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Indicators of the Metroscope: Columbia Log Jam

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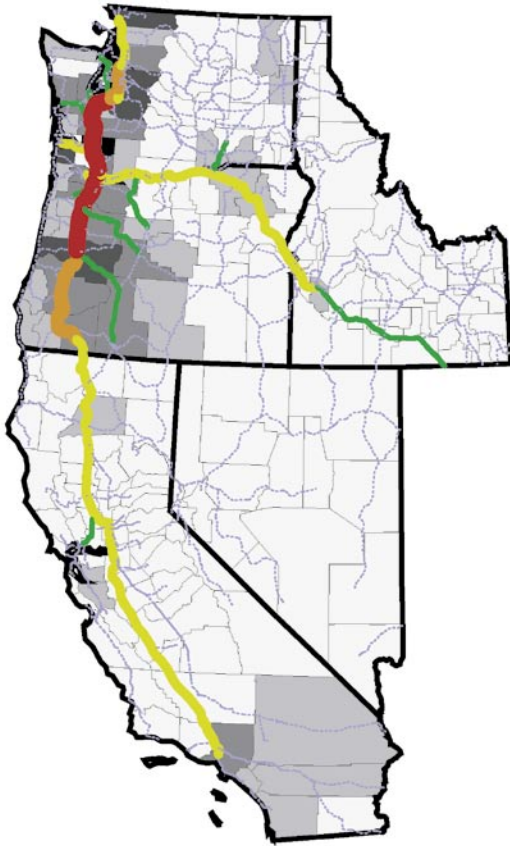
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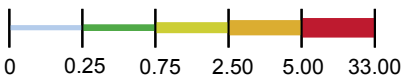
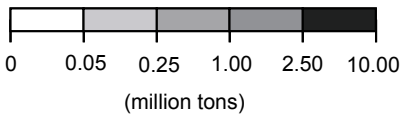
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Columbia Log Jam

by Brian Vanneman

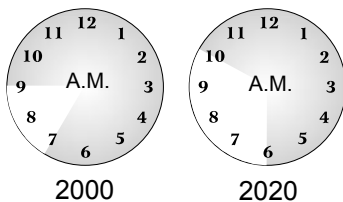


Origins and Destinations of Lumber, Wood, and Paper Products Crossing I-5 and I-205 Columbia River Bridges, 1998



Volume of Lumber, Wood, and Paper Products on Routes Used to Access I-5 and I-205 Columbia River Bridges, 1998

Duration of Congestion



Source: Columbia River Crossing Project

The I-5/Columbia River Bridge, which connects Washington and Oregon, is not a pleasant place to be during the morning commute. It's not uncommon for traffic congestion to last for five miles or more—from Vancouver to North Portland's Columbia Boulevard.

In fact, the Columbia River Crossing Project (the task force directed by the Washington and Oregon Departments of Transportation to study interstate gridlock, involve citizens, and seek a solution) projects that unless steps are taken to change the situation, it will get considerably worse. Currently, the I-5 Bridge operates at capacity between 7 and 9 a.m. and 4 and 6 p.m. By 2020, staff project 4 hours of morning rush hour congestion followed by 5.5 hours of congestion in the evening.

While peak-hour congestion spells trouble for workers commuting by car and transit, the bridge's role as a critical bottleneck for freight movement may have a significant impact on the region's economy. This is because a large part of both Oregon and Washington's economies are built on transportation-dependent industries like agriculture, forest and paper products, high-tech, and manufacturing. And while the U.S. as a whole relies on exports for approximately 7.5% of its gross national product, about 15% of the two-state Northwest economy can be attributed to exports. In short, we have a lot of goods that need to go somewhere—often over the I-5 bridge.

The transportation of lumber, wood, and paper products is one good example of freight transportation in trouble. Although the strength of this sector has been declining in recent decades, it still employs 114,000 people in Oregon and Washington, and makes up for 8% of such products produced in the United States. And the sector has evolved. Where the Northwest used to export mostly raw goods like lumber, it now ships far more finished or processed goods—like architectural framings—to distant markets. Thus, raw materials must often go back and forth between Oregon and Washington before being transformed into finished products and heading off to major export markets like California and Texas. Thus, multiple-hour delays in crossing the Columbia present extra costs and uncertainties to this industry, which, in the long term could mean that businesses and jobs move elsewhere. Similar patterns in delivery delays and work-flow problems can be discerned in the high-tech, agriculture, and distribution sectors. These spell far-reaching impacts for the economy as a whole.

But the solution to the Columbia River Crossing problem is far from a forgone conclusion. The task force will continue to solicit public input as it examines solutions to the problem throughout 2006. (Check up on the process and get involved at www.columbiarivercrossing.com) And of the many citizens and interest groups proposing answers, some see tolls as the key to a resolution, where others see vastly improved public transit, and still others simply envision a much wider bridge.