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Transportation officials praise federal stimulus spending on highways

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BILOXI Highway officials representing a dozen states took time out from a two-day conference to praise the \$26.8 billion federal stimulus spending on state roads and bridges.

The highway program is part of the \$787 billion American Reinvestment and Recovery Act.

The stimulus program directed at roads and bridges has been a "smashing success," said John Horsley, executive director of the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, during a news conference Tuesday at the Beau Rivage in Biloxi.

Mississippi accomplished about six months of road and bridge construction beyond its regularly scheduled work with the federal funding, said Larry "Butch" Brown, executive director of the Mississippi Department of Transportation. The news conference on the highway spending was made during a meeting of the Southeastern Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, which was attended by about 1,200 people.

Horsley said all states put at least half of the stimulus money to work by a June 30 federal deadline.

"Two months later, we are at the 70 percent mark," he said.

There were 3,351 transportation contracts under construction in the stimulus program as of Friday, according to a news release from the Mississippi Department of Transportation.

From 50 percent to 65 percent of the \$274 million for Mississippi highway projects has been spent, said Brown, who also serves as president of the Southeastern association.

Brown said all of Mississippi's \$274 million is under contract. "The important thing is when you have projects that are sitting there ready to go and you don't have the money for them, then this little piece of money from heaven comes in," said Brown. "We were able to ratchet forward and do some of the things that needed to be done."

The earliest state efforts were resurfacing projects, he said. "We immediately started on those projects that had been held up for lack."

About 40 percent of the stimulus money is going to overlay projects and the remainder is for construction, said Brown.

Road widening projects on Interstate 59 are among the major projects in the stimulus program, said Brown. "We will be widening up to 12 bridges along the interstate system," he said.

The highway chief said there is a \$400 million to \$500 million backlog of road and bridge projects in Mississippi.

Wayne Brown, Mississippi southern district transportation commissioner, said the I-59 project "makes that highway much safer by having the shoulders on the bridges. Then again, when we have the contra flow it gives a place for the emergency vehicles to travel."

The \$10.5 million U.S. 90 project under way in Gautier is the largest federal stimulus project in Jackson County, he said.

The state's highway department operates on an annual budget of about \$800 million, said Brown.

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