

Effort To Raise Weight Limits Revived

Fleets, shippers renew Capitol Hill campaign to allow states to raise truck weight limits to 97,000 pounds.

Americans for Safe and Efficient Transportation have launched an effort that revives legislation introduced last year to give states authority to set higher limits. The bill, HR 1667, also would require the heavier trucks to have a sixth axle at the rear of the trailer to spread the weight.

ASET, whose membership includes trucking interests as well as large shippers, is aware of its challenge. Higher weight limits are the "third rail" of truck safety politics, said John McQuaid, co-chair of ASET and president of the National Private Truck Council.

The concern among opponents is that heavier trucks jeopardize safety. Advocacy groups such as Citizens for Reliable and Safe Highways oppose any weight increase, and congressional support is limited. In fact, the climate for change on Capitol Hill is still affected by Congress's 1991 size/weight freeze, according to the Federal Highway Administration's Jim March.

March also pointed to other problems ASET must overcome: the current bridge formula will not allow six-axle combination, 97,000-pound vehicles, and according to Department of Transportation studies, the heaviest trucks do not pay their full share of highway costs.

Still, advocates for the bill are undaunted and recognize they are embarked on a long campaign.

Realistically, we don't expect to

advance a bill this year, said McQuaid. The strategy is to gather co-sponsors for next year, he said.

ASET is honing its arguments, which center on the increased productivity of heavier trucks and safety improvements stemming from having fewer trucks on the road. Also, the bill does not require states to raise their limits — it only permits them to, said Rep. Collin Peterson, D-MN, a cosponsor of the bill.

For certain kinds of trucking operations, the productivity argument is compelling. Richard K. Riederer, CEO of Weirton Steel Corp., said the bill would reduce the number of trucks he needs from 500 to 400 a day. Besides steel, the ASET membership is gathered from the forest products, beverage, agriculture and cattle industries, as well as trucking companies that serve those industries.

Steve Williams, president of steel hauler Maverick Transportation, Little Rock, AR, said the weight increase would amount to a 30% raise for him. Moreover, he would not have to buy new equipment to take advantage of the higher limit — he can retrofit his trailers simply by adding a third axle between the two rear axles on his flatbeds.

John Smith, president of CRST International, Cedar Rapids, IA, covered the safety benefits. He said the higher limit could lead to 11% fewer truck miles on the highway. Also, he said, the additional axle will provide better

traction for improved braking and reduce pavement damage.

Martin Labbe, president of consulting firm Martin Labbe Assoc., said increasing productivity is key to controlling costs and highway congestion as the nation's truck fleet expands. He predicted freight demands will require 1 million more trucks of all types over the next six years — unless productivity improves.

He also said higher weight limits will lead to considerable savings in fuel — a hot issue in these days of spiraling diesel prices.

Labbe said that a 97,000-pound truck would use 42 more gallons than an 80,000-pound truck to haul a load from New York to San Francisco — but it would take 20% fewer trips to haul the same amount of freight, amounting to an overall savings of 124 gallons per load.

Peterson counseled ASET members to take their message to congressional representatives from agricultural areas, because the agriculture industry needs to lower costs and improve productivity. Also, he said, the message should go to those who voted for the North American Free Trade Agreement and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, because they will be sympathetic to the U.S. competitive situation in the global economy.

Canada, Mexico and Europe all have higher weight limits than the United States, he said.

— *Oliver B. Patton*
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