Increased Truck Size & Weight Limits

ISSUE TYPE
Legislative (Federal)

AGENCY
Congress

STATUS
Legislation Introduced

DIVISION IMPACT
Rail, MC

INTERESTED PARTIES
AAR, ATA, OOIDA, Coalition for Transp. Productivity (CTP), Coalition Against Bigger Trucks (CABT), Coalition for Efficient Responsible Trucking, Public Citizen, Americans for Modern Transportation (AMT)

KEY DATES
May 5, 2015 – FHWA Truck Size and Weight Technical Reports find severe data limitations in areas of study mandated by MAP-21
April 14, 2016 – Comprehensive Truck Size and Weight Limits Study recommends no changes to federal truck size and weight limitations
Nov. 27, 2018 – TRB recommends areas for additional research to support truck size and weight regulations

Summary
In 1991, Congress froze truck size and weight limits on federal highways. Trucks traveling on Interstate highways are limited to gross vehicle weights (GVW) of 80,000 pounds unless state permits are obtained for special movements. Truck tractor-semitrailer-trailer combinations are restricted to 28.5 feet and truck tractor-semitrailer combinations are capped at 48 feet, unless states have “grandfathered” approvals for longer lengths through previously passed legislation.

Congress has shown interest in reforming national truck size and weight limitations. In Jan. 2008, GAO released findings of its study on reforming national truck size and weight limits, which was requested by Senator Jim Inhofe (R-OK). GAO found that larger combination vehicles don’t pay commensurately with the damage they cause to roads and bridges. Thus, heavier trucks “...distort the competitive environment by making it appear [they] are a less expensive shipping method than they actually are and put other modes, such as rails and maritime, at a disadvantage.”

In 2012’s Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century (MAP-21) Act, Congress directed the U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT) to conduct a Comprehensive Truck Size and Weight Limits Study assessing the differences between trucks operating at or within the federal truck size and weight limits and trucks legally operating in excess of federal limits. The study examined five key areas: safety and truck crash rates; pavement service life; highway bridge performance; enforcement programs; and shifts in goods movement among truck types and between modes. USDOT released a set of technical reports in June 2015, which pointed to major data limitations in the mandated areas of focus.

USDOT released the final Comprehensive Truck Size and Weight Limits Study in April 2016. Rather than recommend changes to federal truck size and weight limitations, the study suggested future areas of research, including assessments in truck weight and configuration in crashes, long-term bridge performance, and other related topics.

The study asserted that data sources and models must be developed in order to find real impacts of how larger and heavier trucks impact roads and safety. USDOT emphasized that Congress should not take the study as support of any change to policy, but rather it should be used to inform debate and to identify areas that need more research. In response to this study, the Transportation Research Board of the National Academies of Sciences published a report in November 2018 recommending seven areas for additional research. The report also predicted it could take four to six years to collect sufficient research on this topic.

The transportation industry is split over whether truck size and weight limits should be increased. Some organizations, including the Association of American Railroads (AAR) and the Owner-Operator Independent Drivers Association (OOIDA), believe that increasing the current truck size and weight limits would create more damage to highways and bridges, cause additional traffic congestion and consequently, reduce air quality.

In Jan. 2018, the Coalition Against Bigger Trucks (CABT) published a poll finding 79 percent of respondents were opposed to longer and heavier trucks. However, the trade press noted that respondents could have been swayed by the poll’s inclusion of the Coalition’s criticisms of the larger trucks. In Feb. 2019, several groups, including AAR, OOIDA, and CABT,
wrote Congress to urge opposition to any legislation that would increase truck size and weight limits.

The American Trucking Associations (ATA) takes the position that “federal one-size-fits all regulation prevents trucking companies from using their safest, cleanest, most pavement-friendly vehicles.” ATA urges Congress to give states the authority to determine whether larger and heavier vehicles should be allowed to operate on their highway systems. In 2017, a group of shippers, including Amazon, FedEx, the National Retail Federation, and more, formed the Americans for Modern Transportation (AMT) Coalition. AMT argues the widespread adoption of twin 33-foot trailers, among other improvements, can increase productivity and efficiency on U.S. highways.

Potential Impact to Intermodal Freight Transportation

Following are some potential impacts of truck size and weight increases on intermodal freight transportation:

Impact 1:

Increased truck size and weights could lead to more highway and bridge damage, resulting in the need for more spending on this type of infrastructure maintenance and enhancement. This in turn, would reduce the available funding for intermodal projects such as intermodal connectors, removal of grade crossings, and terminal expansion projects, at a time when additional capacity is needed.

Impact 2:

The economic subsidies enjoyed by longer combination vehicles distort the relative pricing for over-the-road trucking service vs. rail intermodal service and could lead to a reduction in the use of intermodal transportation. While no studies specifically measure the amount of potential traffic diversion from intermodal to OTR services, research conducted by MIT showed that an increase in truck weight from 80,000 to 97,000 pounds could reduce merchandise shipments on regional and short line railroads by up to 44 percent.

Impact 3:

Increased use of longer combination vehicles, at the expense of intermodal service, would substantially increase fuel consumption and lead to a corresponding increase in greenhouse gas emissions and a reduction in air quality.

Impact 4:

Any changes to the current size and weight structure would cause many intermodal service providers to consider a competitive response. Fleet owners would be required to evaluate the current inventory, size and configurations of domestic and international containers, their respective chassis configurations and railcar fleet designs.