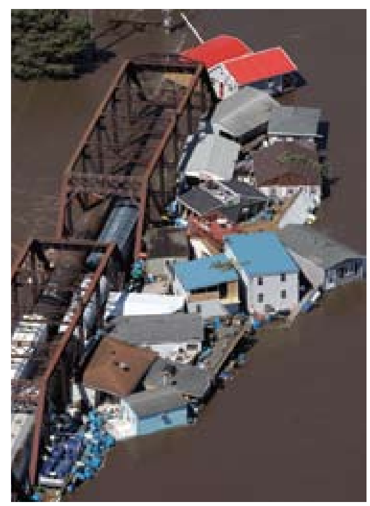
Transportation

Key Messages:

- Sea-level rise and storm surge will increase the risk of major coastal impacts, including both temporary and permanent flooding of airports, roads, rail lines, and tunnels.
- Flooding from increasingly intense downpours will increase the risk of disruptions and delays in air, rail, and road transportation, and damage from mudslides in some areas.
- The increase in extreme heat will limit some transportation operations and cause pavement and track damage. Decreased extreme cold will provide some benefits such as reduced snow and ice removal costs.
- Increased intensity of strong hurricanes would lead to more evacuations, infrastructure damage and failure, and transportation interruptions.
- Arctic warming will continue to reduce sea ice, lengthening the ocean transport season, but also resulting in greater coastal erosion due to waves. Permafrost thaw in Alaska will damage infrastructure. The ice road season will become shorter.

The U.S. transport sector is a significant source of greenhouse gases, accounting for 27 percent of U.S. emissions.[221] While it is widely recognized that emissions from transportation have a major impact on climate, climate change will also have a major impact on transportation.



Buildings and debris float up against a railroad bridge on the Cedar River during record flooding in June 2008, in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

Climate change impacts pose significant challenges to our nation's multi-modal transportation system and cause disruptions in other sectors across the economy. For example, major flooding in the Midwest in 1993 and 2008 restricted regional travel of all types, and disrupted freight and rail shipments across the country, such as those bringing coal to power plants and chlorine to water treatment systems. The U.S. transportation network is vital to the nation's economy, safety, and quality of life.

Extreme events present major challenges for transportation, and such events are becoming more frequent and intense. Historical weather patterns are no longer a reliable predictor of the future.[222] Transportation planners have not typically accounted for climate change in their long-term planning and project development. The longevity of transportation infrastructure, the long-term nature of climate change, and the potential impacts identified by recent studies warrant serious attention to climate change in planning new or rehabilitated transportation systems.[223]

The strategic examination of national, regional, state, and local networks is an important step toward understanding the risks posed by climate change. A range of adaptation responses can be employed to reduce risks through redesign or relocation of infrastructure, increased redundancy of critical services, and operational improvements. Adapting to climate change is an evolutionary process. Through adoption of longer planning horizons, risk management, and adaptive responses, vulnerable transportation infrastructure can be made more resilient.[215]

Sea-level rise and storm surge will increase the risk of major coastal impacts, including both temporary and permanent flooding of airports, roads, rail lines, and tunnels.

Sea-level rise

Transportation infrastructure in U.S. coastal areas is increasingly vulnerable to sea-level rise. Given the high population density near the coasts, the potential exposure of transportation infrastructure to flooding is immense. Population swells in these areas during the summer months because beaches are very important tourist destinations.[222]

