

Fewer Cars On The Road, Fewer Dollars For Highways: What COVID-19 Means For WYDOT

By [CATHERINE WHEELER](#) · MAY 15, 2020

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This is the time of year when lots of drivers are typically on Wyoming highways. But like in so many other ways, this spring has been far from usual.

"What we're starting to see is a dramatic drop-off in miles traveled in the state," said Wyoming Department of Transportation (WYDOT) Director Luke Reiner.

Across the state automobile traffic is currently down about 25 percent, and truck traffic is down about 10 percent, he said.

While that may be a good sign of people staying home, social distancing and following state and local restrictions, it doesn't necessarily bode well for WYDOT.

"All that affects our source of revenue, which is fuel tax...Fuel taxes is what primarily funds WYDOT. We get zero general fund dollars. So we watch that very closely," Reiner said.

WYDOT does get some funding from mineral royalties, but still it mostly has to rely on money spent on fuel. And this sudden drop-off could have major effects on the department's budget.

"If the trend continues on the way it is, we could probably be in the \$15 million-ish range between now and the end of September," he said.

That's \$15 million less because of the decline in fuel tax revenue, which would mean that WYDOT may have to make some hard decisions about which projects may be delayed.



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But WYDOT is already an under-funded department. Reiner said before all this started, it's about \$135 million short on just maintaining the state's highways.

However, he says the 61 active construction projects, and others slated for this year, are safe for now.

"One of the interesting things about Wyoming is that most of our projects are actually federally funded," Reiner said. "So in terms of the specific projects we have going this year, we don't anticipate any issue to those unless it's caused by a lack of material or crews getting really sick with COVID. That could hurt our construction season."

But there's been one good piece of news from the federal government: Wyoming airports are receiving close to \$50 million in [CARES Act funding](#) through the U.S. Department of Transportation.

"There is a rather complicated formula used by the FAA, and it looked at a variety of factors," said Brian Olsen, aeronautics administrator for WYDOT.

He said those factors include enplanements, the amount of debt an airport has, and unrestricted cash reserve levels. The amounts the Federal Aviation Administration is [distributing range from](#) \$18 and \$16 million at the Cody and Jackson Hole airports respectively-and to \$20,000 or \$30,000 at some of the smaller airports in the state.

"They can use it for a variety of things, such as payroll, operating expenses, maintenance expenses, it's really to help them hang on as we get through this unprecedented time and come out the other side and remain viable and strong," Olsen said.

Yellowstone Regional Airport Director Bob Hooper said the airport's board will decide what they do with the money, but they'll likely be using it for day-to-day expenses at the airport in Cody and some capital improvement projects.

"[We'll] possibly put in some navigational aids to help the airlines with landing operations during inclement weather and also taking a look at the facilities in our current airport terminal buildings for airport expansion," he said.

Hooper said while the amount of funding they received was a good surprise, they are anticipating major losses in travel this summer.

And that feeling is mutual in other communities. Sheridan County Administrative Director Renee Obermueller said they were hoping its new service provider Skywest would have a big impact.

"We were above our totals in enplanements for January and February and even March compared to dates as far back as we could go. So we were very encouraged...and then the COVID situation hit," she said.

In April, the Sheridan County Airport had about a 95 percent drop, Obermueller said. Though she said things are starting to pick back up this month, they've reduced the number flights a week during May to save some money.

WYDOT Director Luke Reiner said his department will be looking at options for saving money, but they're also looking into requesting some federal CARES Act funding.

But for now, he said he's proud of how the department has responded during the pandemic, like continuing its construction projects-something not all state's have done.

"Our construction season is short. We thought construction is really important to the economic vitality of the state. And we thought we could implement the correct protective measures for both WYDOT employees and our contractors," Reiner said.

He said that drop in traffic has a silver lining after all: crews have quicker turnaround time on construction projects and the department is saving money on traffic control.

Have a question about this story? Contact the reporter, Catherine Wheeler, at cwheel11@uwyo.edu.