

Highways in Calif. some of the worst in U.S.

By Gary Richards, San Jose Mercury News

California's highways continue to rank among the worst in the nation – a sorry distinction the state has held for more than a decade.

The Golden State's highway system is ranked 47th among the 50 states in overall highway performance and efficiency in the latest annual highway report by the Reason Foundation. That is a slight improvement for California, which ranked 48th in the two previous studies and has ranked in the bottom 10 every year since 2000.

Only Alaska, Rhode Island and Hawaii have worse roads, while North Dakota, Kansas and Wyoming have the best and most cost-effective highways.

"I've noticed a lot of paving over the past few years, but there are so many roads with so many potholes," said

Mark Lin of Stockton, who commutes over the Altamont Pass to the East Bay. "Interstate 580 is like driving in a Third World nation. It needs fixing bad."

The report covers road conditions through 2009, the most recent year data was compiled by the Department of Transportation.

"It's hard to believe it when you hit a pothole or see a bridge in Washington collapse, but the nation's roads have been getting better," said David Hartgen, author of the study and a professor at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. "There are still several states struggling and plenty of problem areas but progress continues to be made."

Progress has been slow in California, which spent \$679,000 per mile on road maintenance and other highway

upgrades. That's a significant increase (24 percent) in per-mile highway expenditures over 2008, making per-mile spending in the state nearly five times the national average. But with 18,260 miles, California's highway system is the 11th largest in the nation and carries the most traffic of any state.

"California seems to lag behind the others," Hartgen said, noting that improvement was shown in only two of seven categories analyzed. "This report doesn't get into the why and we are not asserting they are doing a good job or if there is something fundamentally flawed in what they are doing. We'll let the locals decide that."

California's urban interstates are the most congested in the nation, ranking 50th. The state ranks next to last in urban interstate pavement condition and 49th in the condition of key rural roads.

More than 16 percent of urban interstate pavement in California is in poor condition. Only Hawaii ranks worse, with 27 percent of its urban interstate pavement rated as poor.

But there are bright spots. California ranks 14th in highway fatalities and 12th in the number of deficient bridges.

Not only are California's interstates full of potholes, they are also jammed – 80 percent of the state's urban interstates are congested. Minnesota has the next highest percentage of gridlocked interstates, with 78 percent deemed congested.

Transportation officials say decades of underfunding have contributed to today's poor road conditions in California. The state excise gas tax had not been raised in two decades until Monday, when it went up 3.5 cents.

"The trend is now being slowly reversed," said John Goodwin of

the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, "but our state dug itself a deep hole that we will not climb out of overnight."

Added Hans Larsen, head of the San Jose Department of Transportation: "The cracked and bumpy freeways, potholes, weeds, graffiti and trash are all clear evidence of the lack of investment. The main source of funding for transportation has been the gas tax (and) it's dying like a dinosaur as vehicles are getting more fuel-efficient or aren't even using gas."