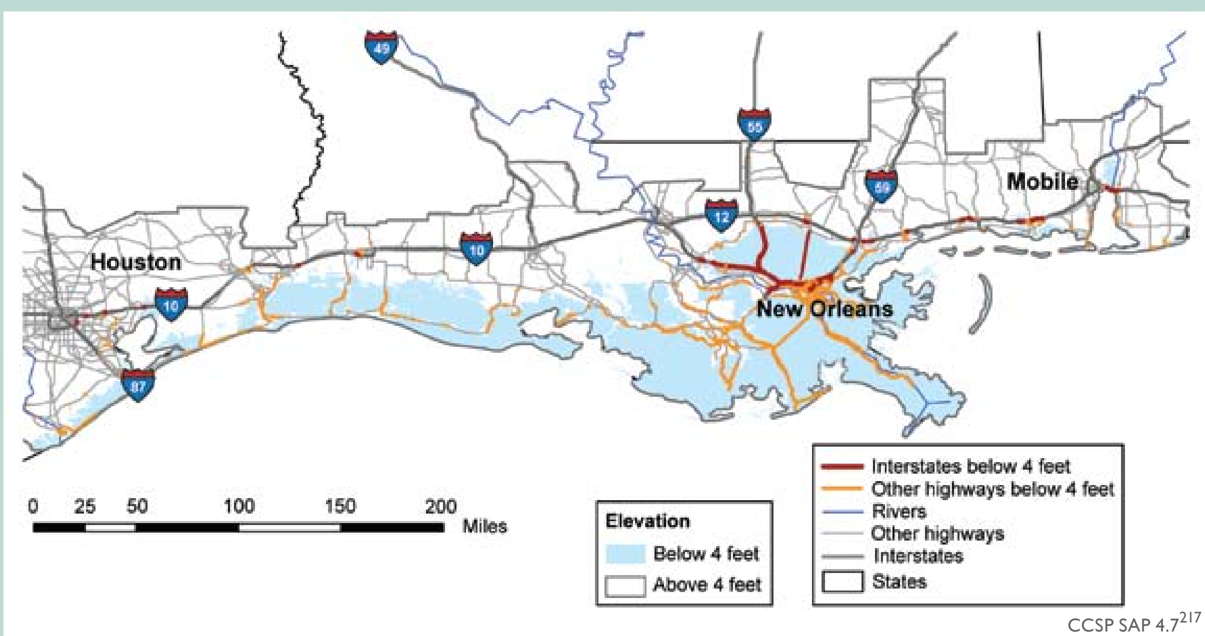
In the Gulf Coast area alone, an estimated 2,400 miles of major roadway and 246 miles of freight rail lines are at risk of permanent flooding within 50 to 100 years as global warming and land subsidence (sinking) combine to produce an anticipated relative sea-level rise in the range of 4 feet.[217] Since the Gulf Coast region's transportation network is interdependent and relies on minor roads and other low-lying infrastructure, the risks of service disruptions due to sea-level rise are likely to be even greater.[217]

Coastal areas are also major centers of economic activity. Six of the nation's top 10 freight gateways (measured by the value of shipments) will be threatened by sea-level rise.[222] Seven of the 10 largest ports (by tons of traffic) are located on the Gulf Coast.[222] The region is also home to the U.S. oil and gas industry, with its offshore drilling platforms, refineries, and pipelines. Roughly two-thirds of all U.S. oil imports are transported through this region[224] (see *Energy* sector). Sea-level rise would potentially affect commercial transportation activity valued in the hundreds of billions of dollars annually through inundation of area roads, railroads, airports, seaports, and pipelines.[217]

Storm surge

More intense storms, especially when coupled with sea-level rise, will result in far-reaching and damaging storm surges. An estimated 60,000 miles of coastal highway are already exposed to periodic flooding from coastal storms and high waves.[222] Some of these highways currently serve as evacuation routes during hurricanes and other coastal storms, and these routes could become seriously compromised in the future.

Gulf Coast Area Roads at Risk from Sea-Level Rise



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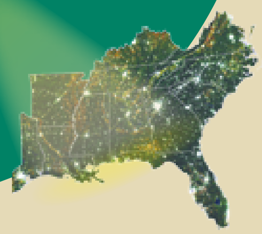
Within 50 to 100 years, 2,400 miles of major roadway are projected to be inundated by sea-level rise in the Gulf Coast region. The map shows roadways at risk in the event of a sea-level rise of about 4 feet, within the range of projections for this region in this century under medium- and high-emissions scenarios.[91] In total, 24 percent of interstate highway miles and 28 percent of secondary road miles in the Gulf Coast region are at elevations below 4 feet.[217]

