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## **House bill proposes putting heftier trucks on nation's highways**

**Opposition from railroads, roadway safety advocates**

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WASHINGTON -- The nationwide debate over transportation productivity and highway safety seems certain to resume following a House proposal that would increase truck weights by 21%.

The legislation, introduced Tuesday by Utah Republican Merrill Cook and Minnesota Democrat Collin Peterson, would give states the flexibility to allow 97,000-pound trucks on their roads.

The nationwide weight limit was frozen at 80,000 pounds in 1991 after a legislative battle that involved truckers, shippers, railroads and safety interests. More than a dozen states allow vehicles above 80,000 pounds today under "grandfather" rights.

Since 1990, freight tonnage moving by truck has increased 45%, according to the American Trucking Associations.

Moreover, the National Private Truck Council expects volume to rise another 16% within five years.

Shippers of heavier products such as paper, food, steel, chemicals and agricultural products apparently would benefit most from additional weight capacity because many of their shipments reach the 80,000-pound limit before their trucks are filled.

Provisions in the Cook-Peterson bill would require that heavier trucks have a sixth axle to distribute the additional weight evenly and allow compliance with federal rules that limit vehicle weight per axle on bridges.

Proponents of the Cook-Peterson bill clearly hope to steer this year's debate away from another safety confrontation. They say that the legislation would reduce truck mileage by 11%, translating into fewer accidents.

Shippers and truckers that back the bill insist that a 17,000-pound increase in maximum truck weight can go hand-in-hand with safety improvements as the number of trucks on the highway are reduced.

"We have consistently supported efforts to get some incremental productivity gains. From a public safety standpoint, the bill allows us to move 21% more (freight) in the same truck," said John McQuaid, who heads the National Private Truck Council.

"We have to have greater carrying capacity or more trucks on the highway. If this bill is looked at dispassionately by safety advocates, I would be hard-pressed to see how they would not see the virtue of it because it allows industry to move more freight without bigger or more trucks on the highway," he said.

However, railroads and safety advocates are already attacking the bill.

"This bill would lead to a head-on collision with public sentiment," said Russ McGurk, a spokesman for the railroad-backed Coalition Against Bigger Trucks.

"The vast majority of drivers are opposed to the changes. The bill . . . is nothing more than a smoke-screen. The real goal of those who would profit from this bill is to force all states to permit bigger, more dangerous trucks," Mr. McGurk said.

The bill also could change the shape of the new debate because it would not allow longer trucks or extended configurations that were the primary targets for criticism in 1991.

### *Savings for shippers*

Proponents claim that shippers could save \$14.6 billion annually by using heavier trucks. An estimated 5% of cargo, amounting to \$1.3 billion, would shift from rails to the highways. Railroads claimed in the 1991 debate that their profitability would be slashed by approximately half.

"Our members are sending trucks out on the road that are two-thirds or three-fourths full. We think that is a terrible waste of productivity," said Kathy Luhn, director of government affairs for the National Industrial Transportation League. "We see the legislation as a way to slow down the growth in the number of trucks on the road today. It can be helpful to safety."

### *Public opposition*

On the other side was Joan Claybrook, president of Public Citizen, who said, "The public opposes large trucks as they are today and certainly does not want larger ones. We would oppose this bill. It doesn't do anything to improve safety. We have heard their arguments (about reduced truck traffic) before, but it never happens."

Tom White, a spokesman for the Association of American Railroads, said his group also would fight the legislation.

"You can safely assume we will oppose the bill," he said. "We think you still have the problem that larger trucks do not pay their fair share for highway pavement damage. It (heavier trucks) is a very serious economic issue for railroads. We can't afford to lose \$1.5 billion in revenue, if their estimate is correct. I don't know what our (revenue impact) analysis will show. We haven't done that yet."

But David Hershey, a spokesman for the American Forest and Paper Association, said the bill strikes a balance between safety and productivity. "This proposal gives us safe trucks and more truck productivity, which translates directly into competitive pricing for our members' products," he said.

### *ATA supports bill*

Mike Russell, a spokesman for the American Trucking Associations, agreed.

"ATA favors the bill. It could mean less truckloads on the roads, reducing vehicle miles traveled and improving safety and congestion," he said.

Also in support was Ed Mortimer, director of government affairs for the Transportation Intermediaries Association.

"We wholeheartedly support the bill," Mr. Mortimer said. "We feel it is a much-needed piece of legislation to help deal with the increased amount of freight that is moving now by truck."