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**Rail, road improvement urged**

New England, Atlantic region would benefit, U.S. study says

By KEVIN BISSETT The Canadian Press

Wed, Sep 17 - 4:46 AM

BAR HARBOR, Maine — A new study concludes New England and Atlantic Canada are losing out on economic growth without major east-west highway and rail connections across Maine to the central United States.

Glen Weisbrod of Boston-based Economic Development Research Group told the region's premiers and governors Tuesday that freight must now travel on long and congested routes around Maine.

"In a global economy, where there's competition with the rest of the world and the rest of the U.S. and Canada, this does not help our region with inefficiencies either over the top of Maine, or going through Massachusetts, Connecticut and New York," he said during a meeting of eastern premiers and governors in Bar Harbor.

And Weisbrod said those routes will get even more congested between now and 2020.

He examined the success of trade between Toronto and Chicago, and New York and Washington, and said they are growing because of superior trade connections.

"We are right in the middle of those but we're not getting near the economic growth the rest of the U.S. and Canada are getting," Weisbrod said. "A large part of the reason is that the trade connections are not there between the East, the West, and Great Lakes, and we're paying the consequences of that."

Weisbrod said building the east-west connection across Maine would cost \$5 billion to \$8 billion over a decade, but the return would be three-fold, plus job creation.

"We're talking in the range of 100,000 more jobs being created than would otherwise be created in the region if these kind of improvements are made," he told the premiers and governors.

Gov. John Baldacci of Maine, the conference co-chair, said such a project would require new forms of funding, but added it's important for both business and the environment.

Newfoundland and Labrador Premier Danny Williams said a big challenge for the project would be getting current leaders to look beyond the short term.

"A framework needs to be put in place that can really kind of gel this," he said. "In Atlantic Canada right now we're trying to get a handle on the Atlantic gateway. We really need to step up our game."

New Brunswick Premier Shawn Graham, the other co-chair, said he supports better connections within the region. He recently committed to complete the twinning of the highway between Saint John, N.B., and Calais, Maine.

"The twinning of Highway 1 is a \$275-million investment. . . . That's a key corridor link that was missing," Graham said.

The next phase of the study on the east-west highway is expected in time for the 2009 meeting of the premiers and governors, next September in Saint John, N.B.

"We're going to be looking forward to followup at next year's meeting," said Graham. "It's premature to talk about what the financial implications are, but we're definitely supportive of the direction being taken."

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