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Trucking Leader in the Railroads' Den

American Trucking Associations President Walter B. McCormick Jr. showed that he could throw verbal jabs just as well as he could take them during a panel discussion on railroad and trucking productivity.

His opponent and the issue have been encountered before: Association of American Railroads President Edward R. Hamberger and the rail industry's opposition to bigger, heavier trucks.

The latest debate between the two industries occurred during an Oct. 28 event sponsored by Railway Progress Institute, which represents rail suppliers, at a hotel in Washington, D.C. Part of the gathering featured a black-tie dinner in which members of the organization honored customers.

What provoked the most recent war of words was trucking and railroad defending their turf in the ongoing dispute over increasing the productivity of big rigs.

Hamberger and McCormick were in neutral corners in their opening remarks, during which they cited their respect for each other and their longtime association working in Congress.

Hamberger criticized the "inside-the-beltway myopia" that caused trucking and rail representatives to focus on "areas where we have conflict" instead of the possibilities for cooperation.

McCormick said he and Hamberger "think of transportation in an integrated way," noting "customers don't care if something travels by rail or truck as long as it arrives on time." He added that the freight transportation needs of the future would strain the capacities of both modes unless they cooperated to achieve more productivity. He also noted the need to reform the "antiquated" hours-of-service rules, which were developed in the 1930s, to help trucking reach that goal.

Conceding that Hamberger had to "aggressively represent his industry," McCormick said he was confident that the two industries could work out their differences over truck sizes and weights.

Most of trucking support the idea of lifting the limit to allow longer tractor-trailers weighing as much as 97,000 pounds, up from the current 80,000-pound federal restriction. ATA has formed a task force to examine efforts to do so (6-21, p.1).

As the discussion moved on, Frank Turner, president of the American Short Line and Regional Railroad Association talked about the efforts of short-line and regional railroads to prepare themselves for the introduction of 286,000- and 315,000-pound axle weights on railroad cars.

McCormick generated a chuckle from the audience when he interjected: “Did you want to ask about 315,000-pound trucks?”

However, Hamberger, who was sitting next to him, found little humor in the remark. He launched into a vigorous explanation of the railroad industry’s opposition to bigger trucks, which he said was based on economic grounds.

“When the railroad industry wishes to make its cars more productive, we test the results on our own tracks,” Hamberger said.

“[We] try to see if it makes economic sense because we will have to pay for heavier track – pay 100% of the cost. I don’t see that in trucking.”

Hamberger said the heaviest trucks pay less than 50% of their fully allocated cost responsibility for the highways.

Rail industry studies have shown that heavier trucks would divert billions of dollars worth of traffic away from the rails, he added.

A surprised McCormick paused a beat, then responded.

The Trucking association’s leader said he understood railroad’s economic argument, but pointed out that “you never hear truckers saying ‘the railroads shouldn’t be allowed to have 315,000-pound axle weights, because that would make them more productive and they might divert traffic from trucks.’”

McCormick said that given the freight demands in the coming years, there are two choices under the current regulations: more trucks on the roads or bigger, but fewer, trucks on the nation’s thoroughfares.

As he finished, the moderator, Ron McDaniel, chairman of the institute and president of Western-Cullen-Hayes, a maker of rail-crossing equipment, said he was “scared to death” by the big trucks on the highways, especially in bad weather.

McCormick defended trucking’s performance: “We care about safety. It is in our interest to care. When an accident ties up the highway, we are stopped, freight doesn’t move.”

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