

Written Testimony of the Honorable James P. McGovern
Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
Subcommittee on Highways and Transit
April 5, 2011

As work begins on highway authorization, so too begins another concerted effort to allow super-heavy, unsafe, and inefficient trucks on highways across the country.

Various groups dominated by large shippers and large trucking companies are lobbying congress to raise the maximum weight of single tractor trailer trucks from 80,000 pounds to 97,000 pounds and to allow longer trucks -- longer combination vehicles (or LCVs – like super-heavy and super-long double and triple trailer trucks).

This committee and this body have debated this issue many times before and have nearly always voted against risking the safety of motorists and the pocketbooks of taxpayers by allowing trucks to get even dangerously and destructively larger than they are today.

A lot has changed since our last debate of truck size and weight. Our nation is emerging from the worst economic recession since the Great Depression. States and local governments are facing huge budget shortfalls. And, our transportation infrastructure continues to crumble and our Highway Trust Fund remains underfunded.

Forty-four states and the District of Columbia are facing projected budget shortfalls in FY 2012. Allowing increases to truck size or weight would exacerbate existing transportation funding problems. As the committee is well aware, the Highway Trust Fund continues to face a projected shortfall in the years to come. While this shortfall has been linked to the increasing fuel efficiency of cars and a reduction in travel because of the recession, certainly the subsidy Congress has given the trucking industry has helped create this environment.

The fact of the matter is that heavy trucks on the road today do not pay their fair share. According to the Federal Highway Administration's 2000 Highway Cost Allocation Study, the typical five-axle, 80,000-pound single tractor trailer on the road today only pays 80% of its highway maintenance costs. A long double registered at 129,000 pounds pays only 60% of its costs and a triple trailer truck registered at 110,000 pounds pays only 70%. In 2000, FHWA estimated that heavy trucks underpaid their share of highway costs by nearly \$1.9 billion.

This number does not include the underpayment of damage to state and local roads, which is even larger. And since road and bridge construction costs increase much faster than do diesel taxes and truck registration fees, the gap between heavy truck damage to our infrastructure and the user fees paid by the trucking industry continues to widen. While some groups lobbying for bigger trucks have said that they are willing to pay a modest user fee, what they are offering wouldn't begin to cover the full cost of the damage done to the highway infrastructure. It's like offering to pay the tip for a meal and requiring other highway users to cover the full tab.

The tragic collapse of the I-35W bridge in Minnesota in 2007 focused the public's attention on the state of our nation's infrastructure. One out of every four bridges – 151,397 – in the nation is structurally deficient. Almost half of the bridges on the National Highway System are more than 40 years old, which means that they are nearing the end of their useful lives. The average bridge was built at a time when there was less than a third of the truck traffic that there is today and the truck weight limit was 73,280 pounds.

The Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT) recently conducted a cost-benefit analysis of the impact on Illinois bridges of increasing truck weight to 97,000 pounds. IDOT's conservative estimate shows that these heavier trucks would cost the state an additional \$162 million in infrastructure repair and maintenance costs for interstate bridges alone.

Proposals that suggest adding additional axles to the bigger truck configurations would minimize the additional damage these rigs would do to our infrastructure are unsound. While additional axles would help mitigate additional damage to pavement, it would actually *increase* the damage to bridges dramatically.

In addition to the costs associated with bigger trucks, the impacts of bigger trucks on motorists are well documented. As former Chairman Oberstar said on the floor of the House in 2004 when debating SAFETEA-LU:

It simply comes down to this: heavier trucks are more dangerous. They are more costly to the Nation's highways. As truck weights increase, fatal accident rates go up, according to the University of Michigan's transportation research study.

Heavier tractor-trailers raise the center of gravity of the vehicle and its load, increasing rollovers. Heavier vehicles mean increasing speed differentials with other traffic. Increasing truck weights result in greater brake maintenance problems. Brakes are out of adjustment, trucks take longer to stop. It is just that simple.

I have studied this issue for many years. Heavier trucks are worse on the roadway, worse still on bridges, and are involved in a highly disproportionate greater number of accidents.

