Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington DC 20515

Peter A. DeFazio
Chair

Katherine W. Dedrick
Staff Director

Sam Graves
Ranking Member

Paul J. Sass
Republican Staff Director

September 28, 2021

SUMMARY OF SUBJECT MATTER

TO: Members, Subcommittee on Highways and Transit
FROM: Staff, Subcommittee on Highways and Transit
RE: Subcommittee Hearing on "Examining the Role of Ferries in Improving Mobility"

PURPOSE

The Subcommittee on Highways and Transit will meet on Tuesday, September 28, 2021, at 10:00 a.m. EDT in 2167 Rayburn House Office Building and virtually via Zoom to receive testimony related to the hearing entitled "Examining the Role of Ferries in Improving Mobility." The purpose of this hearing is to examine the role of ferry transportation in reducing congestion and contributing to clean mobility alternatives, and to examine the federal programs that support this mode of transportation. The subcommittee will hear from representatives of the Washington State Department of Transportation, M-495 Regional Commuter Ferry Group, San Francisco Bay Area Water Emergency Transportation Authority (WETA), and the Calhoun County, Illinois Engineering Department.

BACKGROUND

Federal Investment in Ferries

Federal Highway Administration (FHWA)

Under current law, the Highways and Transit Subcommittee authorizes two programs that provide federal funds to support ferry transportation. The Ferry Boat Discretionary (FBD) Program is a formula-based program for the construction of ferry boat and ferry terminal facilities administered by FHWA. The program, created under the *Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991*, was most recently reauthorized in 2015 in the *Fixing America's Surface Transportation (FAST) Act* (P.L. 114-94) which provided $80 million per year over five years in contract authority from the Highway Trust Fund (HTF), and was continued in the *Continuing Appropriations Act, 2021 and Other*

Extensions Act (P.L. 116-159). In fiscal year (FY) 2020, the program provided funds to more than 100 public recipients in 37 states and territories.[1]

In July 2021, the House passed the *Investing in a New Vision for the Environment and Surface Transportation (INVEST) in America Act* (H.R. 3684), which reauthorized the FBD program and provided increased funding of $600 million over five years ($120 million per year) in contract authority. In August 2021, the Senate passed the *Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA; Senate amendment to H.R. 3684),* which included $912 million over five years in total guaranteed funding. Of that total, $570 million is contract authority from the HTF and $342 million is guaranteed additional spending over the next five years. The $570 million is provided as follows:

- FY22: $178,400,000
- FY23: $180,400,000
- FY24: $182,400,000
- FY25: $184,400,000
- FY26: $186,400,000

Federal Transit Administration (FTA)

Administered by the Federal Transit Administration (FTA), the Passenger Ferry Grant program (49 U.S.C 5307(h)) provides grants on a competitive basis to improve the condition of public ferry systems in urbanized areas. The program was authorized at $30 million annually in the *Fixing America's Surface Transportation (FAST) Act* (P.L. 114-94) and was continued at $30 million in FY 2021 under the *Continuing Appropriations Act, 2021 and Other Extensions Act (P.L. 116-159)*. Funds are provided as a takedown from the Urbanized Area Formula Grant program. In FY 2020, FTA awarded grants under this program to public transportation entities in 12 states.[2]

The House-passed *INVEST in America Act* provided $245 million for FY23 through FY26 for passenger ferries and would authorize the Secretary to make grants for zero- or reduced-emission passenger ferries. The IIJA does not include an increase in funding for this account.

Other Proposed Programs

The IIJA included $1.25 billion in additional guaranteed general fund funding for ferry programs. Of the total, $1.0 billion is for a Ferry Service in Rural Areas program, and $250 million is for an Electric or Low-Emitting Ferry Pilot program to support alternative fuel ferry service.

Ferry Ridership

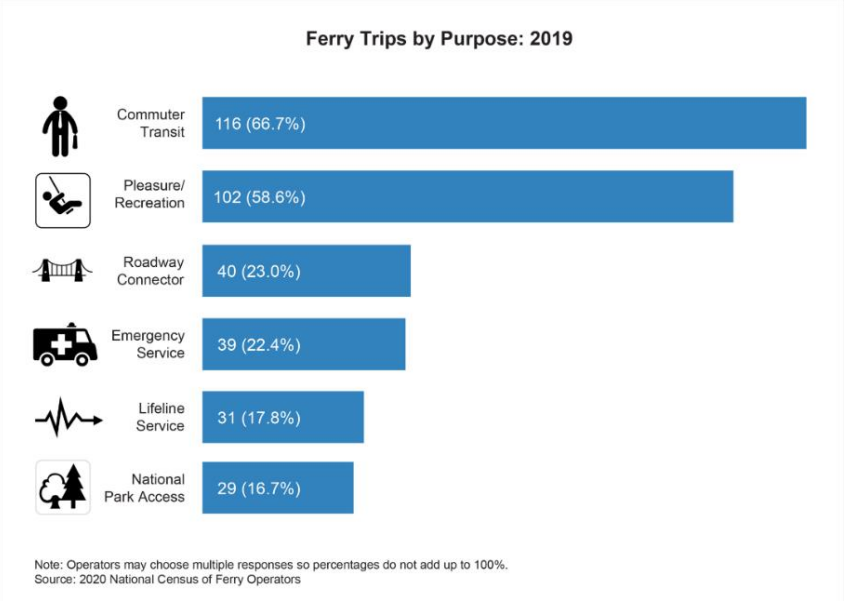
Ferries operate in diverse areas of the United States, including in some of the nation's most congested urban areas—such as New York City and San Francisco—to provide an alternative to

