Proposed Recommendations: Modernization of Safe & Efficient Truck Standards

Prepared by Regulations Subcommittee, Advisory Committee on Supply Chain Competitiveness

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Sources:
American Trucking Association
Coalition for Efficient and Responsible Transportation
Coalition for Transportation Productivity

Proposed Recommendations:

This proposal is actually two different proposals and are not inclusive. They are independent recommendations where one is not dependent on the other. One is for the increase in weight limits while others is proposing an increase of the trailer length limit.

Increase the Interstate weight limit for trucks

- Congress should enact an act to modernize truck transportation and make it safer and more sustainable. This act should allow States to increase their Interstate weight limits from 80,000 pounds up to 97,000 pounds if vehicles are equipped with an additional sixth axle.

Increase the length of twin truck trailers from 28 to 33 feet

- Congress should increase the length of truck trailers operating in a double configuration from 28 to 33 feet.

Background:

- For more than 25 years, the federal vehicle weight limit on the Interstate System has been set at 80,000 pounds, and twin trailer trucks' minimum trailer length has remained frozen at 28 feet. These regulations are outdated and a new regulations would improve safety, grow the economy, reduce emissions, and lower infrastructure costs.

- Trucking companies are currently required to use more vehicles than necessary because their trucks often hit the federal weight limit or are volume limited due to the 28-foot length limit.

- Truck traffic has grown with the needs of the U.S. population—increasing 11 times faster than road capacity. The U.S. Department of Transportation estimates that by 2025, the amount of freight shipped throughout the US will increase by 87 percent from what it was in 2000.

Infrastructure Impacts

- Both proposals would slow the growth of truck traffic, and fewer truck trips translate directly to less wear and tear on pavements and bridges.

- The higher weight limit would cut the number of trucks needed for shipments—saving $2.4 billion in pavement restoration costs over 20 years, according to a U.S. DOT study. An additional axle ensures that pavement damage does not increase. While additional bridge costs are possible, these can be minimized through bridge management, and an increased fee will offset some of these costs.

- The increased length for twins would save 1.3 billion vehicle miles per year, and a slightly longer wheelbase would reduce bridge impacts. The proposal does not increase axle or gross weight limits, so overall infrastructure maintenance costs can be expected to come down.

The Impact on Safety

Length Proposal

- Freight on trailers with greater capacity will allow companies to consolidate freight on fewer trucks and make roads safer, since the biggest single factor in the number of tractor-trailer accidents is vehicle miles traveled.
- Modernizing freight transportation regulations to allow for 33-ft. doubles will result in 6.6 million fewer truck trips per year, preventing 912 crashes per year.

- Because they have a longer wheelbase, 33-ft. double trailer configurations are inherently more stable than twin 28-ft. double trailers. Added stability makes them safer, not only in straight line driving, but also in cornering. In addition, twin 33s for years have been tested under a variety of conditions in Canada and select markets within the United States without adverse safety outcomes.

Weight Proposal

- The last highway authorization bill, from two years ago, authorized a study of higher truck weight limits in Maine and Vermont, by the US Dept. of Transportation. DOT has completed that study and preliminary reports are that increased weight limits, with a sixth axle, not only do not increase truck fatalities, but they actually declined.

- 2009 DOT study looking at the impacts of heavier trucks in Wisconsin found that if the 97,000 lb. weight limit had been in place in 2006, it would have prevented 90 truck-related accidents in that state alone.

- Stopping distance is not a concern for either configuration. Weight limits for the double trailer truck do not increase, and the sixth axle on the 97,000 pound vehicle would maintain braking capacity

- Currently almost all states authorize the operation of heavier trucks on secondary road systems because federal law restricts their operation on Interstates. Shifting these heavy trucks to Interstates would improve safety, since the crash rate on Interstates is much lower than on secondary roads.

Congestion and Environmental Impacts

Length Proposal

- Because investments in infrastructure haven't kept up with population growth, 42 percent of major urban highways in the U.S. are congested. Modernizing freight transportation regulations to allow for 33-ft. doubles will result in 6.6 million fewer truck trips per year.

- According to Environmental Protection Agency data, a five-foot extension for twin trailers, with no change in the weight limits, would avoid 4.4 billion pounds of carbon emissions. That is the same as the CO_2 emissions from 666,708 homes' energy use or 1,540,648 passenger vehicles, for one year.

Weight Proposal

- Six-axle trucks loaded to 97,000 pounds get 17 percent more ton-miles per gallon than five-axle trucks carrying 80,000 pounds, according to a 2008 study by the American Transportation Research Institute. The U.S. DOT estimates that raising the federal weight limit would save 2 billion gallons of diesel fuel annually and result in a 19% decrease in fuel consumption and emissions per ton mile.

Productivity Impacts

Length Proposal

- Under current regulations, 28-ft. trucks routinely "cube out before they gross out," meaning they fill all their available volume long before the 80,000 lbs. gross weight limit is reached. This inefficiency saddles American businesses with $27 billion per year in avoidable costs that could be eliminated by authorization of 33-ft. doubles.

Weight Proposal

- U.S. gross vehicle weight limits are among the lowest of all industrialized nations. Canada, Mexico and most European nations already employ higher vehicle weight limits—putting U.S. shippers at a competitive disadvantage.

Conclusion:

Sustainability for a growing economy requires a close look at all policies that affect the development, transport, and use of goods. When it comes to freight transport, the proposed increase in weight and trailer length limits provide clear benefits to supply chain competitiveness while improving safety and the environment.