Regional Spotlight: Gulf Coast



Sea-level rise, combined with high rates of subsidence in some areas, will make much of the existing infrastructure more prone to frequent or permanent inundation; 27 percent of the major roads, 9 percent of the rail lines, and 72 percent of the ports in the area shown on the map on the previous page are built on land at or below 4 feet in elevation, a level within the range of projections for relative sea-level rise in this region in this century. Increased storm intensity may lead to increased service disruption and infrastructure damage. More than half of the area's major highways (64 percent of interstates, 57 percent of arterials), almost half of the rail miles, 29 airports, and virtually all of the ports, are below 23 feet in elevation and subject to flooding and damage due to hurricane storm surge. These factors merit consideration in today's transportation decisions and planning processes.[217]

Coastal areas are projected to experience continued development pressures as both retirement and tourist destinations. Many of the most populous counties of the Gulf Coast, which already experience the effects of tropical storms, are expected to grow rapidly in the coming decades.[222] This growth will generate demand for more transportation infrastructure and services, challenging transportation planners to meet the demand, address current and future flooding, and plan for future conditions.[223]

Land

More frequent inundation and interruptions in travel on coastal and low-lying roadways and rail lines due to storm surge are projected, potentially requiring changes to minimize disruptions. More frequent evacuations due to severe storm surges are also likely. Across the United States, many coastal cities have subways, tunnels, parking lots, and other transportation infrastructure below ground. Underground tunnels and other low-lying infrastructure will experience more frequent and severe flooding. Higher sea levels and storm surges will also erode road base and undermine bridge supports. The loss of coastal wetlands and barrier islands will lead to further coastal erosion due to the loss of natural protection from wave action.

Water

Impacts on harbor infrastructure from wave damage and storm surges are projected to increase. Changes will be required in harbor and port facilities to accommodate higher tides and storm surges. There will be reduced clearance under some waterway bridges for boat traffic. Changes in the navigability of channels are expected; some will become more accessible (and extend farther inland) because of deeper waters, while others will be restricted because of changes in sedimentation rates and sandbar locations. In some areas, waterway systems will become part of open water as barrier islands disappear. Some channels are likely to have to be dredged more frequently as has been done across large open-water bodies in Texas.[222]

Regional Spotlight: New York Metropolitan Area

With the potential for significant sea-level rise estimated under continued high levels of emissions, the combined effects of sea-level rise and storm surge are projected to increase the frequency of flooding. What is currently called a 100-year storm is projected to occur as often as every 10 years by late this century. Portions of lower Manhattan and coastal areas of Brooklyn, Queens, Staten Island, and Nassau County, would experience a marked increase in flooding frequency. Much of the critical transportation infrastructure, including tunnels, subways, and airports, lies well within the range of projected storm surge and would be flooded during such events.[222,225,369]

Air

Airports in coastal cities are often located adjacent to rivers, estuaries, or open ocean. Airport runways in coastal areas face inundation unless effective protective measures are taken. There is the potential for closure or restrictions for several of the nation's busiest airports that lie in coastal zones, affecting service to the highest density populations in the United States.

Flooding from increasingly intense downpours will increase the risk of disruptions and delays in air, rail, and road transportation, and damage from mudslides in some areas.

Heavy downpours have already increased substantially in the United States; the heaviest 1 percent of precipitation events increased by 20 percent, while total precipitation increased by only 7 percent over the past century.[112] Such intense precipitation is likely to increase the frequency and severity of events such as the Great Flood of 1993, which caused catastrophic flooding along 500 miles of the Mississippi and Missouri river system, paralyzing surface transportation systems, including rail, truck, and marine traffic. Major east-west traffic was halted for roughly six weeks in an area stretching from St. Louis, Missouri, west to Kansas City, Missouri and north to Chicago, Illinois, affecting one-quarter of all U.S. freight, which either originated or terminated in the flood-affected region.[222]

The June 2008 Midwest flood was the second record-breaking flood in the past 15 years. Dozens of levees were breached or overtopped in Iowa, Illinois, and Missouri, flooding huge areas, including nine square miles in and around Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Numerous highway and rail bridges were impassable due to flooding of approaches and transport was shut down along many stretches of highway, rail lines, and normally navigable waterways.

