

8 TRUCK FREIGHT, RAIL, AND AIR

8.1 OVERVIEW AND REGIONAL BENEFITS

Freight and inter-modal transportation systems ensure that residents have access to goods and that local products can reach markets quickly and cost-effectively. However, FMPO member agencies and residents are hampered by the fact that the FMPO region is not located along major transcontinental rail or truck freight corridors. As a result, there is a high level of dependence on truck freight along US 550, which affects the resiliency of the region and can add to the costs of shipping and the price of goods.

This chapter considers the set of inter-modal transportation systems that support economic activity in the FMPO region. In spite of the limited options for freight movement, the Farmington metropolitan planning area is especially reliant upon freight transportation-dependent industries, which account for 62% of the area's total output and more than 40% of the region's jobs. Historically, industries such as agriculture and mining (which includes oil and gas extraction) were even more critical to the region's economy. New economic development opportunities, such as manufacturing and potash mining, have also been limited by transportation access. In the coming decades, FMPO and member agencies can invest in freight transportation infrastructure that supports a range of industries to ensure greater economic resiliency.

8.2 TRUCK FREIGHT

The lack of rail access means that the majority of goods entering and exiting the region travel by truck freight, and a combination of routes that allow for regional truck freight mobility and local distribution of goods is necessary (see additional discussion below). FMPO plays a role in regional truck freight planning through data collection, coordination with NMDOT on inter-regional transportation needs, and consideration of roadway conditions that can affect the movement of goods. Ensuring that goods can be transported across the region efficiently is critical for economic competitiveness and for mitigating the negative environmental and community impacts associated with heavy truck travel.

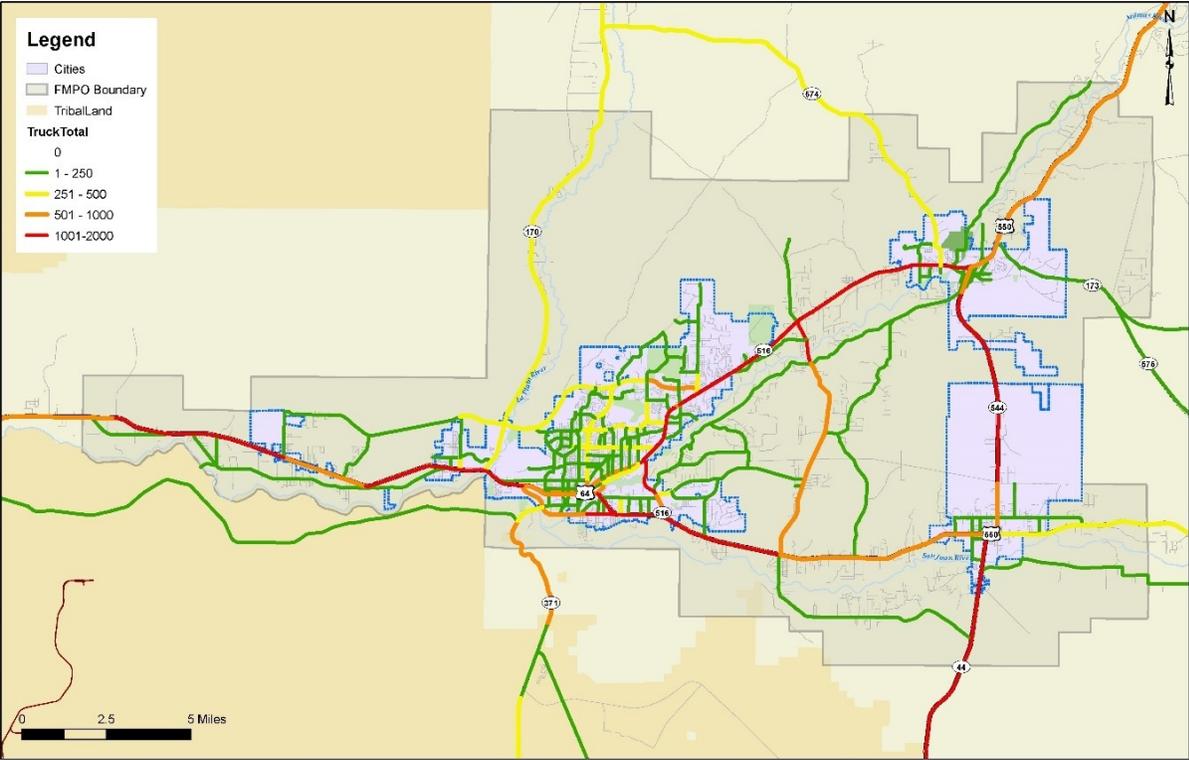
8.2.1 Existing Services

The primary routes for heavy freight truck travel include US 550, NM 516, and US 64. The highest volumes in the region are observed along NM 516 between Farmington and Aztec, where about 5-8% of the vehicles on the route are heavy trucks. As a share of total volume, the roads with the highest percentage of heavy trucks include CR 350 and NM 371. See Table 8-1 for additional information.

