
Testimony of
BILL FARRELL
OWNER, BILL FARRELL, LLC
MISSOULA, MONTANA

Before the
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HIGHWAYS AND TRANSIT

Regarding
TRUCK WEIGHTS & LENGTHS
ASSESSING THE IMPACTS OF EXISTING LAWS & REGULATIONS

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Submitted by



Owner-Operator Independent Drivers Association
1 NW OOIDA Drive
Grain Valley, Missouri 64029
Phone: 1-800-444-5791
Fax: (816) 427-4468

Good morning Chairman Defazio, Ranking Member Duncan and distinguished members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for inviting me to testify on a matter that is extremely important to our nation's small business trucking professionals.

My name is Bill Farrell. I am the owner and namesake of a small business trucking company in Missoula, Montana. I have been involved with the trucking industry for the better part of 4 decades. Over the past 37 years I have driven truck as a company employee and as an independent owner-operator, have worked as a solo driver as well as in a team driving operation and have logged well over 2 million miles without a chargeable accident. I have also owned and managed a small fleet of trucks and currently own 7 trucks and 11 trailers, driving one of the units myself and hiring out the other driver positions. I served for 8 years as a Montana State Senator, and am past President and Chairman of the Montana Motor Carriers Association. I have been an active member of the Owner-Operator Independent Drivers Association for more than 32 years.

OOIDA is a not-for-profit corporation established in 1973, with its principal place of business in Grain Valley, Missouri. OOIDA is the national trade association representing the interests of independent owner-operators and professional drivers on all issues that affect small-business truckers. The more than 162,000 members of OOIDA are small-business men and women in all 50 states who collectively own and operate more than 260,000 individual heavy-duty trucks. One-truck motor carriers represent nearly half the total number of active motor carriers operating in the United States while approximately 96 percent of active motor carriers operate 20 or fewer trucks.

The Association actively promotes the views of small business truckers through its interaction with state and federal regulatory agencies, legislatures, the courts, other trade associations and private entities to advance an equitable business environment and safe working conditions for commercial drivers.

On average, OOIDA members operate their vehicles over 100,000 miles on this nation's highways each year. Unquestionably, they have the most at stake when it comes to highway safety. Their lives and livelihoods literally depend on it.

Truckers such as OOIDA members know from firsthand experience that further increases in sizes and weights of commercial motor vehicles can endanger highway users and hasten the deterioration of our nation's roads and bridges. As such, OOIDA has long been an opponent of increases to federal truck size or weight standards.

Advocates of increased size and weight limits point to productivity and environmental benefits that are allegedly associated with these vehicles. They ignore both the safety risks and the added strain on highway infrastructure that these vehicles present. These factors more than offset any theoretical productivity or environmental gains.

Under the guise of enhanced productivity, some carriers and shippers incessantly push for ever increasing size and weight limits while largely ignoring the dire safety implications.

OOIDA believes that the economic benefits enjoyed by a few would pale in comparison to the increased costs associated with loss of life and property; accelerated deterioration of equipment and the highway system; and developing, implementing and complying with the inevitable imposition of new rules and operational restrictions.

Proposals such as increasing allowable vehicle weights from 80,000 pounds to 97,000 pounds may be described by some as a minor change, but could have a dramatic impact on the safety and structural integrity of some federal aid highways.

SAFETY

To allow vehicle size to increase beyond current Federal limits would seriously jeopardize the safety of commercial drivers and the motoring public. Vehicle stability, mobility and maneuverability would be substantially reduced resulting in a likely reversal of a commercial vehicle safety record that has been improving for more than a decade.

The type of configuration currently being advocated by proponents of heavier trucks, 97,000 pounds gross weight on 6 axles, presents a serious handling issue due to the fact that adding a third axle to the trailer will increase the maximum allowable trailer weight to 51,000 pounds, compared to 34,000 to 40,000 pounds now. The trailer weight would then exceed the allowable weight of 46,000 pounds on the tractor creating a dangerous kinetic force that could easily push the tractor out of control when attempting to stop on icy, snowy and wet road surfaces. Add to that descending a steep mountain grade in the same conditions and even an experienced veteran driver will surely be challenged to keep the vehicle under control.

Driving of commercial motor vehicles is an increasingly complex task. In today's environment, drivers must not only understand the handling characteristics of vehicles they operate, they must also be aware of issues such as cargo securement and be able to deal with realities of highway congestion and careless operators of the other vehicles with whom they must share the roads. As the collective number of miles travelled by commercial motor vehicles continues to grow, it is a tribute to the abilities of the commercial drivers that the corresponding number of highway fatalities related to trucks has not grown.