Planners have generally relied on weather extremes of the past as a guide to the future, planning, for example, for a "100-year flood," which is now likely to come more frequently as a result of climate change. Historical analysis of weather data has thus become less reliable as a forecasting tool. The accelerating changes in climate make it more difficult to predict the frequency and intensity of weather events that can affect transportation.[222]

Land

The increase in heavy precipitation will inevitably cause increases in weather-related accidents, delays, and traffic disruptions in a network already challenged by increasing congestion.[215] There will be increased flooding of evacuation routes, and construction activities will be disrupted. Changes in rain, snowfall, and seasonal flooding will impact safety and maintenance operations on the nation's roads and railways. For example, if more precipitation falls as rain rather than snow in winter and spring, there will be an increased risk of landslides, slope failures, and floods from the runoff, causing road closures as well as the need for road repair and reconstruction[222] (see *Water Resources* sector).

Increased flooding of roadways, rail lines, and underground tunnels is expected. Drainage systems will be overloaded more frequently and severely, causing backups and street flooding. Areas where flooding is already common will face more frequent and severe problems. For example, Louisiana Highway 1, a critical link in the transport of oil from the Gulf of Mexico, has recently experienced increased flooding, prompting authorities to elevate the road (see Adaptation Box page 58).[217] Increases in road washouts, damage to railbed support structures, and landslides and mudslides that damage roads and other infrastructure are expected. If soil moisture levels become too high, the structural integrity of roads, bridges, and tunnels, which in some cases are already under age-related stress and in need of repair, could be compromised. Standing water will have adverse impacts on road base. For example, damage due to long term submersion of roadways in Louisiana was estimated to be $50 million for just 200 miles of state-owned highway. The Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development noted that a total of 1,800 miles of roads were under water for long periods, requiring costly repairs.[217] Pipelines are likely to be damaged because intense precipitation can cause the ground to sink underneath the pipeline; in shallow river-

Adaptation: Climate Proofing a Road

Completion of a road around the 42-square mile island of Kosrae in the U.S.-affiliated Federated States of Micronesia provides a good example of adaptation to climate change. A road around the island's perimeter existed, except for a 10-mile gap. Filling this gap would provide all-weather land access to a remote village and allow easier access to the island's interior.

In planning this new section of road, authorities decided to "climate-proof" it against projected increases in heavy downpours and sea-level rise. This led to the section of road being placed higher above sea level and with an improved drainage system to handle the projected heavier rainfall. While there were additional capital costs for incorporating this drainage system, the accumulated costs, including repairs and maintenance, would be lower after about 15 years, equating to a good rate of return on investment. Adding this improved drainage system to roads that are already built is more expensive than on new construction, but still has been found to be cost effective.[226]

beds, pipelines are more exposed to the elements and can be subject to scouring and shifting due to heavy precipitation.[217]

Water

Facilities on land at ports and harbors will be vulnerable to short term flooding from heavy downpours, interrupting shipping service. Changes in silt and debris buildup resulting from extreme precipitation events will affect channel depth, increasing dredging costs. The need to expand stormwater treatment facilities, which can be a significant expense for container and other terminals with large impermeable surfaces, will increase.

Air

Increased delays due to heavy downpours are likely to affect operations, causing increasing flight delays and cancellations.[222] Stormwater runoff that exceeds the capacity of collection and drainage systems will cause flooding, delays, and airport closings. Heavy downpours will affect the structural integrity of airport facilities, such as through flood damage to runways and other infrastructure. All of these impacts have implications for emergency evacuation planning, facility maintenance, and safety.[222]

The increase in extreme heat will limit some transportation operations and cause pavement and track damage. Decreased extreme cold will provide some benefits such as reduced snow and ice removal costs.

Land

Longer periods of extreme heat in summer can damage roads in several ways, including softening of asphalt that leads to rutting from heavy traffic.[164] Sustained air temperature over 90°F is a significant threshold for such problems (see maps page 34). Extreme heat can cause deformities in rail tracks, at minimum resulting in speed restrictions and, at worst, causing derailments. Air temperatures above 100°F can lead to equipment failure (see maps page 90). Extreme heat also causes thermal expansion of bridge joints, adversely affecting bridge operations and increasing maintenance costs. Vehicle overheating and tire deterioration are additional concerns.[222] Higher temperatures will also increase refrigeration needs for goods during transport, particularly in the South, raising transportation costs.[217]

Increases in very hot days and heat waves are expected to limit construction activities due to health and safety concerns for highway workers. Guid-

ance from the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration states that concern for heat stress for moderate to heavy work begins at about 80°F as measured by an index that combines temperature, wind, humidity, and direct sunlight. For dry climates, such as Phoenix and Denver, National Weather Service heat indices above 90°F might allow work to proceed, while higher humidity areas such as New Orleans or Miami should consider 80 to 85°F as an initial level for work restrictions.[227] These trends and associated impacts will be exacerbated in many places by urban heat island effects (see *Human Health* and *Society* sectors).

