

Planting a Seed

BY JOHN D. SCHULZ

Truckers sense opening for acceptance of 97,000-pound, single-trailer truck

John A. McQuaid calls the longer combination vehicle “the third rail” of the trucking industry. “Touch it and you’re dead,” the president of the National Private Truck Council says in the tone of a man who has fought in the LCV lobbying war and lost.

But McQuaid is cautiously bullish about the legislative prospects for the 97,000-pound single trailer combination. McQuaid has been making the rounds on Capitol Hill on the 97,000-pound truck and happily reports he has not been thrown out of any legislators’ offices yet.

In fact, the reception has been quite kind. A bill, H.R. 1667, has been introduced that would allow states the right to make their own evaluation of the heavier truck, which its proponents say is necessary to offset coming productivity losses tied to changes in the 65-year-old hours-of-service regulations.

“This is a reasonable approach from our view,” said McQuaid, who is co-chairman of a coalition called Americans for Safe and Efficient Transportation, which is pushing the 97,000-pound idea in Washington. Some of the biggest names in transportation — Schneider National, CRST International, Georgia-Pacific, Frito-Lay, Rollins Leasing — are among the scores of ASET members talking up the idea at both the grassroots and national

lobbying levels.

“We certainly think if we’re going to have these kinds of changes in the hours of service that would throw more trucks on the highways, then alternatives

awareness on this issue:’

McQuaid said. “I’ve personally visited 15 to 20 congressmen and the reception was very good. I can’t recall anybody rejecting the idea out of hand. We’re setting



that would slow the growth of those numbers of trucks which those rules dictate makes sense to me,” McQuaid said. “We think it’s difficult for anyone to look at this proposal on its face to deny its validity, and that includes the safety extremists?”

Realistically, few expect action this election year. But the trucking lobby is working hard to plant the seed this year on heavier trucks and try to get it passed when a new Congress convenes along with a new administration next January.

“What we’ve been able to do with this spade work is elevate

this up as must-pass legislation in the next congress.”

There is some method to the truckers’ plan. First, historically, nearly any time the trucking industry has been forced to give up something — and the proposed hours of service would be a productivity hit — the industry has been able to win some offsetting measure. This has been true on virtually every productivity issue going back to the Surface Transportation Assistance Act of 1982, which allowed 80,000-pound vehicles in all states in exchange for a nickel increase in the diesel fuel tax.

Trucking interests are buoyed by the fact that H.R. 1667 would require no federal mandate overruling the states on the issue. All it would do would allow each state the right to make its own evaluation on their own particular conditions. In a time of ever increasing scrutiny on truck safety, allowing heavier trucks (with as much as 17 percent more payload capacity) actually would reduce the number of trucks on the highways.

Last year, according to preliminary numbers compiled by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, fatalities involving large trucks dropped 3 percent from 5,374 in 1998 to 5,203 last year. NHTSA estimated that 394,000 trucks weighing more than 10,000 pounds were involved in accidents last year. That's down from 412,000 crashes reported in 1998 and 440,000 in 1997.

McQuaid calls those numbers "encouraging evidence" the trucking industry is succeeding in making its safety case. Trucking critics such as Joan Claybrook, co-chair of Citizens for Reliable

and Safe Highways, vehemently disagree. Claybrook has stated that if gross vehicle weights of trucks were raised to 90,000, an additional 9,253 lives would be lost and each of those trucks would do an additional \$40,200 in pavement damage. CRASH has noted that while an 80,000-pound truck does as much road damage as 9,600 cars, a 120,000-pound truck does the equivalent damage of 37,440 cars.

Trucking interests predictably disagree with CRASH. Noting that the 97,000 pounds would be spread out over a sixth axle on the trailer, the heavier truck actually would do less damage because of the fewer miles it would travel and the "softer footprint" it would create, they say. The fewer vehicle miles allowed by the heavier payload capacity also would reduce emissions and other environmental damage, they add.

Clearly, the pending HOS reform will renew the heavier truck debate. The hours-of-service proposal by DOT's Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration call for a reduction from the current level of daily driving hours. The

industry would "lose" 586,000 hours a year, according to the government. DOT admits the rules will cost the trucking industry \$490 million a year and will result in nearly 50,000 new truck drivers hired in an industry already suffering a driver shortage.

Top officials within FMCSA have not ruled out the 97,000-pound idea, although the issue may not be totally in their hands. A pending FHWA study on the 97,000-pound truck is said to be favorable on the issue.

The move also has international appeal. Europe allows trucks up to 97,000 pounds. Canada's limit is 95,900 pounds. Mexico allows trucks up to 106,920 pounds. Truckers argue that to be competitive, this country should give states the right to raise weights where appropriate.

"Is it a panacea? No," McQuaid said. "Is it reasonable progress for productivity? Yes. If you're for safety and trying to reduce the exposure of private automobiles with trucks, then you have to be for this idea."