Oppose Longer & Heavier Trucks on Our Nation’s Roads

Truck size and weight (TSW) limits should not be changed.

Congress has long maintained reasonable limits on the size of trucks operating on the Interstate Highway System — no more than 80,000 pounds for weight and two 28-foot trailers for length. Over the years, legislation to increase federal limits on truck weights to at least 91,000 pounds — a jump of almost 14% — and to force states to permit the operation of double 33-foot trailer trucks, or “Twin 33s,” has repeatedly failed because permitting longer or heavier trucks on our nation’s roads is simply bad policy.

In fact, a 2016 Department of Transportation (DOT) study examining the impacts of increasing TSW limits concluded that no changes to federal policy should be made.

Increasing TSW limits would cause additional damage to our nation’s roads and bridges and exacerbate the trucking industry’s underpayment into the Highway Trust Fund (HTF).

The fuel taxes and fees trucks pay do not come close to covering the costs of the significant damage they cause to our nation’s roads and bridges. These taxes and fees have not been substantially changed since 1993, resulting in a multibillion-dollar annual underpayment into the HTF by the commercial trucking industry and requiring taxpayers to cover that shortfall.

Since 2008, policymakers have been forced to transfer a total of $275 billion of general taxpayer funds into the HTF, including requiring $118 billion in the 2021 Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), which will only cover the HTF shortfall through 2026.

Increasing TSW limits would substantially increase highway lifecycle costs due to accelerated pavement deterioration. Because much of the U.S. highway network was not built for longer or heavier trucks, their widespread use could require massive amounts of new spending to strengthen or replace bridges and pavement and to widen lanes and shoulders. The state-of-good-repair backlog for our nation’s roads and bridges is already in the tens of billions of dollars. Permitting longer or heavier trucks, including the millions of additional trucks that would be added to our nation’s already overcrowded highways because of the diversion of freight, would make this backlog much worse.

Increasing TSW limits would further distort competition in the freight transportation sector.

Unlike trucks, America’s freight railroads operate almost exclusively on infrastructure that they pay to maintain and improve themselves. The Government Accountability Office has found that underpayment into the HTF by the trucking industry distorts the competitive environment within the freight transportation sector “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.”

Key Takeaways

- Congress should not consider changes to TSW limitations until the full extent of the impacts of different truck configurations are understood and trucks are paying for the damage they cause to our roads and bridges.

- A 2016 DOT study examining the impacts of increasing current TSW limits concluded that no changes to federal policy should be made.

- Raising TSW limits would mean higher taxpayer costs to repair uncompensated damage to our nation’s highways and bridges, more gridlock traffic and greater environmental harm.

- 80,000-pound trucks currently cover roughly 80% of the damage they cause to our nation’s highways and bridges and underpay their federal cost responsibility by some 27 cents per gallon of fuel.

- 97,000-pound trucks only cover about 50% of the damage they cause, and the underpayment of such larger trucks could be well over $1 per gallon.

- Increasing allowable TSW limits would increase the trucking industry’s underpayment and further distort competition within the freight transportation sector, significantly impacting rail traffic.
A study projected that increasing allowable truck weights from 80,000 to 97,000 pounds could reduce merchandise traffic on Class I railroads by up to 50% and overall Class I rail traffic by up to 19%. Another study found that increasing truck weights to 120,000 pounds, combined with permitting twin 33-foot trailers, would result in an annual diversion of 7.5 million rail carloads and 8.5 million intermodal shipments from rail to trucking. Traffic on short line railroads would suffer significantly as well.

**Increasing TSW limits would cause further environmental and other economic harm.**

U.S. freight railroads, on average, can move one ton of freight nearly 500 miles per gallon of fuel and are three to four times more fuel efficient than trucks. In fact, AAR analysis of federal data found that if 25% of the truck traffic moving at least 750 miles went by rail instead of truck, annual greenhouse gas emissions would fall by approximately 13.1 million tons.

Additionally, railroads help to reduce the huge economic costs of highway congestion. A single freight train can replace several hundred trucks, freeing up space on the highway for other motorists. According to the Texas Transportation Institute’s 2019 Urban Mobility Report, highway congestion alone costs Americans $166 billion in wasted time (8.8 billion hours) and wasted fuel (3.3 billion gallons) in 2017.

**DOT should complete research essential to fully understanding the consequences of additional bigger trucks.**

Research needs to be conducted to fully understand the extent of the impacts of different truck configurations on driver safety, the service life and deterioration rates of bridges and the condition of pavement, as well as potential impacts of such changes on the long-term solvency of the HTF.

In a 2016 study, DOT noted the difficulties encountered in studying the effects of the size or weight of various truck configurations and requested that the Transportation Research Board (TRB) develop a program of research to overcome limitations in data analysis and modeling of impacts. In 2018, TRB released its TSW Research Plan which outlined 27 research projects the completion of which would contribute to the improved evaluation of potential changes to TSW limitations.

Congress, in its fiscal years 2020 and 2021 omnibus appropriations bills, directed DOT to expeditiously develop an implementation plan, including projected timelines, for conducting this research and noted that this research should be completed before any changes in federal TSW policy are considered. However, DOT has not yet submitted this implementation plan.

Completion of this research could also inform the highway cost allocation study being undertaken by DOT pursuant to IIJA. This cost allocation study, the first such study since 2000, will provide an essential baseline for the direct costs of highway use by various types of users, including commercial motor vehicles, and will review a broad range of costs, such as those related to safety, emissions, congestion and noise, to determine the proportionate share of the costs attributable to each class of highway user. The study will then compare those costs with the user fee revenue contributed to the HTF by those users and provide recommendations for a set of revenue options to fully cover the costs occasioned by highway users.