

# Keep Existing Federal Truck Size and Weight Limits

ASSOCIATION OF AMERICAN RAILROADS

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## Summary

Increasing existing truck size and weight limits would mean higher taxpayer costs to repair 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 heavy trucks cause. This multi-billion dollar annual underpayment — which other motorists and the general public have to make up for through higher taxes — would become even greater if truck size and weight limits were increased. In April 2016, the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) released the final results of a study examining the impacts of increasing current federal truck size and weight limits. **The DOT study concluded that no changes to federal policy on truck size and weights should be made at this time.**

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## Truck Size and Weight Limits Have Been in Place Nearly 25 Years — For Good Reason

- In 1982, Congress decreed that trucks on the Interstate Highway System could weigh no more than 80,000 pounds. In 1991, Congress limited the routes on which trucks weighing more than 80,000 pounds with two or more trailers (known as longer combination vehicles, or LCVs) could travel. These limits were imposed largely because of **concerns about the safety of longer and heavier trucks** and the **uncompensated highway damage they cause**.
- Legislation to increase these limits on federal highways has been proposed many times over the years. To date, all attempts at nationwide increases have failed because the **concerns that led to the federal limits in the first place are still valid**.

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

The fuel taxes and other fees that heavy trucks pay don't come close to covering the costs of the highway damage these trucks cause.

- According to the DOT's Highway Cost Allocation Study released in 2000, 80,000-pound, five-axle **combination trucks cover just 80 percent of the damage they cause to our highways; six-axle, 97,000-pound trucks cover just 50 percent of their cost responsibility**; and trucks weighing more than 100,000 pounds cover only 40 percent. There's no reason to think these percentages are significantly different today.
- Recent studies suggest that, adjusted for inflation, the DOT findings mean that **80,000-pound trucks today underpay their federal cost responsibility by around 27 cents per gallon of fuel**. For other truck size and weight configurations, **the federal underpayment could be as high as \$1.17 per gallon**. Underpayments on state taxes are also significant and are in addition to the federal underpayment.

- These huge underpayments mean that much of the damage heavy trucks cause is **paid for by the general public, not by the heavy trucks themselves**. The Highway Trust Fund has already drawn more than \$70 billion in cash infusions from the U.S. Treasury's general fund to stay solvent, and another \$70 billion in infusions is expected to be needed by 2020. Allowing bigger trucks on the road would only add to these costs.
- Some proponents of expanding allowable truck weights claim they support higher taxes to pay for the additional damage heavier trucks would cause. However, **the additional taxes they say they're willing to pay are not enough to cover what's needed to compensate for existing underpayments**, much less the *additional* underpayments that weights above 80,000 pounds would cause.
- As the Government Accountability Office (GAO) has pointed out, the existence of underpayments "...distorts the competitive environment by making it appear that heavier trucks are...less expensive...than they actually are and puts other modes, such as rail and maritime, at a disadvantage."<sup>1</sup>

### The Need to Strengthen Roads and Bridges

- 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, as well as to widen vehicle lanes and shoulders**.
  - ✓ Today, more than 58,000 U.S. bridges — nearly 10 percent of all bridges — are "structurally deficient." That means the bridges have significant defects, which often means the bridges need speed or weight limits to ensure safety. The American Road & Transportation Builders Association has calculated that if all structurally deficient bridges were lined up end to end, it would take close to 25 hours to drive across them at 60 mph.
  - ✓ Another 84,000 bridges (14 percent of the total) are "functionally obsolete," meaning their current use is not consistent with their design (for example, they lack shoulders or are carrying more volume than they were designed to carry).
  - ✓ Approximately 18 percent of vehicle-miles traveled on federal-aid highways are on pavements that are rated "not acceptable."
- The backlog to repair bridges and highways is already tens of billions of dollars. Allowing heavier trucks would add billions of dollars more to this taxpayer burden.
- Some proponents of heavier trucks claim that heavier weights should be allowed only on trucks that add a sixth axle, and that this sixth axle would reduce or eliminate the damage the heavier weight would cause. **That's not true. Bridge stress is primarily a function of vehicle length and gross vehicle weight, not per-axle weight. Therefore, adding a sixth axle does little to reduce bridge damage.**
- In April 2016, DOT released the final results of a comprehensive study of various safety, infrastructure, and efficiency issues surrounding federal truck size and weight limits and the potential impacts of changing those limits. Among other things, the study found that

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<sup>1</sup> Government Accountability Office, Freight Transportation: National Policy and Strategies Can Help Improve Freight Mobility," GAO-08-287, January 2008, p. 16.

if federal truck weights were increased to 91,000 pounds, the added stress to bridges would require engineering and repair work to either strengthen or completely replace more than 4,800 bridges, of which 1,485 are on the Interstate Highway System. The DOT estimated that the cost to taxpayers just for this construction is up to \$1.1 billion. Moreover, the DOT analyzed just 20 percent of the nation's bridges for its report. The remaining 80 percent are likely to be even more vulnerable to heavier trucks.<sup>2</sup>

- In a June 2015 letter to Congress on the issue, Peter Rogoff, the DOT's Under Secretary for Policy, wrote that data limitations make precise estimates of highway and safety effects of longer and heavier trucks impossible to calculate. He stated, "As such, the [DOT] believes that no changes in the relevant truck size and weight laws and regulations should be considered until these data limitations are overcome." This conclusion was repeated in the DOT's April 2016 final report to Congress on the June 2015 study.

### More Trucks on Already Overcrowded Highways

Everyone recognizes the critical role trucks play in American commerce, but increased truck size and weight limits 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.**

- 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.
- The 2000 and 2015 DOT studies found that increased truck size and weights would mean large rail traffic declines. Other studies have confirmed this. For example, a 2010 study by Dr. Carl Martland projected that an increase in allowable truck weight from 80,000 pounds to 97,000 pounds could reduce merchandise traffic on Class I railroads by up to 50 percent and overall Class I rail traffic by up to 19 percent. Traffic on short line railroads could suffer too, likely crippling many of them. Millions of additional trucks could be added to our nation's already overcrowded highways because of diversion of freight from railroads that pay their own way to trucks that don't. **Freight diversion would mean that railroads would have less money to reinvest in their networks,** leading to reduced rail capacity for rail customers. Railroads don't fear competition, but the playing field should be level.
- **Traffic diversion would also harm the environment.** Because 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 increase greenhouse gas emissions accordingly.



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<sup>2</sup> The DOT released two technical reports as part of its recent truck size and weight study. Volume I gives an overview of the study project, background on scenarios selected, explains the study's methodology, and summarizes the key findings. Volume II comprises a set of the five comparative assessment documents that meet the technical requirements of the legislation.