Top Stories

6/26/19 – Amtrak CEO Richard Anderson stated that he is looking at "breaking up" some of its long-distance routes at a Senate Commerce Committee hearing. "We are working hard to try to get ridership up, but it's just clear that trips over 600 miles are not where consumers want to use Amtrak," and "We believe there's always a role for long distance, but on the margin, we should be looking at breaking up some of those long-distance trains."

6/24/19 – The House passed its second FY 2020 minibus appropriations bill that contained five of the 12 appropriations bills. They previously passed a minibus bill containing four appropriations bills. Three of the five appropriations bills including Agriculture, Interior-Environment, and the Transportation-Housing cover items under Natural Resources and Infrastructure Committee jurisdiction. The agriculture bill, which funds USDA, would provide just over $24 billion in discretionary funding, more than $5 billion above the level requested by the President. The Interior-Environment bill, which funds the Department of Interior (DOI) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) would provide a 7.5% increase to EPA compared to current levels and a 6.4% to DOI. The Transportation portion would fund the Department of Transportation (DOT) at nearly 7% above the President's request. As part of the House Appropriations Committee's FY 2020 transportation spending bill, the report includes provisions highly critical of the agency in how it has run some of their competitive grant programs. The report specifically calls out the lack of transparency in DOT's INFRA grants, and FRA rail grants, noting that the agency has failed to select project winners over the last few years for a number of competitive grant programs.

6/21/19 - The White House Council on Environmental Quality released new draft guidance laying out steps federal agencies should use to incorporate the impacts of greenhouse gases (GHG) into their reviews under the National Environmental Policy Act which applies to permitting new energy and infrastructure projects. While former guidance generally, but not always, required a federal agency to quantify the extent of a project’s GHG emissions, the new draft guidance would only require agencies conduct such actions when “a sufficiently close causal relationship exists between the project and carbon emissions.” It also provides agencies with reasoning for when such quantification is not required if it “would be overly speculative.” Federal courts have blocked a number of energy infrastructure projects over the past years after finding that the NEPA analysis accompanying the project's certification did not appropriately address its carbon emissions.

6/20/19 – The House Energy & Commerce Committee held a hearing, "Driving in Reverse: The Administration's Rollbacks of Fuel Economy and Clean Car Standards," in response to a letter that 17 major automaker corporations wrote to President Trump. The letter called for "one national standard that is practical, achievable, and consistent across 50 states … a final rule supported by all parties—including California." Many committee members at the hearing agreed with the automakers that California and the federal government must come to a unified agreement for a singular standard.
6/17/19 – In a report of early estimate of motor vehicle fatalities in 2018, traffic deaths were down slightly to 36,750 from 37,133, but “pedalcyclist” deaths jumped by 10%. Overall, after two years of substantial increases in roadway fatalities in 2015 and 2016, 2017 and 2018 have shown slight reductions with 1.8% and 1.0% declines respectively.

6/14/19 – The president issued an executive order requiring federal agencies to reduce the number of advisory committees. According to General Services Administration (GSA,) the federal government has more than 1,000 active advisory committees, 601 of which are required by various statutes. The order limits the number of committees not required by law to 350. GSA previously reported that the federal government spent $384 million on advisory committees in fiscal 2018.

6/12/19 – The Chairman and ranking member, John Barrasso (R-Wy) and Tom Carper (R-Del.), of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, which is the committee of jurisdiction in the senate for surface transportation infrastructure, sent a letter to Majority Leader Mitch McConnell and Democratic leader Chuck Schumer requesting the repeal of a provision in the FAST Act, which would rescind $7.6 billion in federal highway funding on July 1, 2020. The request matches a similar request that the chairman and ranking member of the House committee with jurisdiction made to the Speaker and Minority Leader earlier this year. The request is identical to a letter sent by NCSL to congressional leaders earlier this year.

6/5/19 – DOT’s Pipeline and Hazardous Material Safety Administration is asking for public comment on an environmental assessment report tied to a permit application filed by Energy Transport Solutions LLC to ship liquified natural gas (LNG) by rail. Due to lack of current pipeline capacity in the northeast the company hopes to be able to deliver gas in this alternative mode. However, the proposal notes that LNG could pose a particular hazard since at minus 260 degrees Fahrenheit it is cold enough to fracture metal in the event of a leak from a rail car. The super-cooled liquid methane would then rapidly revert to its gaseous state, presenting a risk of explosion.

From the Administration

6/24/19 – The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) awarded $495 million in airport infrastructure grants, which is the second allotment of the total $3.18 billion under the Airport Improvement Program (AIP). There are 358 grants to 327 airports around the country in 46 states and the Pacific Islands. Selected projects include runway reconstruction and rehabilitation, construction of firefighting facilities, and the maintenance of taxiways, aprons, and terminals. Earlier in June, FAA announced $840 million in airport infrastructure grants to 381 airports in 47 states.

6/12/19 – The Federal Railroad Administration awarded more than $326 million in Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvements or CRISI grants to fund 45 railroad projects in 29 states, with nine state departments of transportation receiving funds for 12 projects.

6/6/19 – At FAA’s Drone Advisory Committee meeting, FAA staff said in a presentation that the final remote ID rule “is likely up to 24 months away.” Remote ID is shorthand for a forthcoming system to identify drones operating in the navigable airspace. FAA hopes to issue a proposed rule by September 2019.