

DOT launches mapping project to guide government spending on freight

First step in rollout of National Multimodal Freight Network comes 9 years after project was required by Congress

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DOT begins rollout of multimodal freight network 9 years after it was authorized in 2015. (Photo: John Gallagher/FreightWaves)

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Department of Transportation is launching the first step in a long-awaited National Multimodal Freight Network (NMFN), a project that will be used to prioritize federal money for freight infrastructure around the country.

A [request for information](#) scheduled to be published in the Federal Register on Friday will give the public 60 days to submit comments and data on the best way to identify freight facilities and corridors that will be used to create an NMFN map.



DOT's Allison Camden. (Source: DOT)

In addition to prioritizing and directing federal funding, the network map will be used to better assess how federal investments can achieve national and regional freight policy goals.

DOT is particularly interested in suggestions from shippers, seaports, motor carriers, railroads, airports, freight forwarders, brokers, supply chain logisticians and state agencies.

“We’re hoping for robust input, hoping that the owners, operators and users — as well as those who are impacted by living and working nearby these facilities — will tell us how to think about it so that we can get a draft map out this summer, and a final map by the end of the year,” said Allison Camden, DOT’s deputy assistant secretary for multimodal freight infrastructure and policy, at an industry conference in March.

It has taken most of a decade to get the NMFN off the ground. An Interim NMFN was authorized by Congress and signed by President Barack Obama in 2015, followed by two comment periods between 2016 and 2018 that generated a total of 126 comments.

Commenters on the interim plan “overwhelmingly supported increasing the highway component of the NMFN and many suggested including the entire [National Highway System],” DOT stated in a separate [National Freight Strategic Plan](#) published in 2020.

However, “the freight transportation system has undergone significant changes in the time since the Department last solicited comments and additional designations for the Interim NMFN,” DOT points out in its current information request. “With more data and information available ... DOT has decided to reopen the NMFN designation process.”

Congress directed DOT to consider 12 factors in designating the route miles and facilities on the NMFN:

- Origins and destinations of freight movement within, to and from the United States.
- Volume, value, tonnage and the strategic importance of freight.
- Access to border crossings, airports, seaports and pipelines.

- Economic factors, including balance of trade.
- Access to major areas for manufacturing, agriculture or natural resources.
- Access to energy exploration, development, installation and production areas.
- Intermodal links and intersections that promote connectivity.
- Freight choke points and other impediments contributing to significant congestion, delay in freight movement or inefficient modal connections.
- Impacts on all freight transportation modes and modes that share significant freight infrastructure.
- Facilities and transportation corridors identified by state agencies as having critical freight importance to the region.
- Major distribution centers, inland intermodal facilities, and first- and last-mile facilities.
- The significance of goods movement, including consideration of global and domestic supply chains.

In the information request, DOT is looking for comments on three primary areas for designating the NMFN: feedback on NMFN's goals, prioritizing the 12 designation factors, and potential thresholds, criteria and data sources that correspond to one or more of those factors.

"There's a lot of different ways to decide what's a strategic port, what's an important highway mile or rail mile," Camden said at the conference.

"Please dig into this and share your expertise with us."