everett, team leader of the bridge program at the Federal Highway Administration, wrote in "[Issues of Concern](#)," a slide show for safety experts on Jan. 13.

The 500 e-mails released to msnbc.com show federal bridge officials were operating under great stress in the months after the Minnesota collapse killed 13 people on Aug. 1, 2007. Officials were dealing with two federal audits of the bridge inspection process, fending off pitches from vendors of safety equipment, dealing with inquiries from members of Congress, answering questions from msnbc.com for its series on bridge inspection delays, writing [talking points for the boss](#), all while continuing to press states to live up to their responsibilities to inspect bridges on time.

A sampler:

- Kentucky was threatened with loss of federal funds for not turning in its bridge data.
- Iowa bridge engineers expressed frustration that they weren't certified to inspect bridges, considering that they were considered qualified enough to design them.
- Ohio was trying something new to make sure bridges were thoroughly inspected: Hiding tokens or small items on bridges, requiring inspectors to find them in a sort of treasure hunt.
- The city of Los Angeles was told it had to let state officials do all inspections, because its inspectors weren't doing them properly.
- Mississippi lost federal aid funds in February for seven cities that failed to post or close unsafe bridges, a month after msnbc.com had reported on the reluctance of federal officials to withhold funds when states didn't meet inspection deadlines.
- Ohio was not assigning load limits to all bridges.

- North Dakota was waiting four years to inspect fracture-critical bridges.
- Hawaii officials, the farthest behind on inspections, asked for all training courses to be taught over the Internet; federal officials responded that you just can't teach someone how to inspect a bridge using the Internet alone.
- And again in Kentucky, often the problem child, a state official asked how he was supposed to code in the database bridges that had been recommended for closure, but which remained open; the larger problem, federal officials replied: Why haven't the bridges been closed?

The National Bridge Inventory is used primarily as a tool for handing out federal highway money for repair of the worst bridges. But it's also the database used by the public, Congress and the media to get a snapshot of the condition and inspection history of the more than 600,000 bridges carrying traffic in the U.S.

"Everyone is 'data hungry,' particularly during times of crisis," Everett wrote. Recognizing the value of the data, the highway administration was trying to develop handheld computer access to the bridge database, for use by inspectors in the field; it shelved the project for lack of funds.

But in the "lessons learned" section of his presentation, Everett wrote that the Minneapolis experience showed that many pieces of information in the database were not being verified for accuracy by state and federal agencies. Many steps are being taken, he said, to improve the quality of the data.

Several state officials sent e-mails encouraging the federal bridge experts to keep their chin up.

"Hang in there, Tom," Terry Leatherwood, civil engineering manager for the state of Tennessee, wrote to Everett.

"Just remember that the the news media has the attention span of a fruit fly. So this will fade (as long as we don't lose another one)!"

The hundreds of e-mails released this week are being posted online at msnbc.com as .pdf files. (The latest version of the [free Adobe Reader](#) is required.) Many of the e-mails have document files attached; look for those links at the top of the e-mails.

If readers see a story idea or something we should follow up on, [send us an e-mail](#).

Documents released this week:

- ["Issues of Concern" slide show by Tom Everett](#)
- [Talking points for the administrator of the Federal Highway Administration](#)
- [E-mails from team leader Tom Everett \(318 e-mails\)](#)
- [E-mails from inspections leader Gary Moss \(211 e-mails\)](#)
- [E-mails from bridge data specialist Ann Shemaka \(14 e-mails\)](#)
- [E-mails from former senior engineer Edgar Small \(3 e-mails\)](#)
- [E-mail from engineer Shay Burrows tallying the steel truss bridges](#)
- [A list of the steel deck truss bridges that were reinspected](#)
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- [State-by-state summary of the reinspection results](#)
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