

Abstract

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NAFTA Transportation Corridors: Approaches to Assessing Environmental Impacts and Alternatives

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With the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), trade between the three signatory countries (i.e., Canada, Mexico, and the United States) has dramatically increased, significantly shifting traditional patterns of production, distribution, and transport. Trade traffic across *all* modes of transport, including highway, rail, and air, has increased, often overwhelming the capacity of existing infrastructure, particularly along the border where 60–80 percent of goods are transported by truck. The value of “just-in-time” delivery and the cost of delay have risen sharply and in tandem, prompting analyses and assessments of the capacity of the current transportation infrastructure to absorb increased trade flows and to ensure future mobility.

The capacity of the transportation infrastructure to respond and absorb these growing trade flows has emerged as the “linchpin” of liberalized trade—with the concept of the “NAFTA trade corridor” gaining traction. Broadly defined, the corridors comprise the transportation infrastructure and systems that facilitate the flow of traffic both within and across North American borders, particularly those traffic flows prompted by the trade liberalization of NAFTA. In the absence of a uniform definition or objective indicators that coherently distinguish a NAFTA trade corridor from another segment of interstate highway, discussions of specific routes and their proposed designation as a NAFTA corridor are inherently dynamic, inextricably political, and typically, highway-centered. Various “corridors” have been put forth, with competition among routes, both extant and proposed, increasingly fierce.

While most discussions of NAFTA trade corridors have been limited to the logistical challenges of accommodating increased traffic through highway upgrades and construction, rather than a broad-based investigation and analysis of the extent to which multimodal alternatives might provide relief. As a consequence, a broad-based comparative assessment of the environmental costs, impacts, and benefits of the range of transport alternatives, is rare. Related, comprehensive consideration—much less, specific assessment—of these impacts on the communities through which the heaviest flows of traffic are expected or occurring, are rarer still.

Using the analytical methodology proposed in NACEC's *Analytic Framework*, this paper examines the environmental impacts of NAFTA-related shifts along transboundary border regions, using Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas (Mexico)–Laredo, Texas (US) and Detroit, Michigan (US)–Windsor, Ontario (Canada) as subjects of two case studies. Employing available, publicly accessible data, air, water, biodiversity, and “quality of life” indicators were analyzed. An aggregate presentation of these indicators, particularly as applied on the community level, are presented in a “report card” format. The ease or difficulty with which data were located and extracted, as well as gaps in publicly-accessible data, are discussed. Recognizing the unique role of NACEC, several recommendations for action are made. A listing of bibliographic resources and Internet-accessible websites are provided.