Table 8-1: Roads with High Freight Volumes in the FMPO Region

Corridor	Daily Volume	Truck Volume Share	Location(s) with Highest Volumes
Butler Ave	500	6%	North of Main St
CR 350	550-1050	9-13%	US 64 to NM 516
Main St	550-1400	4-7.5%	West of Browning Pkwy
Murray Dr	750-1100	7-8.5%	West of US 64
NM 371	700	11%	South of Murray Dr
NM 516	800-1800	5-7%	East of Browning Pkwy
Pinon Hills Blvd	850	6%	College Blvd to NM 516
Scott Ave	500	4%	North of US 64
US 550	6000-1100	6-12%	Bloomfield to Aztec
US 64	700-1150	5-7%	East of Browning Pkwy

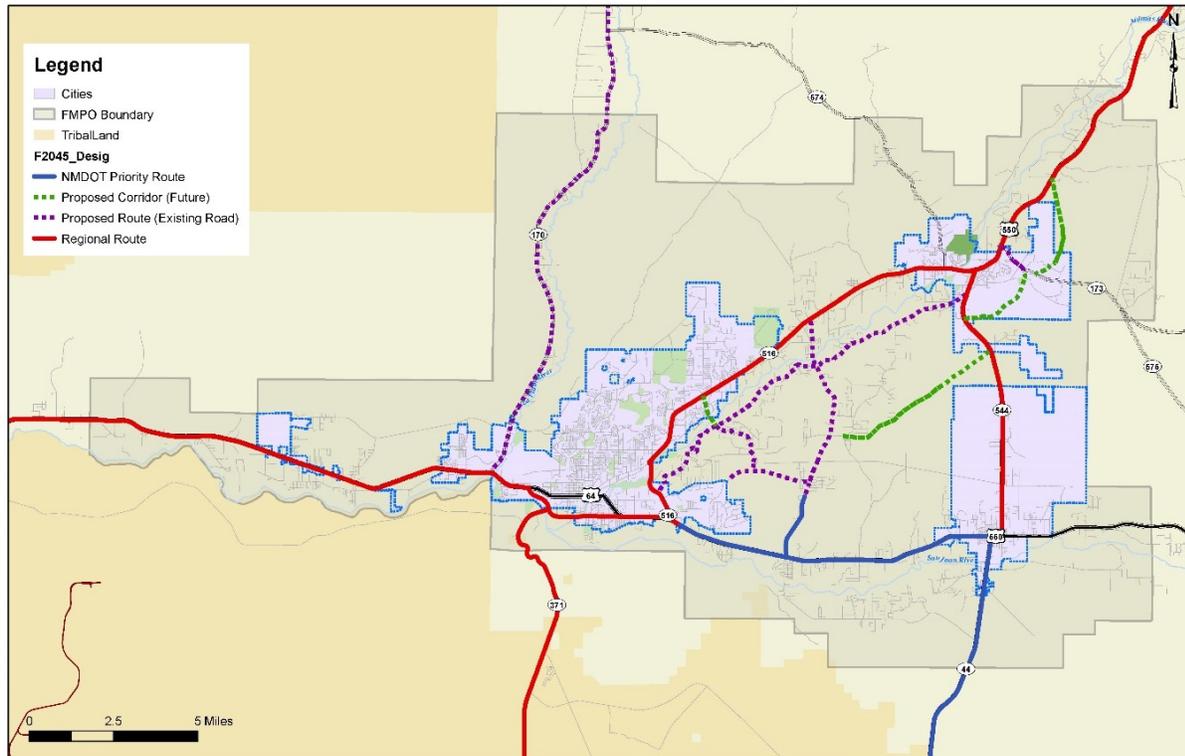
Figure 8-1: Truck Freight Volumes in the FMPO Region



To support the local distribution of goods, NMDOT and FMPO have also identified routes across the FMPO planning area to ensure products reach local businesses and that locally produced goods and natural resources can be shipped around the state and the US (see Figure 8-2). US 550 is considered a statewide Priority Freight Corridor for the critical connection it provides from the Albuquerque metropolitan area and I-25 to the Four Corners region. Per the NMODT Freight Plan, truck freight travel along this corridor is expected to increase in the coming decades. (The

impacts of the proposed rail line on truck freight travel have not been fully evaluated and may reduce truck freight travel along both NM 371 and US 550.)

