Keep Existing Federal Truck Size and Weight Limits

ASSOCIATION OF AMERICAN RAILROADS MAY 2014

Summary

Increasing existing truck size and weight limits would mean higher taxpayer costs to repair damage to our highways and bridges; more highway gridlock; and more harm to the environment. The taxes and fees that heavy trucks pay are already far less than the cost of the damage that heavy trucks cause. This multi-billion dollar annual underpayment — which other motorists and the general public have to make up for through higher taxes — would become even greater if truck size and weight limits were increased. MAP-21 directed the U.S. Department of Transportation to conduct a comprehensive study to examine the impacts of increasing current federal truck size and weight limits. Policymakers should defer consideration of any changes to them until this study is completed, which is scheduled to be in late 2014.

Truck Size and Weight Limits Have Been in Place Nearly 25 Years — For Good Reason

- Truck weight limits on the Interstate Highway System were set at 80,000 pounds by Congress in 1982; truck length and weight limits for longer combination vehicles (LCVs) — tractors with two or more trailers weighing more than 80,000 pounds — were frozen in 1991. These limits were imposed largely because of **concerns about the safety of longer and heavier trucks** and the **uncompensated highway damage that heavy trucks cause**.
- Legislation to increase these limits on federal highways have been proposed many times over the years. To date, all attempts at nationwide increases have failed — most recently in 2012 during debate on MAP-21 — because the concerns that led to the federal limits in the first place are still valid.

Heavy Trucks Should Fully Pay For the Damage They Cause, But They Don't

The fuel taxes and other highway-related fees that heavy trucks pay do not come close to covering the costs of the highway damage they cause.

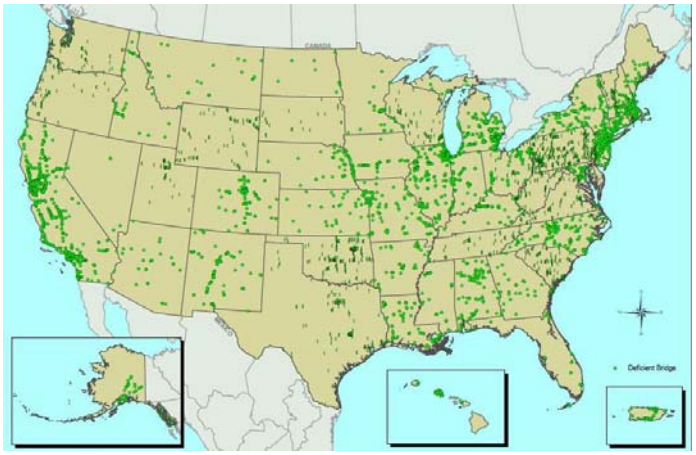
- According to the U.S. Department of Transportation's 2000 Highway Cost Allocation Study, an 80,000-pound, five-axle **combination truck pays just 80 percent of its cost responsibility; a six-axle, 97,000-pound truck pays just 50 percent of the damage it causes to our highways**; and trucks weighing more than 100,000 pounds pay only 40 percent. There is no reason to think these percentages are significantly different today.
- Recent studies suggest that, adjusted for inflation, the DOT findings mean that **80,000-pound trucks today underpay their federal cost responsibility by around 27 cents per gallon**. For heavier truck size and weight configurations, **the federal underpayment could be as high as $1.17 per gallon**. Underpayments on state taxes are also significant and are in addition to the federal underpayment.

- These huge underpayments mean that much of the damage heavy trucks cause is **paid for by the general public, not by the heavy trucks themselves**. The Highway Trust Fund has already drawn more than $50 billion in cash infusions from the U.S. Treasury's general fund to stay solvent, and more such infusions will almost certainly be executed in the near future. Allowing bigger trucks on the road would only add to these costs.
- Proponents of expanding allowable truck weights claim they support higher taxes to pay for the additional damage heavier trucks would cause. However, **the additional taxes they say they are willing to pay are far less than what's needed to compensate for *existing* underpayments, much less the additional underpayments that weights above 80,000 pounds would cause**.
- As the Government Accountability Office (GAO) has pointed out, the existence of underpayments ".. distorts the competitive environment by making it appear that heavier trucks are…less expensive…than they actually are and puts other modes, such as rail and maritime, at a disadvantage."[1]

The Need to Strengthen Roads and Bridges

- Because many parts of the interstate highway system were not built for longer and heavier trucks, their widespread use could require **massive new spending to strengthen or replace bridges and pavement, as well as to widen vehicle lanes and shoulders**.
- Today, more than 63,000 U.S. highway bridges — 10 percent of all bridges — are classified as "structurally deficient." That means the bridge has a significant defect, which often means that speed or weight limits are needed on the bridge to ensure safety. The American Road & Transportation Builders Association recently calculated that if all deficient bridges were lined up end to end, it would take 25 hours to drive across them at 60 mph. Another 84,000 bridges (14 percent of the total) are "functionally obsolete," meaning their current use is not consistent with their design (for example, they lack shoulders or are carrying more volume or weight than they were designed to carry). In addition, approximately 18 percent of vehicle-miles traveled on federal-aid highways are on pavements that are rated less than "acceptable." The backlog to repair these bridges and highways is already many tens of billions of dollars; allowing heavier trucks would add billions of dollars more to this taxpayer cost burden.

Structurally Deficient Bridges in the U.S.



[1] Government Accountability Office, Freight Transportation: National Policy and Strategies Can Help Improve Freight Mobility," GAO-08-287, January 2008, p. 16.

- Proponents of heavier trucks claim that the addition of a sixth axle would ameliorate the damage the heavier weight would cause. A sixth axle would do nothing to reduce bridge damage caused by heavier trucks because bridge stress is affected by total load.

More Trucks on Already Overcrowded Highways

Everyone recognizes the critical role trucks play in American commerce, but increased truck size and weight limits would lead to **more freight carried by trucks that don't pay for the damage they cause to our roads** and **less freight carried by trains.**

- A 2000 U.S. DOT study found that increased truck size and weights would lead to a sharp decline in rail traffic. More recent studies have confirmed this, projecting that an increase in allowable truck weight from 80,000 pounds to 97,000 pounds could **reduce merchandise traffic on Class I railroads by up to 50 percent and overall Class I rail traffic by up to 19 percent. Traffic on short line railroad would suffer similarly large diversion**, likely crippling many short lines. An estimated 6 million to 12 million additional trucks could be added to our nation's already overcrowded highways because of diversion of freight from rail to trucks that don't pay their own way.

- Unlike trucks, barges, and airlines, America's privately-owned freight railroads operate almost exclusively on infrastructure that they own, build, maintain, and pay for themselves. **Freight diversion would mean that railroads would have less money to reinvest in their networks**, leading to reduced rail capacity and poorer rail service. Railroads are not afraid of competition, but the playing field should be level.

- **Traffic diversion would also harm the environment**. Since railroads are, on average, four times more fuel efficient than trucks, diversion could increase fuel consumption by hundreds of millions of gallons per year and increase greenhouse gas emissions accordingly.

The Public Strongly Opposes Bigger and Heavier Trucks

- Polls have consistently found that **Americans overwhelmingly oppose bigger and heavier trucks** because of cost and safety concerns. For example, a March 2010 poll of 3,000 AAA members in Missouri found 90 percent were opposed to bigger trucks on the highways.

- In fact, polls show that the public believes that enforcement of existing truck size and weight limits is inadequate, and that if any changes are to be made, they should be in the direction of more restrictive limits, rather than more permissive limits.