

Farmers have a sizable stake in the infrastructure bills under debate in Congress

As we write this column, Congress seems to be caught between a rock and a hard place when it comes to funding improvements to the infrastructure. But to be completely clear, there seems to be at least two “rock and hard places.”

First, there is the debate over what constitutes “infrastructure.”

Does the word “infrastructure” solely refer to physical things like roads, bridges, the electrical grid, sewer and water systems, and the like? Or does it also include the social side of life including education, childcare, and the reduction of poverty?

In this debate, we have to admit that we have a distinct bias. As graduates and employees of Land Grant institutions, we view the education, research, and outreach we participated in as a means of supporting and improving the human infrastructure of the US. As social scientists, we would go so far as to argue that a strong human infrastructure is a critical element of the strength of our society. From our perspective, a strong human infrastructure multiplies the effectiveness of improvements to the physical infrastructure and vice versa.

Second, we have a debate in Congress and across the nation over how much to invest in infrastructure improvement. Is \$3.5 trillion too much? Is \$1.0 trillion too little? What about the sum of the two?

Once again, we admit to a bias. Without reference to any particular economist or school of economics we would like to pose a simple question. What set of entrepreneurs would resist constructing a building, purchasing machinery, and training a staff if they thought that these investments would pay off handsomely?

How these arguments get resolved depends in Congress over the next month. We have a \$1 trillion bipartisan infrastructure bill that has passed the Senate and is waiting on action in the House where a significant number of Representatives have indicated that they will vote no on that bill if their \$3.5 billion infrastructure bill is not passed at the same time. The success of this bill will likely depend upon garnering the votes of all the Democrats in the Senate.

So, what is the fuss over and what stake do agriculture and rural communities have in the outcome of this standoff? Let’s look at a couple of the elements of one or the other of these two bills.

The \$1.0 trillion bipartisan bill includes \$110 billion for bridges and roads, addressing the critical need to fix rural bridges where decades of underinvestment have left farmers with the necessity of avoiding bridges with weight limits when they take their grain and livestock to town.

For farmers whose operations depend upon or can benefit from digital technology, the \$65 billion in broadband investment will give them access to data transfer rates that their urban relatives take for granted. Higher internet speeds will also increase the educational opportunities available online.

Small towns will benefit from the \$55 billion that is designated for water system improvements.

Agricultural exports will benefit from improvements to freight rail and port improvements. A total of \$83 billion has been designated for passenger and freight rail and ports and waterways.

The \$3.5 trillion plan of the Democrats also includes items that will benefit farmers and other rural residents.

While some think of poverty as an issue of urban slums, some of the most serious pockets of poverty are in rural areas which often lack the tax revenue to provide quality educational and child support facilities and programs. The larger plan will provide \$726 billion toward childcare, health care, and educational benefits.

Agriculture will receive \$135 billion to address various conservation issues including climate change, the effects of which are being felt by farmers in many regions of the country—too much water in some areas and too little in others.

Will any one of us like every item that is included in the two bills? Probably not. But without support for both bills we all could end up with nothing. Some will like that, but as a country we will be the poorer for not making the investment.

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