



Policy Briefing: Transportation

Should Congress lift restrictions on truck sizes and weights?

States Should Control Truck Sizes

By Rep. Merrill Cook

As we all head out onto the highways this summer, we are concerned about the number of trucks on our roads and the safety hazards they can cause.

We have all heard the horror stories. Yet we also all realize that the geography of our nation requires the shipment of goods across long distances.

Trucks and rail are necessary components if we are to keep goods flowing and our economy strong. Currently trucks carry more than 80 percent of the nation's freight. If we can find ways to make them operate more safely, cause less damage to our roads, help the environment and increase productivity and efficiency, we will all benefit. Moving decision-making away from Washington and back to the states is an added but important bonus.

H.R. 1667, the Safe and Efficient Transportation Act, helps alleviate all four problems by allowing states the right to increase single-trailer truck weight. I want to point out up front, however, that I don't advocate changing current restrictions on truck length or on double and triple-trailer vehicles, which many safety groups oppose.

One may wonder how increasing truck weight could improve safety, I wondered myself when it was first proposed to me.

The reason is simple. By allowing trucks to carry a little more, you decrease the number of trips needed to carry the same amount of goods. Fewer trips mean fewer trucks on the road and fewer trucks on the road directly improves safety.

A 1998 Department of Transportation Truck Size and Weight Study estimates that allowing single-trailer truck weights to be increased would result in an 11 percent decrease in vehicle miles traveled. Other industrialized countries have already realized the advantages of increased truck weight. Canada, Mexico and European nations all allow higher truck weights than does the United States.

Many states have recognized the advantage and have applied for waivers to increase truck weights as well. States have granted temporary permits for individual shipments at higher weights and have come to Congress to obtain exemptions.

This bill would level the playing field and allow others to benefit from increased weights without going through the bureaucratic red tape of applying for waivers and permits or coming to Congress for special exemptions. But it would also ensure that trucks allowed to carry the

heavier loads are safely equipped to do so. The current permitting system often does not require improved safety.

The DOT study also found that increased truck weight would save an additional \$2.4 billion in road repair costs. My bill ensures that road repair costs are reduced and safety improved by requiring that trucks allowed to carry the extra weight have an additional axle (tridem). This spreads the extra weight giving the truck a softer "footprint" on the road. It is not the total amount of weight that damages a road, but the weight per square inch of tire that matters. The extra axle provides four extra tires.

As a member of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, I have heard the reports about the poor condition of our nation's roads. Last year, the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century authorized billions of dollars to repair our highways. We collect money from almost every taxpayer through a gasoline tax in order to repair roads. By reducing the number of trucks on the road and helping each truck cause less damage, we can add another weapon to our infrastructure repair arsenal and save taxpayer money.

An important safety issue is truck braking and stopping ability. Would a heavier truck be harder to stop? The required extra axle provides two extra brakes on the truck, improving its ability to stop. Increased truck weight, in tandem with the extra axle requirement, improves safety without hurting our roads.

Fewer trucks on the road also means less exhaust emission and air pollution. The Department of Transportation estimates that increased truck weight would result in a 6 percent reduction in fuel use. As we try to find ways to lessen our dependence on oil, a 6 percent reduction is not a trivial amount. It also brings a corresponding reduction in air pollution and ozone depletion. Increased truck weight is good for the environment.

H.R. 1667 is also good for consumers and increases productivity. The Department of Transportation estimates that increasing truck weight would save an estimated \$15 billion in shipping costs alone. Shippers can send their goods in one truck instead of two. This makes U.S. goods more competitive because of lowered distribution and product costs.

We all know the problems that face farmers and the steel industry. They are both heavily reliant on trucks to ship their produce and their raw materials. Reducing their costs by allowing heavier trucks will be of enormous benefit to these struggling sectors of the economy.

Consumers will benefit as goods like food, paper, electronics and raw materials become less expensive to bring to supermarkets, stores and manufacturers. Allowing one truck to travel full rather than two traveling partially empty is more productive, efficient and cost effective.

H.R. 1667 brings a variety of benefits. However, I believe the most important aspect of the bill is that it is not a federal mandate. It is a "states' rights" issue. States will ultimately determine whether truck weights should be increased on their roads and highways.

Local citizens can debate the pros and cons of increased truck weight, not bureaucrats in Washington. Local geography, weather, population density and traffic patterns -- not some stranger in Washington -- will determine whether an increased truck weight is appropriate for a given locality.

No federal mandates, increased productivity, improved safety and huge savings all lead me to believe H.R. 1667 is good for the environment, good for consumers and taxpayers, good for motorists, good for the economy and good for America.

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