Wildfires are projected to increase, especially in the Southwest (see *Southwest* region), threatening communities and infrastructure directly and bringing about road and rail closures in affected areas.

In many northern states, warmer winters will bring about reductions in snow and ice removal costs, lessen adverse environmental impacts from the use of salt and chemicals on roads and bridges, extend the construction season, and improve the mobility and safety of passenger and freight travel through reduced winter hazards. On the other hand, more freeze-thaw conditions are projected to occur in northern states, creating frost heaves and potholes on road and bridge surfaces and resulting in load restrictions on certain roads to minimize the damage. With the expected earlier onset of seasonal warming, the period of springtime load restrictions might be reduced in some areas, but it is likely to expand in others with shorter winters but longer thaw seasons. Longer construction seasons will be a benefit in colder locations.[222]

Water

Warming is projected to mean a longer shipping season but lower water levels for the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Seaway. Higher temperatures, reduced lake ice, and increased evaporation are expected to combine to produce lower water levels as climate warming proceeds (see *Midwest* region). With lower lake levels, ships will be unable to carry as much cargo and hence shipping costs will increase. A recent study, for example, found that the projected reduction in Great Lakes water levels would result in an estimated 13 to 29 percent increase in shipping costs for Canadian commercial navigation by 2050, all else remaining equal.[222]

If low water levels become more common because of drier conditions due to climate change, this could create problems for river traffic, reminiscent of the stranding of more than 4,000 barges on the Mississippi River during the drought in 1988. Freight movements in the region could be seriously impaired, and extensive dredging could be required to keep shipping channels open. On the other hand, a longer shipping season afforded by a warmer climate could offset some of the resulting adverse economic effects.

Regional Spotlight: the Midwest

An example of intense precipitation affecting transportation infrastructure was the record-breaking 24-hour rainstorm in July 1996, which resulted in flash flooding in Chicago and its suburbs, with major impacts. Extensive travel delays occurred on metropolitan highways and railroads, and streets and bridges were damaged. Commuters were unable to reach Chicago for up to three days, and more than 300 freight trains were delayed or rerouted.[222]

The June 2008 Midwest floods caused I-80 in eastern Iowa to be closed for more than five days, disrupting major east-west shipping routes for trucks and the east-west rail lines through Iowa. These floods exemplify the kind of extreme precipitation events and their direct impacts on transportation that are likely to become more frequent in a warming world. These extremes create new and more difficult problems that must be addressed in the design, construction, rehabilitation, and operation of the nation's transportation infrastructure.

Navigable Inland Waterways

CCSP SAP 4.7[217]

Inland waterways are an important part of the transportation network in various parts of the United States. For example, these waterways provide 20 states with access to the Gulf of Mexico.[217] As conditions become drier, these main transportation pathways are likely to be adversely affected by the resulting lower water levels, creating problems for river traffic. Names of navigable rivers are shown above.

In cold areas, the projected decrease in very cold days will mean less ice accumulation on vessels, decks, riggings, and docks; less ice fog; and fewer ice jams in ports.[222]

Air

Rising temperatures will affect airport ground facilities, runways in particular, in much the same way they affect roads. Airports in some areas are likely to benefit from reduction in the cost of snow and ice removal and the impacts of salt and chemical use, though some locations have seen increases in snowfall. Airlines could benefit from reduced need to de-ice planes.

