



Federal Trucking Plan Could Benefit States, Taxpayers

By Steve Oslica

A bill before the U.S. House of Representatives could help tackle fiscal and environmental concerns without increasing taxes or spending more federal money.

Rep. Mike Michaud (D-ME) has introduced the Safe and Efficient Transportation Act of 2009 (HR 1799), which would allow states to raise truck weight limits on interstate highways within their borders. Limits could go as high as 97,000 pounds if a truck is given an extra axle to handle the additional weight.

At press time the measure sported a politically diverse roster of 40 cosponsors, ranging from liberal-leaning House members such as Nita Lowey (D-NY) to conservative stalwarts such as Devin Nunes (R-CA).

90 Percent Rise in Freight

The Federal Highway Administration projects domestic freight tonnage will increase more than 90 percent between 2002 and 2035, requiring an increase in the number of trucks to carry it. By some estimates it would double the number of trucks on interstate highways.

Michaud's bill would provide for modifications within the current transportation infrastructure without creating more layers of government.

"Often lost in the debate over surface transportation policy is the potential to make better use of existing assets," Pete Sepp, vice president for policy and communications at the National Taxpayers Union, wrote in a letter to legislators urging them to cosponsor the legislation. "This is why HR 1799 is a breath of fresh air in an often-rarefied atmosphere of pork-barrel spending projects, fuel-tax

increases, and misplaced priorities that has permeated Washington."

Sepp added: "States, and ultimately taxpayers, are not the only potential winners under HR 1799. For industries that depend on highways to ship their goods, the savings in fuel, labor, and logistical costs from the bill would be considerable—especially at a time when many companies are struggling to survive, much less improve their profit margins. HR 1799 would also enhance America's global competitiveness by bringing truck-weight limits more in line with our neighbors to the north and south."

Canada and Mexico, which are under the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with the United States, have higher truck weight limits (95,000 pounds and 106,000 pounds, respectively).

Less Stress on Pavement

Proponents say two immediate benefits would result: a big reduction in the number of vehicles on the road and a decrease in highway pavement fatigue. A study by the U.S. Department of Transportation showed a 97,000-pound truck with six axles puts less stress on pavement than current trucks do, because there is less weight per axle.

The study noted raising the weight limit on trucks could save states \$2.4 billion in pavement replacement costs over 20 years.

The Coalition for Transportation Productivity, a consortium including more than 100 corporations and industry associations pushing for changes in shipping regulations to remain competitive in the global marketplace, supports HR 1799.

"America's freight transportation infrastructure is on the verge of becoming overwhelmed over the next decade," coalition Cochairman John Runyan told the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. He said the coalition is "asking Congress to responsibly reform truck weight limits with proper safeguards to allow the same amount of freight to be carried on fewer trucks, which will improve the efficiency of our interstates, reduce fuel use, and curb emissions."

Already on State Highways

All but four states—California, Connecticut, Delaware, and Illinois—already allow heavier trucks with extra axles to operate on their non-interstate roads and highways. Extending this option to interstates would give U.S. firms more flexibility to run at greater fuel efficiency per pound of freight.

Reducing the number of trucks on the nation's highways would reduce overall fuel consumption and create a smaller "carbon footprint" from the transportation of goods. Kraft Foods estimates the increased weight limit would allow the company to cut 500 trips annually on one shipping route from central Illinois to the Atlanta area. Doing so would save 33,000 gallons of fuel per year and reduce the company's annual carbon dioxide emissions by 730,000 pounds on that one route.

Sepp contrasted the Michaud measure's incentive-based approach with that of Congressional "cap-and-trade" schemes in which top-down mandates would cause severe disruptions for businesses and consumers.

"Rather than gamble on a discredited cap-and-trade system, officials should

advocate environmentally sound reforms that also improve economic productivity," Sepp said. "HR 1799 certainly fits the bill."

Weight Freeze Proposed

Michaud's bill has encountered some opposition. Another bill, the Safe Highways and Infrastructure Preservation Act (HR 1618), introduced by Rep. James McGovern (D-MA), would freeze the truck weight limit and extend it to U.S. highways.

Proponents of McGovern's proposal, such as Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety, resist increasing the weight limits because they contend current infrastructure cannot support heavier trucks.

Research shows that would be true if such vehicles were put on the road without an additional axle to distribute the greater weight. With this modification, however, fewer trucks can haul the loads with less wear and tear on roads. The Transportation Research Board found "the savings in goods movement that would result from allowing heavier trucks would exceed the increased costs for pavements and bridges."

Steve Oslica (communications@ntu.org) is an associate policy analyst for the National Taxpayers Union.

INTERNET INFO

"Talking Freight Transcript: Higher Productivity Trucks," U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration: <http://www.heartland.org/policybot/results/26208/>