

Traffic World

January 5, 2009 Monday

Bigger Trucks are Reloading; Shipper groups say national economic woes point to need for raised truck weight limits

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When International Paper announced last year it was closing its Louisiana pulp paper mill in Bastrop and laying off more than 500 workers, the company was hardly alone.

As the lumber industry shrinks amid weak economic demand, hundreds of mills have been closed or curtailed, according to the Forest Research Association.

While the troubled industry looks for signs of recovery, association President Richard Lewis says forest products shippers could get one important piece of help from the federal government - clearance for 97,000-pound trucks on federal highways.

"Transportation is a very good percentage of what it costs to keep our mills in production," he said. "If we achieve this gain in transportation it would prevent further erosion of the paper mills and oriented strand board mills operating in this country."

Forest products shippers and others who favor raising the ceiling on truck weight are making a new effort to lift the limits by pointing to the growing economic woes hitting industries that ship heavy goods, particularly the businesses staggered by a decline in the housing market.

Raising the weight limits, said Lewis, would reduce the cost of moving wood between 9 and 18 percent. That's especially important, he said, if Congress raises the federal fuel tax. "There are mills that are just barely competitive in this country right now, they are hanging on by their fingernails," Lewis said.

Although the trucking industry does not track shipments by commodity other figures show the lumber world's troubles are getting deeper this year and hitting transportation operations harder. The Association of American Railroads says carloads of lumber and wood products were down more than 20 percent in 2008.

Advocates of hiking truck weights hope to have such changes included in the 2009 highway bill or some other legislative vehicle.

The coalition, along with the Coalition for Transportation Productivity, another new association, join those who are calling for the federal truck weight limit to be increased to 97,000 pounds from the current 80,000-pound limit, a 21 percent increase.

Congress enacted the national weight limit in 1974 and froze those limits in 1991. But advocates of larger trucks point to a host of factors - ranging from environmental reasons to economic benefits - they say justify another look at the issue.

"This is going to benefit everyone," said Jake Jacoby, executive director of Americans for Safe and Efficient Transportation, which counts Kraft Foods among its members "We see this as a way to help the trucking industry, while also helping the shippers."

Still, an attempt to raise the weight limit went nowhere last year and the effort faces long odds this year.

"It remains to be seen what can be accomplished in the next highway bill," said Rep. Michael Michaud, D-Maine, a member of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, which held a hearing on allowing heavier trucks last year.

Opponents include Sen. Frank Lautenberg, D-N.J., the Association of American Railroads and the Owner-Operator Independent Drivers Association. OOIDA says bigger trucks is simply a way of saying fewer drivers, and the group says arguments about the larger economy can cut the other way.

"As things stand right now, many of our members' trucks going down the highway aren't filled to capacity," said Rod Nofziger, OOIDA's director of governmental affairs.