

Sunday, January 10, 2010

Heavy trucks allowed on interstates in Maine, Vt.

By DAVID SHARP
Associated Press Writer

FREEPORT, Maine (AP) — Heavy trucks used to creep through town, rumbling past shoppers and the well-known L.L. Bean store because big rigs weren't allowed on Interstate 295 a quarter-mile away.

But most of the trucks have disappeared, seemingly overnight, with the passage of a new law that allows heavier trucks — weighing 100,000 pounds — to use interstate highways in Maine.

Those 50-ton behemoths no longer have to dodge tourists and shoppers crossing busy Freeport's Main Street since President Barack Obama signed a measure Dec. 16 allowing the heavy trucks on Maine's interstates. A similar one-year pilot program was approved in Vermont, as well.

"The whole thing should've been done years ago. It's much safer for all drivers and all pedestrians and all traffic," said Joe Cormier, a truck driver for H.O. Bouchard Inc., who has traveled through Freeport more than 200 times a year for 15 years with a variety of loads.

In 1994, Maine won an exemption to the federal 80,000-pound weight limit on the Maine Turnpike, allowing heavier trucks to begin using the 113-mile toll road. But those larger trucks weren't allowed to use Maine's other interstates, so it was a limited victory.

Because they couldn't travel most interstate highways, the big rigs were forced to travel secondary roads that pass through cities and small towns, raising concerns about safety and wear and tear on the local roads.

In Freeport, the six-axle trucks carrying jet fuel, heating oil, cement and other products shared the same road as shoppers and summer tourists. Like other motorists, the big trucks got stopped by school buses and waited at crosswalks as they crept past homes, schools and shops.

Each day, more than 100 of the heavy trucks passed through, mostly early in the day and late at night to avoid traffic snarls, according to the town's engineer.

Cormier said it was frustrating to drive through small towns — Freeport in particular.

"It's a nightmare. You have all of those pedestrians crossing in front of you and you have all of those cars coming out of side streets," he said. "You could kill someone very easily."

In foul weather, truckers had to slip and slide along narrow, curvy local roads instead of traveling on the interstate highways, which are quickly cleared by plow trucks. Freeport Fire Chief Darrel Fournier said he's particularly pleased to see trucks with hazardous loads get off the town roads.

In Vermont, lawmakers still must remove statutes on the books that enforce the 80,000-pound limit. But lawmakers and the state Agency of Transportation are eager to do so.

"We'd much prefer this to be permanent than a pilot (project), but we understand things like this take one step at a time," said John Zicconi, a spokesman for the state's transportation agency in Montpelier, Vt. "We want to show Congress we can do this safely. It's the right thing to do."

Sens. Susan Collins in Maine and Patrick Leahy in Vermont led efforts in their respective states to create pilot programs allowing heavier trucks. Supporters say the pilot program will save time and energy costs, while improving safety by reducing the number of trucks on the road and getting them off rural and secondary roads.

But critics say heavier trucks compromise the safety of other motorists and damage highways and bridges. Railroad operators generally oppose higher weight limits on trucks, as well.

All arguments in favor of higher weight limits are predicated on there being fewer trucks on the road, and that's not borne out by history, said John Lannen of the Truck Safety Coalition in Virginia.

"There's always been more trucks, not less trucks," he said.

The first state weight limits for roads were imposed in 1913 by Maine, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania and Washington, and the federal government got involved in 1956 with the creation of the interstate highway system. Eventually, the federal government settled on a limit of 80,000 pounds for trucks in 1974.

Largely because of Maine's logging industry, the state adopted higher limits of 90,000 pounds and then 100,000 pounds on state roads to accommodate heavier loads.

As time passed, Maine found itself in a "doughnut hole" in which higher weight limits were allowed on interstate highways in neighboring Canadian provinces as well as in New Hampshire and Massachusetts, both of which won exemptions from the federal 80,000-pound weight limit. Nationwide, about a dozen states have various exemptions to the limit on interstates, according to the Federal Highway Administration.

In Maine, many towns are already seeing less truck traffic under the new rules.

Brian Bouchard, president and CEO of H.O. Bouchard, the trucking company, said he sees far fewer trucks passing in front of his home on Route 9 in Hampden. Sometimes there were convoys of Canadian trucks backed up on the road as he tried to drive to work or return home in the evening.

"It's amazing what this has done for people," he said. "I own 150 trucks. I'm not complaining about them. But they just don't belong on these rural roads."

Associated Press writer John Curran in Montpelier, Vt., contributed to this report.