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## **Journal of Commerce Opinion**

### **A welcome truck bill**

Proposed House legislation that substantially improves trucking productivity and safety is a watershed event in the continuing drive to make the U.S. logistics system more efficient.

The bipartisan bill, HR 1667, would override today's nationwide 80,000-pound limit on weights and allow each state to authorize 97,000-pound trucks.

Simply put, such a change is the essence of productivity because it reduces the number of trucks needed to carry the same amount of freight. Companies that ship goods by truck should be allowed to realize any substantial productivity gains that can be achieved without hurting highway safety.

Such improvements make U.S. companies more competitive by lowering distribution and overall product costs. More efficient and productive transportation -- whether it takes the form of larger equipment or any other improvement -- makes an important contribution to the U.S. economy.

Truck shippers, whose cargo accounts for at least 80% of the nation's freight bill, haven't captured any substantial productivity gains from changes in vehicle size and weight since 1982. Meanwhile, freight levels have soared to meet the needs of a growing population and a booming economy. Between 1990 and 1997, truck tonnage increased 45%. And continued growth is anticipated.

Proponents estimate that the increased weight limit would produce an overall savings of \$15 billion.

Among the beneficiaries would be shippers of heavier products such as steel and food, who could move more freight in trailers that today reach the 80,000-pound weight limit before they are filled.

What makes the proposal more appealing is that productivity gains should improve highway safety by reducing truck miles traveled. A Federal Highway Administration study found vehicle miles would be reduced by 11%. Everyone who truly supports highway safety should welcome that, especially given the apparent lack of progress in reducing the frequency of truck-related fatalities on U.S. roads. Opponents of heavier trucks should consider whether they prefer the alternative: more trucks carrying more freight as economic growth continues. How could that enhance highway safety?

Another positive feature of the bill is its retention of current truck-length limits. That avoids rekindling fears that longer trucks are a menace to the motoring public. Despite these positives, railroads and their allies had the expected reaction: Obstruct anything that changes the status quo. Railroads' opposition to improved productivity for their shippers is unfortunate because it reinforces the perception that carriers still are not really customer-oriented. Even worse, the rails' stance looks like an attempt to use public policy to protect themselves from the consequences of their own inability to serve customers reliably. If railroads ever provide service anywhere near as efficiently as truckers do on a daily basis, there could be a different debate about diversion of rail freight to heavier trucks. But such claims ring hollow today because the rails' chronic service shortcomings have long spurred shippers to make those diversions anyway.

Potential productivity improvements also intimidate some motor carriers who fear that investing in more productive equipment will hurt them because their customers will reap nearly all the benefits. But that is the reality faced year after year by any carrier in any mode of transportation when investment decisions are made. Carriers that truly believe in free markets and competition should support the workings of that marketplace.

Even if HR 1667 does not become law this year -- and it well may not -- it offers an important platform for informed dialogue about a subject of substantial national interest: identifying transportation productivity improvements that also benefit safety.

That is reason enough to welcome its introduction.