More heat extremes will create added operational difficulties, for example, causing greater energy consumption by planes on the ground. Extreme heat also affects aircraft lift; because hotter air is less dense, it reduces the lift produced by the wing and the thrust produced by the engine – problems exacerbated at high altitudes and high temperatures. As a result, planes need to take off faster, and if runways are not sufficiently long for aircraft to build up enough speed to generate lift, aircraft weight must be reduced. Thus, increases in extreme heat will result in payload restrictions, could cause flight cancellations and service disruptions at affected airports, and could require some airports to lengthen runways. Recent hot summers have seen flights cancelled due to heat, especially in high altitude locations. Economic losses are expected at affected airports. A recent illustrative analysis projects a 17 percent reduction in freight carrying capacity for a single Boeing 747 at the Denver airport by 2030 and a 9 percent reduction at the Phoenix airport due to increased temperature and water vapor.[222]

Drought

Rising air temperatures increase evaporation, contributing to dry conditions, especially when accompanied by decreasing precipitation. Even where total annual precipitation does not decrease, precipitation is projected to become less frequent in many parts of the country.[68] Drought is expected to be an increasing problem in some regions; this, in turn, has impacts on transportation. For example, increased susceptibility to wildfires during droughts could threaten roads and other transportation infrastructure directly, or cause road closures due to fire threat or reduced visibility such as has occurred in Florida and California in recent years. There is also increased susceptibility to mudslides in areas deforested by wildfires. Airports could suffer from decreased visibility due to wildfires. River transport is seriously affected by drought, with reductions in the routes available, shipping season, and cargo carrying capacity.

Increased intensity of strong hurricanes would lead to more evacuations, infrastructure damage and failure, and transportation interruptions.

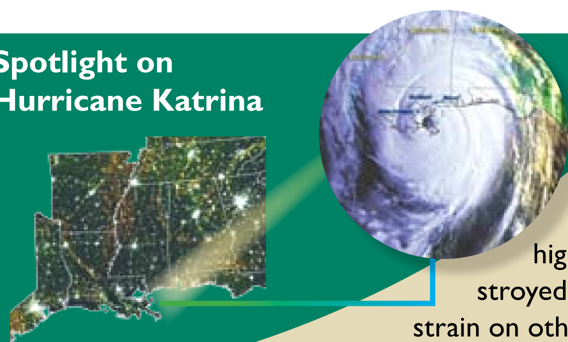
More intense hurricanes in some regions are a projected effect of climate change. Three aspects of tropical storms are relevant to transportation: precipitation, winds, and wind-induced storm surge. Stronger hurricanes have longer periods of intense precipitation, higher wind speeds (damage increases exponentially with wind speed[228]), and higher storm surge and waves. Transportation planners, designers, and operators may need to adopt probabilistic approaches to developing transportation projects rather than relying on standards and the deterministic approaches of the past. The uncertainty associated with projecting impacts over a 50- to 100-year time period makes risk management a reasonable approach for realistically incorporating climate change into decision making and investment.[215]

Land

There will be a greater probability of infrastructure failures such as highway and rail bridge decks being displaced and railroad tracks being washed away. Storms leave debris on roads and rail lines, which can damage the infrastructure and interrupt travel and shipments of goods. In Louisiana, the Department of Transportation and Development spent $74 million for debris removal alone in the wake of hurricanes Katrina and Rita. The Mississippi Department of Transportation expected to spend in excess of $1 billion to replace the Biloxi and Bay St. Louis bridges, repair other portions of roadway, and remove debris. As of June 2007, more than $672 million had been spent.

There will be more frequent and potentially more extensive emergency evacuations. Damage to signs, lighting fixtures, and supports will increase. The lifetime of highways that have been exposed to flooding is expected to decrease. Road and rail infrastructure for passenger and freight services are likely to face increased flooding by strong hurricanes. In the Gulf Coast, more than one-third of the rail miles are likely to flood when subjected to a storm surge of 18 feet.[217]

Spotlight on Hurricane Katrina



Hurricane Katrina was one of the most destructive and expensive natural disasters in U.S. history, claiming more than 1,800 lives and causing an estimated $134 billion in damage.[217,229] It also seriously disrupted transportation systems as key highway and railroad bridges were heavily damaged or destroyed, necessitating rerouting of traffic and placing increased strain on other routes, particularly other rail lines. Replacement of major infrastructure took from months to years. The CSX Gulf Coast line was re-opened after five months and $250 million in reconstruction costs, while the Biloxi-Ocean Springs Bridge took more than two years to reopen. Barge shipping was halted, as was grain export out of the Port of New Orleans, the nation's largest site of grain exports. The extensive oil and gas pipeline network was shut down by the loss of electrical power, producing shortages of natural gas and petroleum products. Total recovery costs for the roads, bridges, and utilities as well as debris removal have been estimated at $15 billion to $18 billion.[217]

