



**U.S. Department of  
Transportation**

Office of the Secretary  
of Transportation

The Inspector General

Office of Inspector General  
Washington, D.C. 20590

August 3, 2007

**INFORMATION MEMORANDUM TO THE SECRETARY**

**From:** Calvin L. Scovel III *C. L. Scovel III*  
Inspector General  
X61959

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**Subject:** Inspector General Audit of the National Bridge Inspection Program

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**SUMMARY**

This memorandum responds to your request that the Office of Inspector General provide an independent review of the National Bridge Inspection Program and the Federal Highway Administration's (FHWA) oversight of the Nation's bridges.

**BACKGROUND**

Your request is significant to the Nation as it follows closely the collapse on August 1 of the Interstate 35W Bridge, which spans the Mississippi River, sending vehicles, tons of concrete, and twisted metal into the water. A number of people were killed or injured. I share your concern about this collapse and wish to assist you in determining whether the current FHWA National Bridge Inspection Program delivers the highest level of bridge safety, in view of FHWA's role as the lead agency for ensuring the safety of the Nation's system of bridges.

This bridge was part of the National Highway System and, therefore, subject to FHWA's National Bridge Inspection Standards (NBIS). The NBIS provides requirements regarding the frequency of bridge inspections, qualifications of inspection personnel, and data to be collected. In addition, FHWA is responsible for maintaining an inventory of the Nation's highway bridges in its Bridge Inventory database and providing oversight of state actions to correct deficiencies.

In March 2006, we issued a report on load ratings and postings on structurally deficient bridges on the National Highway System. In that report, we made several recommendations to improve FHWA's oversight of structurally deficient bridges, including how FHWA works with the states to address the most serious deficiencies found during bridge inspections. We further recommended that FHWA develop a risk-based, data-driven approach and metrics to focus its oversight efforts.

The Interstate 35W Bridge collapse raises questions about FHWA's oversight of the National Bridge Inspection Program and underscores the importance of vigilant oversight of efforts to inspect and repair structurally deficient bridges. Going forward, our overall objective is to evaluate FHWA's implementation of the National Bridge Inspection Program and make recommendations for improvement in order to provide assurance to you, the Congress, and the traveling public that FHWA is doing everything that should be done to ensure bridge safety.

Our audit work will proceed in three concurrent phases, with sequential reporting dates. Specifically, our audit work will focus on the following efforts:

- An assessment of the corrective actions that FHWA has taken to address the recommendations we made in our March 2006 report on structurally deficient bridges. We plan to initiate this effort immediately and issue a report expeditiously.
- A study of the Highway Bridge Replacement and Rehabilitation Program and discretionary funding provided to states to correct structural deficiencies in bridges. We will assess the extent to which states effectively and efficiently use these funds to repair or replace structurally deficient bridges.
- A comprehensive review of FHWA's oversight activities to ensure the safety of National Highway System bridges across the country. We plan to supplement our in-house engineering expertise with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and other experts as necessary.

## **FOLLOW-UP**

None required.