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Billboards 'National Disgrace,' Says Public Roads Bureau Chief; Frowns on Private Toll Bridges

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Reporting on the year's activities of the bureau of public roads, Thomas H. MacDonald, chief of the bureau, emphasizes the functions of the bureau as a research organization operating in behalf of all road building agencies, and also the service of the bureau in co-ordinating the various highway systems including those designed as federal aid, state, forest and park highways.

The report made public recently by Secretary of Agriculture Jardine summarizes the work of the bureau for the year ending June 30, 1928, and includes detailed reports of work done in each state, of sums expended and results achieved by the highway engineers, and also of the various studies of drainage, irrigation, machinery, and farm construction which have gone forward under the division of agricultural engineering.

"During the fiscal year 1928," says Mr. MacDonald, "improvements were completed on 818½ miles of federal aid road which had not previously been improved with federal assistance. Advanced stages of improvements were in progress on 949½ miles and advance or stage construction was under way on 1285 miles."

The total cost of the 818½ miles of initial construction and the 2014 miles of stage construction completed was \$205,043,784, of which the federal government paid \$88,056,984, or 43 per cent, and the states the balance. The largest disbursements during the year were made to Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, New York, Pennsylvania, and Texas. To each of these states the federal government paid during the year more than \$3,000,000. All other states received less than that amount.

Mr. MacDonald discussed at length the attitude of the bureau in regard to toll bridges. He reiterated the hope that "the use of federal aid funds in payment of a part of the cost of important bridges would be continued," and said these funds offer an avenue of escape from the dilemma which confronts the highway departments of many of the states," which are torn between the desire to erect bridges which must be expensive and the desire to give some improvement to long stretches of roads in rural districts.

"Taking advantage of this hesitation, private promoters have been busy acquiring exclusive franchises to build bridges at commanding locations on the publicly-built highways, and in compensation therefor to levy toll upon the annually increasing number of travelers."

The bureau found that, on October 31, 1927, there were 424 toll bridges in operation, under construction or proposed, of which 217 were on the federal aid highway system. In the last Congress bills were introduced to authorize construction of 122 toll bridges, and sixty-seven were authorized. Practically three-quarters are or will be operated by private

interests. This bureau has reliable information that such interests have sought by various means to obstruct the construction of free or publicly operated toll bridges at commanding locations. They have sought to enjoin the construction of public bridges in the courts; and they have attempted, and in some cases have succeeded in blocking legislation authorizing the construction of public bridges.

Originally the law prohibited use of federal funds for roads which serve as immediate approaches to toll bridges. Congress recognized that this might at times be desirable, and authorized federal appropriations in payment of half the cost of public bridges, the state's portion of which is to be met by bonds repayable from toll collections. This, says Mr. MacDonald, has proved a feasible solution, and such toll bonds command an active market and more favorable terms than those placed by private interests. Public building also assures open competition in construction bidding.

In consideration of these and other facts," says Mr. MacDonald, "the bureau generally opposes the construction of private toll bridges and favors construction under public auspices whether or not it is necessary to resort to tolls as a measure of finance. It has recommended against the granting of authority to private interests in numerous cases, when congressional bills have been submitted for its consideration; but in many cases its recommendations have not been followed.

"The facts in its possession were placed before Congress at its last session; and it is hoped that a careful consideration of these facts will lead that body to extend the legislative support needed and earnestly desired by the highway administrative authorities of the government and the states in dealing with this difficult problem of major bridge construction."

Mr. MacDonald also comments on the advertising signboards which often carry misleading information and hide publicly placed guides or confuse travelers. He continues: "Designedly placed where they will receive the utmost attention, they frequently obscure or mar attractive roadside views and so detract from the pleasurable use of the highways. Accustomed as we are to their unwanted presence in ordinary surroundings, to come upon these blatant commercial appeals high on the face of a majestic cliff, marring a mountainside, or completely obscuring a particularly beautiful vista still awakens a sense of their utter incongruity. In practically all cases these roadside advertisements merely repeat in the same form appeals made quite properly through other agencies. Their disfigurement of the landscape is a national disgrace."

Beautification of Highways Given Impetus by Federal Act

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The act, passed at the last session of Congress, which permits the federal government to pay half the cost of wayside planting along Federal-aid highways, will give considerable impetus to the movement long fostered by women's clubs and other social organizations, and its effect will quickly be evident in an improvement of the appearance of the main interstate roads, according to the bureau of public roads of the United States department of agriculture.

Latest available figures show that twenty-five states have no laws governing tree and shrub planting along highways. A few of the remaining twenty-three have good laws, but the majority have indifferent ones.

The Massachusetts department of public works and the highway and forestry departments of other states, have already demonstrated how much can be done at small cost to beautify the roadsides by judicious planting of native trees, shrubs, and perennial flowers.

The Massachusetts department is empowered by law to make roadside improvements, the work including such planting, replacements, and

care as may be necessary. When a road is laid out as a state highway, it is generally made sufficiently wide to provide an area on each side of the traveled portion for roadside improvement. No tree, shrub or plant within such a highway can be cut, removed, or new ones added without a permit from the highway department.

The work of roadside improvement in Massachusetts is done by the maintenance division. The cost is included as a part of the regular maintenance expenditure of the state. The state has a nursery at Palmer, where trees and shrubs are propagated and where the highway landscape supervisor trains men in the care of trees and roadside beautification.

Public acquisition in all states of suitable tracts of land along the highways for state parks, for purposes of recreation and conservation of timber and animal life, and the acquisition of small road-bordering strips and plots for development of parkways and parklets, says the bureau, would enhance considerably the appearance of the roadsides.