

Thompson: Don't forget rural America

Contributed by Congressman Mike Thompson
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Our country is facing some of the biggest challenges I've seen in my lifetime, and we must act quickly and carefully to put our country back on the path of greatness.

There has been much talk of the need to invest in infrastructure projects that will employ Americans while rebuilding our nation. But in this discussion once again America's rural areas are being ignored.

Approximately 50 million Americans live in rural communities, and they face the same challenges confronting all other Americans.

People across this country are struggling to pay their mortgages and afford rising health care costs, while still putting groceries in their refrigerator and gas in their tanks.

But rural communities are hit even harder by the tough economy, especially when it comes to jobs. In my district, for example, one rural county's unemployment is over three percentage points higher than the average for the state as a whole.

Despite the bleaker outlook facing rural communities, we fail to invest equitably in their economic health.

Right now, the federal government invests \$500 less per person in rural communities than in urban areas. But this proportion does not fairly recognize the importance of rural infrastructure to our country's economy.

For example, America's interstate highways help transport 77 percent of America's freight. On a typical day, about 33 million tons of goods, valued at about \$27 billion, are transported across America's highways.

We must recognize that the highways are more than just a way for rural folks to get to work, they are one of the main arteries of our country's economy.

A broader stimulus plan that ultimately only funds projects in urban and suburban communities will fail to provide the broad economic benefit Congress intends.

Congress should build on the precedent created in previous funding bills to include similar guarantees of equitable funding for rural areas.

America's economy cannot be restored to greatness without investing in all Americans, not just those in urban areas.

Congressman Mike Thompson represents Lake County in the US House of Representatives.

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