



Highlights of [GAO-09-219](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

To help meet increasing transportation demands, the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) created three programs to invest federal funds in national and regional transportation infrastructure. As requested, this report provides (1) an overview of the goals, funding status, and types of projects and activities funded by the three programs; (2) advantages and challenges identified by program stakeholders; and (3) potential program enhancements. GAO reviewed pertinent federal laws and rules; examined plans for selected projects; conducted site visits; and interviewed officials, stakeholders, and experts.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO is not recommending executive action. However, to enhance these programs, Congress should consider the following matters: (1) defining the federal role in accordance with national and regional program priorities, (2) implementing a criteria-based, competitive project selection process, and (3) working with the Secretary of Transportation to develop any specific program enhancements that could help these programs meet priorities and achieve the highest possible return on federal investments.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-09-219](#). For more information, contact Phillip R. Herr, 202-512-2834 or [herrp@gao.gov](mailto:herrp@gao.gov).

## SURFACE TRANSPORTATION

### Clear Federal Role and Criteria-Based Selection Process Could Improve Three National and Regional Infrastructure Programs

#### What GAO Found

The goals of the projects funded by the three national and regional infrastructure programs—Projects of Regional and National Significance (PNRS), the National Corridor Infrastructure Improvement Program (NCIIP), and the Coordinated Border Infrastructure (CBI) program—are varied, most projects have been reviewed and funded, most projects are for highway improvements, and funds have been applied toward various related activities. PNRS and NCIIP funds were distributed by congressional directive, and CBI funds were distributed by formula. The states GAO visited or whose officials GAO interviewed had established a variety of project goals, including increasing capacity and enhancing mobility. As of December 2008, the Federal Highway Administration had reviewed most projects submitted by states and had obligated \$1.2 billion, or about 33 percent of the \$3.6 billion authorized for the three programs through September 30, 2008. However, some states had not initiated efforts to obtain available funding. The officials GAO interviewed cited various reasons for not pursuing the funds, such as trying to complete an environmental impact statement and trying to identify a project that met the program's funding criteria. The programs' contributions to projects' estimated total costs varied, from less than 30 percent of the estimated total costs for the majority of reviewed PNRS projects and about half of the reviewed NCIIP projects to 80 percent or more of the estimated total costs for almost half of the reviewed CBI projects. Furthermore, for high-cost projects—those expected to cost over \$500 million—the programs' funding contributions ranged from about 4 to 13 percent of the estimated total project cost. States have used the program funds mainly for highway projects and for various related activities, such as conducting environmental studies and expanding ongoing projects.

In discussing the three programs, stakeholders cited advantages less often than challenges. The most frequently cited advantage was the funding the programs provided to support and move projects forward. The most commonly cited challenge also involved funding and included funding uncertainty. This was a challenge because project sponsors did not know whether they would receive additional federal funds to complete their projects—especially high-cost projects.

According to GAO's interviews and prior work, clearly defining the federal role in surface transportation is an important step in enhancing these programs. Two historical approaches could then be used to distribute federal funds—a criteria-based competition or a formula-based distribution. GAO's interviews and prior work suggest that a criteria-based competition could enhance these programs. Some interviewees also called for a wide range of other enhancements, from broad proposals to increase investment in different transportation modes to specific suggestions, such as using cost-benefit analysis in selecting projects. The Department of Transportation generally agreed with the report's information and conclusions and offered to work with Congress on GAO's three proposed matters.