Stress induced driver fatigue is compounded significantly when operating larger and heavier vehicles. The already-stressful commercial driving task would be heightened to dangerous levels with increases to current truck size and weight standards. Stress induced driver fatigue compounds significantly in proportion to increased adversity in the driving environment. Vehicle size and handling characteristics are a very important component of that environment.

Heavier weight adversely affects vehicle stability, increases stopping distances, exacerbates brake fade on downgrades and slows the vehicle's ascent on hills. In many cases center of gravity rises in correspondence with heavier allowable weight limits increasing the risk of vehicle rollover. This danger compounds significantly on vehicles with multiple trailers.

ROADWAY & EQUIPMENT DETERIORATION

Increasing truck size and weight would accelerate the deterioration of the nation's highways and bridges. Many routes as well as pickup and delivery points would become totally inaccessible without substantial, costly upgrades to accommodate vehicles larger or heavier than currently allowed under the Federal rules.

In addition to the amplified damage to roadways caused by heavier and longer equipment that has been described by other witnesses this morning, increased axle combinations that would be necessitated by weight increases will boost the damage to road surfaces related to “scuffing” which is a phenomenon associated with certain axle configurations where the vehicle’s tires drag across the road surface when turning. Scuffing is most prevalent in configurations where a trailer is equipped with a group of three or more axles – just the type of configuration being primarily advocated by proponents of increased sizes and weights. Scuffing is especially damaging to paved surfaces in hot weather, a condition under which one can physically see the pavement buckle and roll up under the massive stress.

As the size of vehicles increase, the number of highways and bridges that are designed to accommodate them become fewer. What the trucking industry and the nation needs is more available capacity on our highway networks, not less, that has the design capability to allow the free flow of cross-country commercial traffic to pick-up and delivery points. Considering the current financial dilemmas being faced by the federal Highway Trust Fund and state transportation budgets as well as the overall condition of our nation’s highways and bridges, the last thing we need is to accelerate the deterioration of our infrastructure.

Places that are big enough for commercial vehicles to park where drivers can get needed rest are already in short supply. Rest areas and many truck parking areas are not designed for vehicles any larger than those allowed under current Federal law. The size of access routes to many pick-up and delivery points, and room to maneuver within various loading and unloading areas are limited. If vehicle size continues to increase, many areas could become totally inaccessible to those vehicles without substantial and costly upgrading of the infrastructure.

Increases to allowable weight standards will also hasten the deterioration of trucking equipment. Strain on the engine and other drive train components, structural stresses on frames and suspensions, and accelerated tire and brake wear are just a few issues that are caused by hauling heavier loads. While these issues may not be of great concern to large corporate motor carriers who turnover their equipment on a regular basis, it would correspond to significant cost increases for small business truckers that comprise the vast majority of the trucking industry in the U.S. Upgrading to vehicles equipped with heavier-duty components is a cost prohibitive proposition for small businesses. Furthermore, the increased wear on equipment is not only a costly maintenance issue, but also a serious safety concern.

UNIFORMITY

National uniformity in truck size and weight regulation is of the utmost importance in assuring the free flow of goods throughout the nation. A significant portion of motor carriers operate cross-country, on multiple highways, through many different states. The typical OOIDA member operates over irregular routes in more than 23 states each year.

National uniformity is imperative to ensure the unimpeded flow of interstate truck transportation. Past experience proves that when decisions affecting interstate movements are left to the discretion of the individual states, including truck size and weight, the result is a total lack of uniformity and as the Congress has previously stated, "an impediment to the free flow of interstate commerce."

State and local governments also have an obligation to protect the safety and investment of their citizens. Their economies depend on the trucking industry to provide essential transportation services. OOIDA believes that the safety of the motoring public, and the transportation needs of all citizens and their communities can best be balanced through a uniform national network of highways with reasonably, consistent size and weight limitations.

The obstacle presented by the Midwestern "barrier states" in the late 1970's and early 1980's is just one example of the need for national size and weight uniformity. Shippers of high density goods located in the 80,000 pound states expected carriers to load to the maximum allowable gross weight without regard that the truck must travel to or through these barrier states where vehicle weight limits were significantly lower. Length laws also varied. It took Federal legislation to force states to recognize a uniform size and weight standard on certain highways, but even then the uniformity aspects were short lived.