Figure 8-2: Truck Freight Network in the FMPO Region



8.2.2 Planned Services/Long-Range Needs

Various roadway improvement projects identified in the 2045 MTP have implications for freight travel. The widening of US 64 is under construction, in part to support the movement of truck freight through the region. Several planned routes are identified as proposed freight corridors, including the Piñon Hills Blvd extension, East Aztec Arterial, and Highline Road. Other existing routes – including CR 350, CR 390, and CR 3000 – could support additional freight traffic through improvements such as more durable pavement design and the installation of shoulders (where absent).

In addition to new and improved infrastructure, truck freight travel through the region can be improved by increasing the efficiency of the existing transportation system and decreasing traffic congestion. Transportation systems management and the use of Intelligent Transportation Systems measures include coordination of traffic operations and signal timing improvements along major freight corridors, intersection improvements, incident management, and access management.

FMPO and member agencies can also explore opportunities to provide the services and amenities desired by truck drivers and better enable the Farmington metropolitan area to serve as a regional center for truck freight. As identified in the recently conducted statewide *Freight-Related Economic Development Opportunity Study* (NMDOT 2016), truck drivers express a strong desire for services and amenities such as fresh food, opportunities to exercise, outside space for drivers and their dogs, and access to health care and personal care services.

8.3 RAIL

8.3.1 Existing Services

There are currently no existing rail services in the FMPO region. The nearest major rail line in northwest New Mexico is operated by Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF), whose track runs parallel to I-40 and stops in Gallup, 100 miles south of Farmington. Distribution of goods into the FMPO region from Gallup or Albuquerque is provided by truck freight.

Rail and Natural Resource Extraction Industries in New Mexico

Rail is particularly important for the state's mining industries, with coal accounting for nearly 60% of all New Mexico rail tonnage. Rail also supports the state's oil and gas extraction and agriculture industries. Energy-related mining and production activities in San Juan County include two coal mines, two coal-fired power plants, a natural gas hub (the Blanco Hub), a petroleum refinery, and a natural gas power plant. Most of New Mexico's coal reserves are found in the San Juan Basin and a large amount of stone and aggregate, which includes construction sand and gravel, a subset of industrial minerals, is found in San Juan County.

8.3.2 Planned Services/Long-Range Needs

In February 2020, the Navajo Nation and San Juan County signed a memorandum of understanding to partner for the development of a potential freight railroad corridor from the BNSF line to the FMPO region. A rail connection has long been identified as a high priority for the region and the MOU signifies a major step for the region. The exact alignment for the proposed rail line is not known, and a new study is warranted to identify a final route and/or validate the route identified in the *Farmington-Thoreau Railroad Study*, a feasibility study completed in 2015 for the New Mexico Economic Development Department by the Navajo Nation and the New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology.

Per the feasibility study, the rail line could help fulfill the demand for equipment and materials to support mining industries in the Four Corners region and represents an opportunity to support a greater set of economic activities and bring products from the Four Corners region to markets across the United States. The Feasibility Study concludes the rail line is viable economically. A barrier had been jurisdictional issues since the vast majority of the rail line would travel through the Navajo Nation; however, the direct participation of the Navajo Nation makes the advancement of the rail line more realistic.

The rail connection from the region to the BNSF line is also considered a statewide priority and is discussed in both the *NMDOT Freight Plan* and the *NMDOT State Rail Plan*. The *Freight Plan* (2015) estimates the project cost at \$553 million. It is important to note that significant roadway transportation investments may also be necessary to support access and distribution from the rail facility. These roadway connections warrant further analysis and may require local investment and long-term maintenance.

8.4 AIR

8.4.1 Existing Services

The FMPO region is currently served by the Four Corners Regional Airport and the Aztec Municipal Airport. Air cargo plays a modest role in the regional flow of goods and services, with most goods moving through the Albuquerque International Sunport before being shipped to the FMPO region by land.

