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Trucks on federal highways could soon be heavier

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for The Northwestern

Wisconsin drivers could share the highways with much heavier trucks if Congress decides the efficiencies of larger loads trump concerns about road damage and safety.

The Safe and Efficient Transportation Act would raise the maximum weight for commercial trucks that routinely travel on highways to 97,000 pounds in most states.

The current threshold in most places, including Wisconsin, is 80,000 pounds unless the truck has a permit to be overweight.

Supporters of the proposal, including many companies that ship household goods in tractor-trailers, argue that it would reduce traffic, decrease fuel use and ultimately keep prices lower for consumers.

Critics say heavier trucks would severely damage roads and especially bridges, many of which are crumbling and need repairs the nation can't afford. Of Wisconsin's 14,000 bridges, 1,142 are rated "structurally deficient" in the National Bridge Inventory.

Driving safety also is a concern. Bill opponents say a heavier truck needs 25 percent more room to stop. In 2010, crashes involving large trucks killed 3,675 people, up about 9 percent from the year before, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's annual report.

Supporters of the bill, however, say the increased limit would apply only to trucks that have a sixth axle. They say such extra equipment gives the heavier trucks essentially the same braking capacity as an 80,000-pound truck with five axles.

About 200 companies have banded together to support the bill as the Coalition for Transportation Productivity — including Hershey, Home Depot and MillerCoors.

State lobby groups like Wisconsin Manufacturers & Commerce and the Appleton-based Wisconsin Paper Council also support the bill.

While the safety effects can be debated, there is no denying the lack of funds for repairing the nation's aging bridges.

The U.S. has a \$70.9 billion backlog of bridge work, and heavier trucks could make the situation much worse, said Andrew Herrmann, president of the American Society of Civil Engineers.

"You have the prospect of shortening the lives of our bridges," Herrmann said. "The trucks with their heavy loads are really what erodes our bridges faster. We're lacking the funds right now to upgrade them."

Equipped for heavy loads

Even without the bill's approval, huge numbers of overweight trucks already pass through Wisconsin.

Their owners paid \$5.5 million for 62,000 overweight and oversize permits in 2011, according to the state Department of Transportation, in part to offset damage to roads and bridges.

If Congress allows heavier trucks on U.S. highways, many could pass through the state as a matter of course, without a permit. However, the bill includes a new heavy-vehicle tax of up to \$800 per year.

But heavier trucks don't necessarily pose a threat to the concrete, steel and other weight-bearing components of roads and bridges, an official said.

"Distributing weight over a bigger area can be done by making a truck longer, or adding axles," said Steve Krieser, executive assistant at the DOT. "That's the solution set in this bill, to add a sixth axle."

Krieser said the state's interstate system is prepared to handle the heavier loads. DOT regularly issues permits for loads exceeding 350,000 pounds.

A sixth axle would more than offset the additional weight, said Sean McNally, a spokesman for the American Trucking Associations.

"A good way to think of it is, you're standing on two feet instead of one," he said.

"The 97,000 pounds on six axles configuration is consistent with offsetting the wear and tear on bridges, and, in fact, it takes trucks off the road."

If passed, MillerCoors estimates it would need 2,000 fewer trucks each week, eliminating more than a million weekly vehicle miles in the United States.

Craig Thompson, who heads the Transportation Development Association of Wisconsin, said the group is hesitant to support the trucking bill without funding to support infrastructure.

"I see the reason for this bill and the desire to move more efficiently. On the other hand, we haven't been maintaining our existing infrastructure," Thompson said. "The increased limits will add to that dilemma. We need to invest in the system."

The bill affects federal highways but undoubtedly would have a ripple effect on other roads.

Outagamie County Highway Commissioner Al Geurts said the county is stringent with permits for loads heavier than 80,000 pounds on county roads, especially in the spring thaw when the ground is soft and spongy.

"Most trips generate from a local road," Geurts said. "If there are 97,000-pound loads in our area, it certainly could have an impact on us."