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Weight Limit Standoff

Renewed push by shippers to increase truck weights hits a freight train

The atmosphere surrounding the trucking and railroad debate over truck size and weight limits is more frigid than ever, and shippers claim they're stuck in the middle.

At a National Association of Manufacturers transportation subcommittee meeting in Washington last month, a representative of International Paper pleaded the shippers' case to increase federal truck weight limits to 97,000 pounds from the current 80,000 pounds. John Runyan, IP's senior public affairs manager, said the plea was swiftly rejected.

"Not only did the railroads oppose this when I raised the issue, but they expressed support for a higher vehicle use tax on existing 80,000-pound trucks," said Runyan, who also co-chairs the Coalition for Transportation Productivity, whose members include Kraft Foods, Boise Cascade and MillerCoors. "It was a little bit of a stunner to see them not only oppose improved truck productivity but support higher fees on existing vehicles — and higher costs for U.S. manufacturers during an economic recession."

Railroad industry officials were not immediately available for comment. Class I railroads have long opposed changes to federal size and weight limits for trucks. Longer combination vehicles — tractors with two or more trailers having gross vehicle weight of more than 80,000 pounds — are limited to certain highways in 21 states that allowed such trucks before 1991.

Beyond safety concerns, the Association of American Railroads points to a Department of Transportation Highway Cost Allocation Study that concludes taxes levied on combination trucks weighing 80,000 to 100,000 pounds cover only half the cost of the damage the trucks cause to highways.

But the railroads are more likely concerned that boosting truck weight limits would give trucks a competitive edge in the fight over shipper dollars. The AAR cites a 1999 DOT study suggesting increasing truck size and weights would result in a decline in rail revenue of between \$2.9 billion and \$6.7 billion. Rail earnings would decline 32 percent to 46 percent, and rail car-miles would decline 4 percent to 20 percent, the study said.

The association also refers to a Massachusetts Institute of Technology study that said increasing federal truck weight limits to 97,000 pounds could reduce merchandise traffic on short line railroads by 44 percent.

"Traffic diversion would mean that railroads would have less money to reinvest in their networks," the AAR said in a position paper. "This would lead directly to reduced rail capacity

and poorer rail service. Remaining rail customers could face higher rates, reduced service, or both.”

The Coalition for Transportation Productivity, which launched its campaign for heavier trucks in December, said its proposal refutes rail arguments against the higher weight limits.

The proposal advocates adding a sixth axle to the heaviest trucks. This would spread out the added weight and actually place less pressure per tire on the roadways. The group cites a Transportation Research Board study showing with an extra axle, braking capacity would be maintained even at 97,000 pounds.

The coalition said its supporters would be willing to pay more through a permit fee dedicated to bridge repair and to offset any additional wear on roads.

And raising weight limits “could significantly reduce fuel use and carbon emissions without compromising safety,” the coalition said, and would also spur investment in upgraded equipment and create jobs.

The National Industrial Transportation League, which supports increasing truck length in addition to weight, said the benefits to shippers are difficult to ignore.

“This would help the carriers’ productivity by adding more revenue per truck,” said Wayne Johnson, who heads the NIT League’s highway committee and is director of logistics for American Gypsum. “Being able to haul another 17,000 pounds per truck would save carriers money, and that can be passed on to the shipper.”

Johnson, whose company is a major player in the home building market, said the railroads’ claim they would lose business to trucks is tenuous given his difficulty in getting railroads to haul American Gypsum’s goods.

“I’m still shocked railroads have taken no steps to getting more product on the rails from the forest industry products sector,” he said. “They’ve got empty cars parked all along their network. Our customers are asking for rail, and we’re telling them ‘no’ until the railroads can be more competitive with trucks.”

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