Hurricane Katrina damage to bridge

Redundancies in the transportation system, as well as the storm timing and track, helped keep the storm from having major or long-lasting impacts on national-level freight flows. For example, truck traffic was diverted from the collapsed bridge that carries highway I-10 over Lake Pontchartrain to highway I-12, which parallels I-10 well north of the Gulf Coast. The primary north-south highways that connect the Gulf Coast with major inland transportation hubs were not damaged and were open for nearly full commercial freight movement within days. The railroads were able to route some traffic not bound directly for New Orleans through Memphis and other Midwest rail hubs. While a disaster of historic proportions, the effects of Hurricane Katrina could have been even worse if not for the redundancy and resilience of the transportation network in the area.

Water

All aspects of shipping are disrupted by major storms. For example, freight shipments need to be diverted from the storm region. Activities at offshore drilling sites and coastal pumping facilities are generally suspended and extensive damage to these facilities can occur, as was amply demonstrated during the 2005 hurricane season. Refineries and pipelines are also vulnerable to damage and disruption due to the high winds and storm surge associated with hurricanes and other tropical storms (see *Energy* sector). Barges that are unable to get to safe harbors can be destroyed or severely damaged. Waves and storm surge will damage harbor infrastructure such as cranes, docks, and other terminal facilities. There are implications for emergency evacuation planning, facility maintenance, and safety management.

Air

More frequent interruptions in air service and airport closures can be expected. Airport facilities including terminals, navigational equipment, perimeter fencing, and signs are likely to sustain increased wind damage. Airports are frequently located in low-lying areas and can be expected to flood with more intense storms. As a response to this vulnerability, some airports, such as LaGuardia in New York City, are already protected by levees. Eight airports in the Gulf Coast region of Louisiana and Texas are located in historical 100-year flood plains; the 100-year flood events will be more frequent in the future, creating the likelihood of serious costs and disruption.[217]

Arctic warming will continue to reduce sea ice, lengthening the ocean transport season, but also resulting in greater coastal erosion due to waves. Permafrost thaw in Alaska will damage infrastructure. The ice road season will become shorter.

Special issues in Alaska

Warming has been most rapid in high northern regions. As a result, Alaska is warming at twice the rate of the rest of the nation, bringing both major opportunities and major challenges. Alaska's transportation infrastructure differs sharply from that of the lower 48 states. Although Alaska is twice the size of Texas, its population and road mileage are more like Vermont's. Only 30 percent of Alaska's roads are paved. Air travel is much more common than in other states. Alaska has 84 commercial airports and more than 3,000 airstrips, many of which are the only means of transport for rural communities. Unlike other states, over much of Alaska, the land is generally more accessible in winter, when the ground is frozen and ice roads and bridges formed by frozen rivers are available.

Sea ice decline

The striking thinning and downward trend in the extent of Arctic sea ice is regarded as a considerable opportunity for shippers. Continued reduction in sea ice should result in opening of additional ice-free ports, improved access to ports and natural resources in remote areas, and longer shipping seasons, but it is likely to increase erosion rates on land as well, raising costs for maintaining ports and other transportation infrastructure.[132,220]