As the former Chairman said, this issue has been studied for many years. The most thorough and authoritative examination of truck size and weight issues to date, the U.S. Department of Transportation's 2000 Truck Size and Weight Study, chronicled the safety issues surrounding bigger trucks. According to the DOT Study:

- LCVs could be expected to experience an 11 percent higher overall crash rate than single-trailer combinations;
- LCVs have poor stability and are significantly more likely to experience rearward amplification (the "crack the whip" effect) than singles;
- LCVs also have more axles and brakes, which increase the potential for brake maintenance problems;

- Adding weight to single trailer trucks increases the risk of an accident involving a fatality;
- Heavier singles have a higher risk of rollover; and
- Increasing truck weight is also likely to lead to brake maintenance problems and longer stopping distances.

As the former Chairman said, bigger trucks are more dangerous. In 2009, 74,000 people were injured and 3,380 killed in crashes with heavy trucks. Allowing trucks to be even heavier is a dangerous proposition.

The dangers these trucks pose to safety and to our roads and bridges are also why truck drivers oppose any increase in truck weight or length. Both the International Brotherhood of Teamsters and the Owner-Operator Independent Drivers Association (OOIDA) are against allowing trucks to be bigger. Teamsters General President Jim Hoffa has called the idea of letting bigger trucks on the road, “crazy,” and has been quoted in the press as saying that he “can’t imagine a worse time to promote this idea.”

If truck drivers are unwilling to drive these trucks, why should we allow them on our roads?

Perhaps the most insulting part of the trucking industry’s proposal, however, is that these ultra-heavy, dangerous trucks are being depicted as green. While I applaud efforts to decrease the emissions that lead to global climate change – such as a national speed limit for trucks and reducing the time trucks spend idling – I reject the attempt to cast heavier, unsafe trucks as part of the solution to climate change.

A centerpiece of this new campaign is the assertion that bigger trucks will mean fewer trucks. Experience indicates this is false. Increases in truck size and weight are likely to accelerate growth in truck transportation. In 1982, Congress passed legislation that required all states to raise the maximum allowable Interstate weight limit to 80,000 pounds. Despite the increase in truck weight, the total number of miles traveled by combination trucks increased by 63 percent from 1980 to 1993, according to the Federal Highway Administration. In fact, the miles traveled by combination trucks and the number of trucks registered in the U.S. has gone up nearly every year since 1982.

Truck travel grows after an increase in truck size and weight because the bigger rigs deliver freight from other transportation modes. As such, allowing heavier trucks would represent a fundamental strategic decision that would shape the future of freight transportation in the U.S. for years to come. I would contend that diverting freight away from our already overcrowded highways is a more sound way to curb emissions that contribute to global climate change.

Allowing heavier and longer trucks will mean more trucks on the road, more fossil fuel burned, more of the emissions that contribute to climate change, and more highway congestion, not less.

In the coming weeks, I will be reintroducing legislation, H.R. 1618 in the 111th Congress, the Safe Highways and Infrastructure Preservation act (SHIPA), which extends the common-sense weight limits we already have on our Interstates to the entire National Highway System. The

weight limit for nearly all portions of the NHS is 40 tons, but ineffective enforcement and state permits that allow trucks to exceed this amount severely undermine the regulation. In some instances, these permits allow trucks to double the limit. In fact, the year before the collapse of the bridge in Minneapolis, the state's department of transportation issued 48 overweight load permits with excesses up to 72 ½ tons.

In short, bigger trucks are more dangerous, which is why they are opposed by motorists and by truck drivers. Bigger trucks tear up our roads and bridges, which are already in disrepair. This additional damage would cost taxpayers billions of dollars just in repair costs. In these difficult budgetary times, states and local governments cannot afford these additional costs. When you add in the cost of sitting in the congestion caused by the additional construction and repair, this number skyrockets even higher. Bigger trucks will also divert more freight to our highways causing more highway congestion, more fuel consumption, and more pollution.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, allowing trucks to get longer and heavier does not make any sense. I urge the Committee to oppose any increase in truck size or weight in highway reauthorization legislation and to consider enactment of the Safe Highways and Infrastructure Preservation Act.