[1] https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/specialfunding/fbp/200820.cfm
[2] https://www.transit.dot.gov/grants/grant-programs/passenger-ferry-grant-program-2020-selected-projects

crowded roadways and transit lines.[3] Likewise, coastal regions—including along the coast of Washington State and Alaska—rely on ferries for connectivity between island and mainland communities. Federal funds also support ferry service in a wide range of non-coastal, predominantly rural states, including Kentucky, Montana, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and Utah.

Ferry data is collected under a national ferry database overseen by the Department of Transportation's Bureau of Transportation Statistics (BTS). Conducted biennially, the National Census of Ferry Operators (NCFO) is a survey of all ferry operations in the United States and territories, and includes information on operators, route segments, terminals, and vessel data.

Due to the impact on ridership from the COVID-19 pandemic, the collection of data for the 2022 NCFO has been postponed and will begin on April 1, 2023.[4] According to the most recently available data from the 2020 NCFO, a survey of 246 ferry operators found that in 2019, 131.6 million passengers were carried on ferries in the United States and territories. Data from the census showed that 66.7 percent of operators reported that commuter transit was one of the purposes of their trip, with pleasure/recreation coming in second at 58.6 percent.[5] Census data further showed that 22.4 percent of operators reported emergency services as one of the purposes of the trip.[6]



Congestion and Emissions Impacts

Our nation's ferry systems quickly and efficiently transport millions of passengers, which reduces congestion and wear and tear on our nation's roads. Ferry service provides a transportation

[3] https://www.apta.com/wp-content/uploads/APTA-2021-Fact-Book.pdf
[4] https://www.bts.gov/NCFO
[5] https://content.govdelivery.com/accounts/USDOT/bulletins/2ea3186
[6] https://www.bts.gov/NCFO

alternative to congested roadways in some of America's largest urbanized areas. Although ferries represent a small percentage of the total transit ridership, according to data from the American Public Transportation Association, the New York City Department of Transportation saw ferryboat ridership grow by nearly 3 percent to 25,222 unlinked passenger trips in 2019, totaling 131,154.3 passenger miles travelled.[7]

The COVID -19 pandemic resulted in a significant reduction in traffic congestion and transit ridership across the United States. Early 2021 data suggests rebounding traffic congestion levels, and points to a continued need to find solutions to reducing delay, including through the provision of alternate modes of travel.[8] Where feasible, ferries have the potential to serve a role in reducing roadway congestion.[9]

Improvements in battery technology hold the potential for expanding electrification in public ferry systems. Ferries in particular are well suited for electrification, compared to other maritime applications, due to short travel distances and sufficient space for battery packs onboard.[10] In recognition that ferries generate the most carbon and other greenhouse gas emissions of any Washington State government source, Washington has emerged as a leader in ferry electrification, following the signing of an Executive Order (EO 20-01) by Governor Jay Inslee in 2019 to transition the state's ferries to be a zero-carbon-emission fleet.[11]

---

[7] "2021 Public Transportation Fact Book" *American Public Transportation Association,* (May 2021) https://www.apta.com/wp-content/uploads/APTA-2021-Fact-Book.pdf.

[8] "2021 Urban Mobility Report" *Texas A&M Transportation Institute,* (June, 2021) https://static.tti.tamu.edu/tti.tamu.edu/documents/mobility-report-2021.pdf.

[9] 2015 National Transit Summary and Trends (National Transit Database). *Federal Transit Administration Office of Budget and Policy.* Oct. 2016. https://www.transit.dot.gov/sites/fta.dot.gov/files/docs/2015%20NTST.pdf

[10] https://connect.ncdot.gov/projects/research/Pages/ProjDetails.aspx?ProjectID=2022-01

[11] 20-01 SEEP Executive Order (tmp).pdf (wa.gov)

WITNESS LIST

Patty Rubstello
Assistant Secretary for Ferries
Washington State Department of Transportation

Seamus Murphy
Executive Director
San Francisco Bay Area Water Emergency Transportation Authority (WETA)

The Honorable Frank J. Principi
Chair
M-495 Regional Commuter Ferry Group

Kyle Godar
County Engineer
Calhoun County Highway Department (Illinois)