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The contract negotiations that are currently taking place in San Francisco between dockworkers and the Pacific Maritime Association will have impacts far beyond the ports.

A contract agreement for West Coast longshoremen keeps the supply chains moving for goods that use the ports on their way to final markets in this country, or in the case of exports, across the globe. This includes California's agricultural exports. This state's agricultural supply chain is a major user of the transportation system. California produces nearly one-half of the country's fruits, nuts and vegetables and also is a major producer of livestock and livestock products. Farm-to-market goods depend upon not only working ports but on a network of interstate highways, state roads and small, rural roads, some of which have not been designed to support large trucks.

The seeds of the farm-to-market road system were planted in the early 1930s when the U.S. Bureau of Public Roads called on America to "get the farmer out of the mud," a slogan that led to a greatly improved and expanded system of paved rural roads. These days, geography and environmental concerns also play a role in determining where, how and why infrastructure investments get made.

The San Joaquin Valley is the main contributor to agricultural production in the state. The eastern Sierras, Sacramento Valley, Imperial Valley east of San Diego County, and the Central Coast also contribute to farm-to-market goods movements. The Sacramento Valley controls more than two-thirds of the worldwide prune market with over 400 growers in California. In the Imperial Valley, local farmers produce more than 100 different commodities, including bamboo, sugar cane, flax, corn, artichokes, fish, goats, honey, cilantro, water lilies and more.

The Central Coast region, a five-county region (Santa Cruz, San Benito, Monterey, San Luis Obispo, and Santa Barbara) is a major producer of broccoli, lettuce and strawberries. Wine grapes and nursery products are also important agricultural products. In all of these regions, goods movement is a significant contributor to poor air and water quality. On top of that, increased population growth creates a demand for more goods movement, increases congestion and hastens the degradation of local roads.

Furthermore, deregulation of the rail industry has allowed rail road companies to disinvest in less profitable, inefficient and often rural railroads making agricultural commodities more dependent on trucking. As a result, the road network for the first, last and sometimes “in-between” miles is critical for farm-to-market goods movement in the state. Underdeveloped roads decrease the efficiency of all types of goods movement. They exhibit high levels of disrepair, thereby slowing vehicular movement, and do not allow for passing, which in turn creates congestion.

Other states are creating their own networks of farm-to-market roadways for rural regions. Best practices are coming from places like Texas, Iowa and Missouri. In Texas alone, there are 40,985 miles of farm-to-market roadways. These road networks are designed to directly connect agriculturally productive regions with population centers so that produce can be delivered to consumers efficiently.

California can learn from these other places about how to design and modify roadways to accommodate trucks that meet federal standards while responding to local needs. It’s also worth looking outside of the state for lessons on how the seasonality of certain commodities affects infrastructure demand. And of course, the more innovative financing tools at our disposal, the better.

But there are in fact efforts underway in this state to improve road conditions and to provide facilities for both short-haul and longhaul truckers. The San Joaquin Valley Interregional Goods Movement Plan, for example, looks at a wide range of issues including the state of existing infrastructure conditions as they relate to freight, the relationship between freight and the valley economy, environmental impacts of freight-related activity, and growth in freight demand.

This effort and California’s Freight Mobility Plan may themselves become national models for addressing farm-to-market issues in the broader context of regional and statewide goods movement. Given the size of both the state and our agricultural industry as well as potential economic impact throughout the country – if not the world – of an inefficient agricultural supply chain, home grown innovations will be important. Of course, that assumes that goods can get through the ports. So, how are those negotiations going?