

Bridge Collapse A Major Break In Trade Corridor

Donna Gordon Blankinship, Associated Press

SEATTLE (AP) — For farmers, business owners and government officials up and down the West Coast, Washington's bridge collapse on Interstate 5 represents much more than a close brush with tragedy. As much as \$20 billion in freight travels to and from Canada and along the busy north-south corridor each year.

People in Canada won't go hungry if no Washington apples are trucked to them. But the American apple farmers may feel a pinch, said Don Alper, director of the Border Policy Research Institute at Western Washington University in Bellingham, about 20 miles north of the Skagit River.

"It's a huge commercial artery," Alper said. "If things happen to it, it can have huge economic ramifications."

Gov. Jay Inslee announced a plan Sunday to have temporary spans installed across the Skagit River in three weeks that would be able to handle cargo trucks, but the remaining spans must clear inspection before that work can begin. In the meantime, alternative routes around the bridge that collapsed Thursday will slow freight significantly.

Shippers can change their plans and ship by rail, air or water, but those options are more expensive and could have different economic impacts on the region.

"Containers might be diverted from the Port of Seattle or the Port of Oakland to Vancouver," Alper said, referring to Vancouver, British Columbia. "But I think it's too early to really go down that path."

On Monday, crews began removing the mangled steel, crumpled pavement and cars that fell into the river when the bridge collapsed. The Washington Department of Transportation said the fallen section has to be removed before final inspection of the spans still standing can begin.

The Canadian border north of Bellingham is the nation's fourth busiest land border port of entry to the north. Agriculture products, lumber, lumber-related products and manufactured goods related to aircraft dominate the freight crossing this Washington-Canada border.

Many of the goods crossing that border stay in Washington state, and some stop before the collapsed bridge. But close to \$10 billion in freight involves business as far away as California and Mexico, Alper estimated.

"The significance of this border up here is a big deal not just for our state and the region, but it's a big deal for the entire U.S.-Canada trading relationship," he said.

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Tourism south of the border also might be affected, with Canadian drivers opting not to travel to Seattle, or further south to Oregon and California. Alper predicted shopping malls south of the bridge may be hurt at least temporarily.

Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., said she is working with the Obama administration to get freight and shoppers moving again on I-5.

"We are working extremely hard to do everything we can to help make this extremely important corridor is fixed as soon as possible," she said.

In the meantime, she encouraged people to "come and shop" in the Burlington-Mount Vernon area.

Sen. Maria Cantwell, D-Wash., noted that when I-5 was closed for four days through Centralia a few years ago because of flooding, it cost the economy \$47 million.

Of the 71,000 vehicles that cross the Skagit River bridge daily, an estimated 12 percent is commercial traffic, Cantwell said.

"It's so important to the local economic activity, and to the economic activity of our region," she said.

Staff members in Rep. Suzan DelBene's office, whose district starts on the north end of the Skagit River bridge, shared some more data concerning the economic impact of the bridge collapse.

In 2012, nearly 1.9 million Canadian vehicles crossed that bridge.

Those numbers have increased significantly since 2001, with Canadian traffic coming south more than doubling during that time.

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