



WISCONSIN TOWNS
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Empowering Town Officials

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For Immediate Release
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Farmington Incident Underscores Small, Rural Bridges a Huge Problem in Wisconsin

Saturday's accident in Farmington highlights the crisis posed by possibly thousands of aging small bridges in rural Wisconsin.

Last weekend, a fertilizer tender truck attempted to cross Wet Coulee Creek with disastrous results. A structure under 20 feet in length on M. Olson Road in the Town of Farmington near La Crosse collapsed under a heavy load. Based on the type of rebar in the abutments, it can be determined that the bridge was constructed nearly 100 years ago, although no definite records exist.

The federal government provides bridge funding and mandates the inventory and inspection of bridges over 20 feet long. However, no database tracks Wisconsin structures under 20 feet in length and no safety assessment is required.

“Wisconsin is making progress on replacing structurally deficient and weight-posted local structures technically defined as bridges,” said Mike Koles, Executive Director of the Wisconsin Towns Association. “However, when it comes to these smaller structures, which act like bridges but don’t meet the technical definition, we don’t even know how many there are, let alone if they are safe.”



Since these structures don't meet the federal definition of a bridge (more than 20 feet in length), they are ineligible for federal bridge funding. Without a dedicated source of state or federal funding, they are often only replaced when they fail.

Structures under 20 feet can have an oversized impact on Wisconsin farmers. Weight posting or structure failure restricts farmers' ability to move goods to market, receive feed, or deliver nutrients to crops. Complying with weight restrictions in order to protect public safety and best maintain crumbling infrastructure requires farmers and suppliers to take half loads or miles-long detours, increasing costs for farmers and disrupting the food supply chain.

"Despite this structure being over 15 feet, it was not eligible for federal bridge funding. Over the years, we applied for state grants to do a road project that would have incorporated replacement of this century old structure, but there were always more critical projects than available dollars," said Town of Farmington Chair Mike Hesse. "We just don't have the money to replace structures like the one on M. Olson Road, and unfortunately, we have more like it."

Replacing the structure is estimated to cost up to \$400,000, far exceeding the town's annual road budget.

"The users of Wisconsin's roadways don't make a distinction between 15-foot bridges versus 21-foot bridges. They just want to know they are safe, and they would be shocked to find out we have no idea if thousands of these structures are safe or not" concluded Koles. "If we don't inventory and inspect these smaller structures, we are going to see more occurrences like Farmington, and next time, someone might be hurt."

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