

Many Nebraska's Bridges Deficient

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OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — The U.S. Highway 159 bridge across the Missouri River at Rulo is only 22 feet wide.

The narrow bridge was closed for 15 days for repairs after a truck hauling 40,000 pounds of anhydrous ammonia damaged the bridge's steel girders and side railings in an accident. The bridge, an important link for businesses on both the Nebraska and Missouri sides of the river, reopened Wednesday after around-the-clock repairs.

"Had that bridge been wider, we probably could have opened up one lane to the public and kept the road open," said Moe Jamshidi, Nebraska's assistant bridge engineer.

Roughly one out of every three bridges in Nebraska is like the bridge at Rulo in the southeastern corner of the state — deficient in some way. A computer-assisted search by The Associated Press of Federal Highway Administration data found 31.79 percent of Nebraska's more than 15,000 bridges classified as "deficient." The state of Nebraska's bridges was about the national average: The search found that 31.4 percent of the nation's 500,000 bridges were deficient.

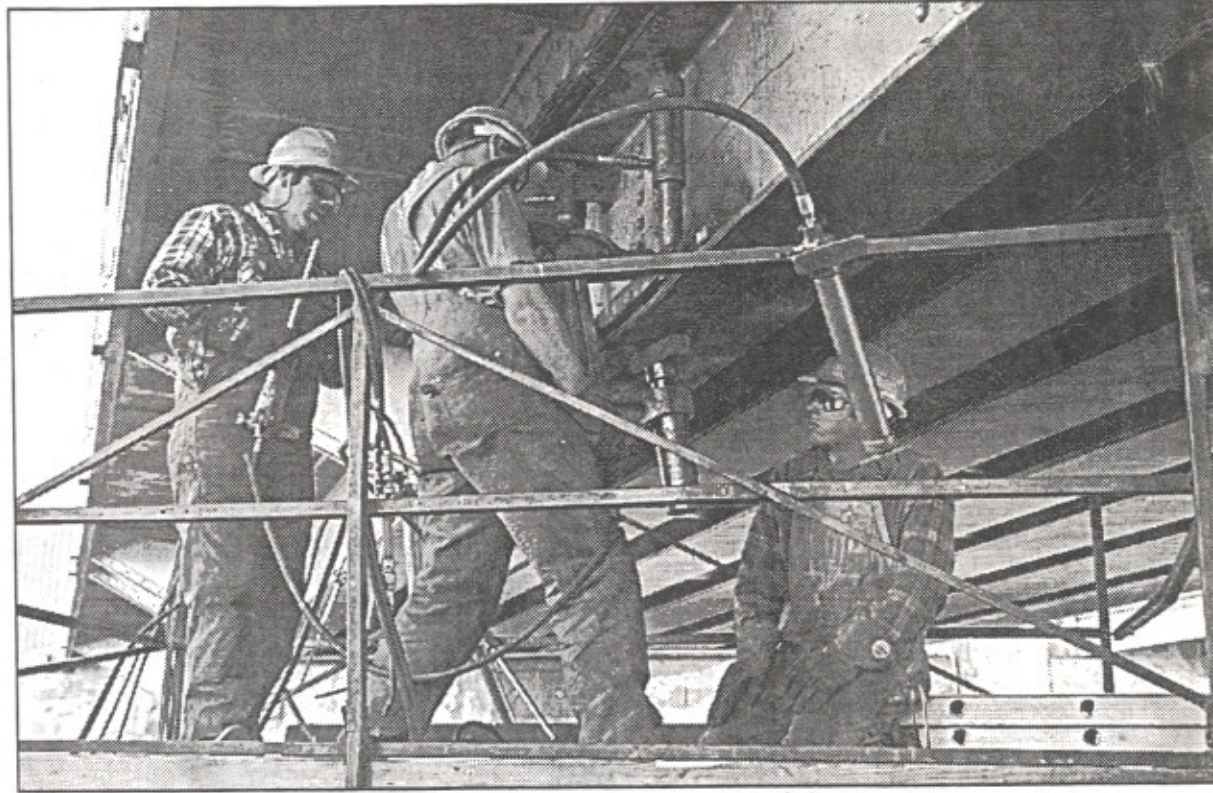
Most deficient bridges are not in danger of collapsing. Some need major repairs, but others are just too narrow to handle the current traffic loads.

"If there were any bridges in Nebraska that we were concerned about their safety, they would be closed for repair," said Jamshidi, who works for the Nebraska Department of Roads. "All the bridges in Nebraska that are open to traffic are safe to drive over."

The state department inspects each bridge in Nebraska every two years. "We have a lot of narrow bridges in this state," Jamshidi said. "The traffic numbers have changed over the years so much that the bridges have become too narrow for the traffic flow." About half of Nebraska's 6,000 county bridges are load-posted: Because of their age or condition, they cannot support more than the posted amount of weight. "They're not falling in," Jamshidi said. "But when they were built in the '20s or the '40s, the trucks that had to cross them weren't as heavy."

Only 27 of the 3,400 state-owned bridges are load-posted, Jamshidi said. State Sen. Doug Kristensen of Minden, chairman of the Legislature's Transportation Committee, said Nebraska repairs its bridges on an as-needed basis and he is comfortable with that system.

BEAM REPAIR



Dan Dalton, Caleb Holt and Daniel Dalton repair a beam on the Burlington Northern Sante Fe Third Street underpass Friday afternoon. The workers used hydraulic clamps and welding torches to straighten an area that was struck by a front end loader. Photo by John Weare/Times-Herald.

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