No sooner than federal length limits required states to allow use of trailers of 48 feet in length, a relative handful of shippers and motor carrier interests began targeting individual state legislatures to authorize use of 53 foot and even longer trailers. Individual legislatures in many states are no match for the high pressure lobbying techniques that can be exerted by powerful interests within their states. These lawmakers inevitably acquiesce to economic and political interests that have minimal or no regard for the longevity of the highway system or any negative highway safety aspects that may result from their actions. And so, the upward ratcheting of truck sizes and weights would continue pitting one state against another.

Ironically, once shippers become aware that bigger trailers (or equipment) are available, they routinely request such larger equipment even in instances where their cargo or shipments could easily fit into smaller trailers. Oftentimes these shippers are totally unaware and largely unconcerned as to which states or routes these trucks can legally operate in or on. As things stand, shippers often require a 53' trailer but, in most cases, shipments do not fill up the whole trailer. Most loads could be handled by 48' trailers, but 53' trailers have become common place in the industry.

Currently trailer length laws vary in several states. This issue is complicated further by varying king-pin laws enacted in some states. Additionally, there is no uniform method for measuring king-pin distance.

A continued, if not enhanced federal role is imperative to protect the safety of highway users by, among other things, containing truck size and weight within discreet limits. However, if federal size and weight limits are increased, the Association believes that even more federal oversight of an industry already heavily burdened by regulation would be necessary. Enhanced equipment specifications and exacting driver requirements would be essential, requiring a multitude of new regulations.

NON-DIVISIBLE LOADS

The Association is also opposed to the issuance of any divisible load weight permits. The practice of issuing overweight permits has become abusive in various jurisdictions. The permits are often issued not on the basis of necessity, but on the basis of economic favoritism to certain industries. Overweight permitting practices of this nature amounts to little more than unwarranted aid to select, politically powerful shippers. The trucking industry and motoring public shoulder the burden of compensating for the costs of repairing the corresponding damage caused to the infrastructure, not to mention the increased safety risks associated with these types of loads.

There is no justification for granting an overweight permit in the case of a divisible load. A divisible load is, by definition, capable of being carried on more than one vehicle. The only reason for not doing so would be to economically benefit a certain shipper. The Association feels that consideration of the convenience of or cost to a shipper is wholly inappropriate in issuing an overweight permit. Overweight permits should only be issued in those rare circumstances when an overweight load cannot be physically subdivided into a series of smaller shipments that would not damage the highways or compromise highway safety.

OOIDA also believes strongly that there should be no special provisions by commodity or operation beyond over-dimensional and overweight permits for non-divisible loads. Historically, truck size and/or weight increases initially instituted to benefit an exclusive few shippers and/or carriers quickly become the new standard which all carriers must emulate in order to remain competitive.

Generally speaking, OOIDA is opposed to exemptions from size and weight limitations for any vehicles. Assuming that existing standards have been established based on sound engineering and safety principles, allowing exemptions for select vehicles contravenes the validity of those principles.

CONCLUSION

The Association is opposed to any increase in the Federal size and weight limits. The Federal, State and local government interest is to safeguard the lives and property of highway users, to

provide uniform access and regulations, and to protect the public investment in the nation's highway system.

Stability, mobility and maneuverability are substantially reduced on bigger and heavier trucks. The larger and heavier the vehicle, the more problems it has interacting with other vehicles on the highway. Increases to current standards could seriously jeopardize the safety of both automobile and commercial truck drivers.

If truck size and weight restrictions are set aside, thousands of smaller motor carriers would be placed at a severe competitive disadvantage since only the very large carriers would have the means to quickly make the change to bigger equipment. A select few shippers may benefit, however, it is highly doubtful that the public would gain any economic relief or environmental benefit from those shipper's ability to utilize larger vehicles.

Short term, limited economic benefits enjoyed by a few would pale in comparison to the increased costs associated with loss of life and property; accelerated deterioration of equipment and the highway system; and developing, implementing and complying with the inevitable imposition of new rules and operational restrictions. If weights are increased, the already limited number of viable routes available to commercial motor vehicles would further be diminished. Efficiency in the trucking industry would be lost, not gained.

Thank you again Chairman DeFazio and Congressman Duncan for the opportunity to testify before the Subcommittee. I look forward to the dialogue, and will be happy to answer any questions that you may have.