Four Corners Regional Airport

The Four Corners Regional Airport in Farmington is a general aviation facility that supports 11.5% of all statewide general aviation activity and contributes \$23 million to the regional economy per year.¹⁵ The facility features two runways at an elevation of 5,506 feet, full-time Aircraft Rescue and Fire Fighting, and an Air Traffic Control tower. At present, there are no commercial flights available to the City of Farmington, though commercial airlines have provided connections to the airport in the past. On-demand charter flights are offered by Vernon Aviation to and from many destinations. Atlantic Aviation, a Fixed Base Operation facility, offers hangar space, aircraft maintenance, in-flight catering, flight crew lounge and flight planning services.

Aztec Municipal Airport

Aztec Municipal Airport has a single runway at 5,882 elevation and serves mostly private planes and minor commercial operations. Aztec is one of several airports located within New Mexico that features a retroreflective landing light system. This system uses reflectors that are located along runways edge at standard intervals. Using the aircraft landing lights will "light up" the runway reflectors at about 1-1/2 miles out.

8.4.2 Planned Services/Long-range Needs

Four Corners Regional Airport

Commercial air service is a major priority. In June 2020, Farmington announced new daily service through United Express and operated by SkyWest Airlines between the Four Corners Regional Airport and Denver, CO. The service, which was expected to begin in October, has been delayed due to COVID-19. The region had been without commercial air service since Great Lakes Airlines suspended flights in November 2017.

The return of commercial service was made possible through recent investments and grant funding. The City of Farmington, which owns Four Corners Regional Airport, received a \$3.45 million grant from the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) to extend the safety areas on either end of the runway. In addition to the extension, the airfield will be repainted and will receive fog sealing to extend the life of the runway. These improvements will help upgrade the runway reference code from a B-II category to a C-II and enable regional jets to operate from the airport. The airport also recently received an \$850,000 Small Community Air Service Development Grant from the FAA that will help pay for marketing and assist with the return of air service to Four Corners Regional Airport.

Other long-term improvements are identified in the City of Farmington's 2013 long-range plan. In particular, the plan cites the need for new air cargo facilities which could be located on the northern portion of the airport's property. The plan also acknowledges general deficiencies,

¹⁵ <https://businessviewmagazine.com/digital-magazines/jan-2020/141/>

though the recent grant funding will allow the City of Farmington to implement some of these infrastructure needs. Additional transportation infrastructure and connections to the airport are also desired to spur development on the northside of the facility.

Aztec Municipal Regional Airport

The City of Aztec initiated a study to complete an *Airport Layout Plan (ALP) Update and Narrative Report* for the Aztec Municipal Airport in 2018. The objective of the ALP Update and Narrative Report is to provide the City with a future development plan that will satisfy aviation demand, identify the critical aircraft, address airport issues and needs, address new FAA design standards, and update the Airport Capital Improvement Plan.

Long-range needs identified in the 2018 ALP include:

- Crosswind Runway Completion
- Hangar Development
- BLM Land Transfer, Environmental Process
- Runway Lighting and Visual Aids
- Pavement Maintenance
- Perimeter Fencing Improvements for security, wildlife
- New FAA Design Standards
- Verification of Design Aircraft and Airport Reference Code (ARC)

8.5 RECOMMENDATIONS AND ACTION ITEMS

8.5.1 Truck Freight

- Evaluate potential truck routes to the proposed rail facility, once a site is identified.
- Conduct a regional freight study to identify freight-specific roadway improvements and formally designate proposed truck routes and potential truck stop areas. The study could also develop design standards to support anticipated levels of freight traffic and evaluate multiple scenarios to consider how the proposed rail line may impact freight traffic across the region.
- Enhance data collection, including freight truck counts, to understand shifts in economic activity and impacts to regional roads.
- Add signage to designated regional truck freight routes.
- Improve amenities for truckers, including consideration of shuttle services from truck stops and the feasibility of a regional center for truckers.

8.5.2 Rail

- Support the proposed rail line from Farmington to the BNSF corridor near I-40.
- Conduct ongoing outreach with BNSF and the Navajo Nation regarding the roadway transportation infrastructure needed to support a rail connection.
- Coordinate with NMDOT and NMEDD on potential funding opportunities to support rail connections and other infrastructure to enable the shipment of local goods via rail

8.5.3 Air

- Invest in runways and other infrastructure at the Four Corners Regional Airport to increase the ability to support general aviation, commercial services, freight cargo, and military use.
- Support marketing efforts to attract commercial passenger air service to the region.
- Improve transportation access to the Four Corners Airport; consider additional access roads and transit shuttle connections to Downtown Farmington.
- Develop transportation infrastructure on the northside of the Four Corners Regional Airport to support aviation-related industries and commercial activity.