

# Keep Federal Truck Size and Weight Limits

ASSOCIATION OF AMERICAN RAILROADS

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## Summary

Increasing existing truck size and weight limits would mean **more 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 they cause. This multi-billion dollar underpayment — which other motorists and the general public have to make up through higher taxes — would become even greater if truck size and weight limits were increased.

## Overview of Existing Truck Size and Weight Limits

Truck size and weight limits on federal highways were frozen by Congress in 1991, largely because of concerns about the safety of longer and heavier trucks and concerns about the highway damage that heavy trucks cause.

Under current law, trucks operating on most of the Interstate Highway System can have a gross vehicle weight of no more than 80,000 pounds. “Longer combination vehicles” — tractors with two or more trailers weighing more than 80,000 pounds — can operate on certain highways in 21 mostly western states that allowed such trucks before 1991.

Over the years some groups have called for unfreezing truck size and weight limits, but legislative attempts to date to thaw the freeze have been unsuccessful. Legislation has also been offered, so far without passing, that would protect our highways and bridges by capping the length of single truck trailers, freezing the weights of trucks using the National Highway System (NHS), and extending the freeze on double- and triple-trailer trucks to the entire NHS.

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

The fuel and other taxes and fees devoted to highway construction and maintenance that heavy trucks pay do not come close to covering the costs of the damage trucks cause.

According to the U.S. Department of Transportation's Highway Cost Allocation Study, **combination trucks weighing 80,000 to 100,000 pounds pay just half the cost of the damage they cause to our highways.** So for each pothole created by a heavy truck, only half of the cost of repairing that pothole is paid for by taxes on trucks. The study found that trucks weighing more than 100,000 pounds pay only 40 percent of the damage they cause.

In fact, based on the DOT findings inflated to current cost levels, **80,000-pound five-axle trucks underpay their federal cost responsibility by approximately 27.5 cents per gallon.** For other truck size and weight configurations, **the federal underpayment is as high as \$1.24 per gallon.** This huge underpayment means that repairing much of the highway damage caused by heavy trucks is **paid for by the general public**, not by the trucks themselves.

As the Government Accountability Office has noted, “From an economic standpoint, this ... distorts the competitive environment by making it appear that heavier trucks are a less expensive shipping method than they actually are and puts other modes, such as rail and maritime, at a disadvantage.” And as the National Surface Transportation Policy and Revenue Commission noted in a 2008 report, this violates a principle of highway taxation, dating back to the creation of the Highway Trust Fund, that “different vehicle classes should be charged in proportion to their contribution to highway investment requirements.”

**Relaxing truck size and weight limits would make this inequity much worse because even more freight would be transported by heavy trucks.**

In addition, 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, and to widen vehicle lanes and shoulders.** Already, more than 146,000 highway bridges (24 percent of the total) are structurally deficient or functionally obsolete, and 14 percent of vehicle-miles traveled on federal-aid highways are on pavements that are rated less than “acceptable.”

### **More Trucks on the Road?**

Railroads recognize the critical role trucks play in American commerce, and railroads are partners with trucking firms all over the country. Intermodal traffic — transporting truck trailers or shipping containers on rail cars — has been the fastest-growing major segment of the U.S. freight railroad industry over the past 20 years.

Increased TS&W limits, however, 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 1999 U.S. DOT study found that increased truck size and weights would result in a significant decline in rail revenue and rail traffic. A more recent study by a retired MIT research associate found that an increase in truck weight from 80,000 pounds to 97,000 pounds could reduce merchandise traffic on short line railroads by 44 percent and overall short line rail traffic by 17 percent — likely crippling many short lines.

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. Traffic diversion would mean that railroads would have less money to reinvest in their networks. This would lead directly to reduced rail capacity and poorer rail service. Remaining rail customers could face higher rates, reduced service, or both.

Traffic diversion would also harm the environment. Already-overcrowded highways would become even more crowded. And 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 lead to a corresponding increase in greenhouse gas emissions.

### **The Public Strongly Opposes Truck Size and Weight Relaxation**

**Americans overwhelmingly oppose bigger and heavier trucks.** A national poll in February 2003 found that 89 percent of Americans oppose triple-trailer trucks. The pollster remarked, “I can think of no other issue ... in which so many Americans are united in their intensity either for or against a particular issue.” More recently, a March 2010 poll of 3,000 AAA members in Missouri found 90 percent were opposed to bigger trucks on the highways.