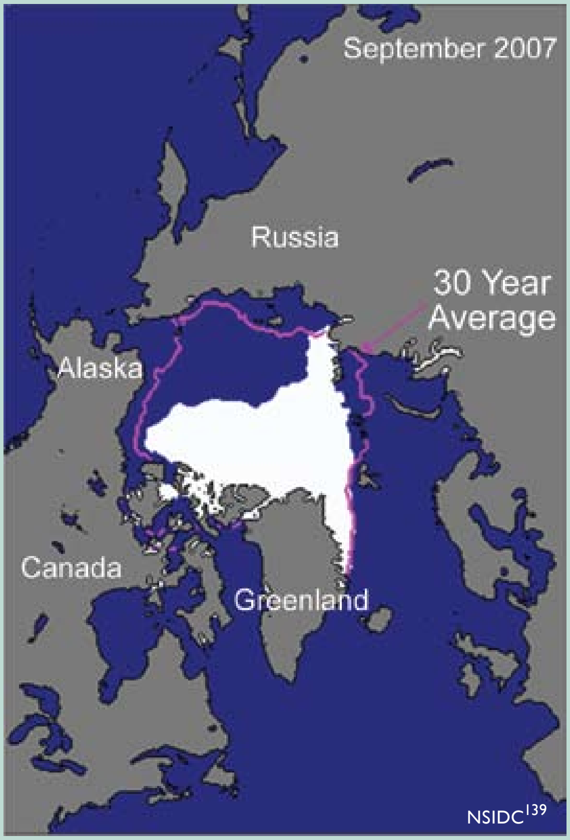
Later this century and beyond, shippers are looking forward to new Arctic shipping routes, including the fabled Northwest Passage, which could provide significant costs savings in shipping times and distances. However, the next few decades are likely to be very unpredictable for shipping through these new routes. The past three decades have seen very high year-to-year variability of sea ice extent in the Canadian Arctic, despite the overall decrease in September sea ice extent. The loss of sea ice from the shipping channels of the Canadian Archipelago might actually allow more frequent intrusions of icebergs, which would continue to impede shipping through the Northwest Passage.

Lack of sea ice, especially on the northern shores of Alaska, creates conditions whereby storms produce waves that cause serious coastal erosion.[137,219] Already a number of small towns, roads, and airports are threatened by retreating coastlines, necessitating the planned relocation of these communities (see *Alaska* region).[132,220]

Thawing ground

The challenges warming presents for transportation on land are considerable.[164] For highways, thawing of permafrost causes settling of the roadbed and

Arctic Sea Ice Decline



The pink line shows the average September sea ice extent from 1979 through the present. The white area shows September 2007 sea ice extent. In 2008, the extent was slightly larger than 2007, but the ice was thinner, resulting in a lower total volume of sea ice. In addition, recent years have had less ice that persisted over numerous years and more first-year ice, which melts more quickly.[139]

frost heaves that adversely affect the integrity of the road structure and its load-carrying capacity. The majority of Alaska's highways are located in areas where permafrost is discontinuous, and dealing with thaw settlement problems already claims a significant portion of highway maintenance dollars.

Bridges and large culverts are particularly sensitive to movement caused by thawing permafrost and are often much more difficult than roads to repair and modify for changing site conditions. Thus, designing these facilities to take climate change into account is even more critical than is the case for roads.

Another impact of climate change on bridges is increased scouring. Hotter, drier summers in Alaska have led to increased glacial melting and longer periods of high streamflows, causing both increased sediment in rivers and scouring of bridge supporting piers and abutments. Temporary ice roads and bridges are commonly used in many parts of Alaska to access northern communities and provide support for the mining and oil and gas industries. Rising temperatures have already shortened the season during which these critical facilities can be used. Like the highway system, the Alaska Railroad crosses permafrost terrain, and frost heave and settlement from thawing affect some portions of the track, increasing maintenance costs.[28,132,220]

A significant number of Alaska's airstrips in the southwest, northwest, and interior of the state are built on permafrost. These airstrips will require major repairs or relocation if their foundations are compromised by thawing.

The cost of maintaining Alaska's public infrastructure is projected to increase 10 to 20 percent by 2030 due to warming, costing the state an additional $4 billion to $6 billion, with roads and airports accounting for about half of this cost.[230] Private infrastructure impacts have not been evaluated.[217]

The Trans-Alaska Pipeline System, which stretches from Prudhoe Bay in the north to the ice-free port of Valdez in the south, crosses a wide range of permafrost types and varying temperature conditions. More than half of the 800-mile pipeline is elevated on vertical supports over potentially unstable permafrost. Because the system was designed in the early 1970s on the basis of permafrost and climate conditions of the 1950 to 1970 period, it requires continuous monitoring and some supports have had to be replaced.

Travel over the tundra for oil and gas exploration and extraction is limited to the period when the ground is sufficiently frozen to avoid damage to the fragile tundra. In recent decades, the number of days that exploration and extraction equipment could be used has dropped from 200 days to 100 days per year due to warming.[220] With continued warming, the number of exploration days is expected to decline even more.