

[Home](#) » [Fleet Management](#) » [Feature](#) » [Lifting the load: Truck weight limits](#)

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## Lifting the load: Truck weight limits

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### Increasing federal truck weight limits could boost efficiency and profits, but not everyone agrees

Weight is a very big deal to Jason Hancock. As president of Hancock Petroleum — a third-generation, family-owned fuel hauler — he says his company's tractor-trailers haul the maximum weight allowed in the western province of Alberta, Canada: 63,500 kilograms, which is equivalent to 140,000 lbs.

Without that 140,000-lb. carrying capacity, Hancock says he'd be stuck between a rock and a hard place, unable to haul loads cost-effectively out of **Fort McMurray** ([http://maps.google.com/maps?f=q&source=s\\_q&hl=en&geocode=&q=Fort+McMurray&sl=39.216267,-94.560845&sspn=0.01054,0.019312&ie=UTF8&ll=56.832447,-111.225586&spn=0.952679,2.471924&z=9&iwloc=addr](http://maps.google.com/maps?f=q&source=s_q&hl=en&geocode=&q=Fort+McMurray&sl=39.216267,-94.560845&sspn=0.01054,0.019312&ie=UTF8&ll=56.832447,-111.225586&spn=0.952679,2.471924&z=9&iwloc=addr)), where oil-rich tar sands are extracted and processed.

"It would require more equipment, manpower, additional operating expense, and yearly safety maintenance expenses if we were limited to the 80,000 lbs. the U.S. allows," he explains, pointing out that the company runs its trucks 24/7 whenever possible by slip-seating drivers, putting over 18,600 mi. per month on its equipment. "In fact, I definitely would like to haul more weight in some applications of my business as it cuts operating expenses. The tractors we are running have 500- to 600-hp. engines and can pull just about anything."

For those very same reasons, U.S. shippers and trucking carriers alike are pushing for a 17,000-lb. hike in federal bridge and road weight limits for commercial vehicles — from the current 80,000-lb. limit to 97,000 lbs.

### MORE WEIGHT, FEWER TRUCKS

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"An increase in load limits on federal highways will draw heavy traffic away from state and county roads and away from intersections in population centers where the chance of a collision with a car or pedestrian is much greater," says Mike Branch, manager of forest sustainability at **Smurfit-Stone Container Corp.** (<http://www.smurfit.com:8080/content/>), and also chairman of the **Agricultural Transportation Efficiency Coalition** (<http://ag-haul.org/>).

"Also, by consolidating loads, that means fewer total trucks on all of the roads and highways," he notes. "Adding fully equipped axles to trucks and corresponding to the extra weight will hold down braking distances and keep the ground pressure on federal highways the same."

The ability to haul more weight could also result in major fuel and wear-and-tear savings for truckers, especially those serving the agricultural, forestry, petroleum and other heavy-haul markets.

"Increasing vehicle weights to 97,000 lbs., if realized, could mean California's fruit and vegetable industry has the potential to experience 160,000 fewer truck trips — equal to 48 million mi. — each harvest," adds Ed Yates, president and CEO of the **California League of Food Processors (CLFP)** (<http://www.clfp.com/>). "Add that to the miles that would be saved by the many other agricultural crops hauled each year and the numbers would be even more impressive."

From a technical perspective, it wouldn't take much to upgrade a tractor-trailer so it could haul 17,000 extra lbs., says Darrin Roth, director of highway operations for the **American Trucking Assns. (ATA)** ([/topics/ata](#)). Adding an extra axle to the trailer would be enough to disperse the impact of that extra weight, preventing damage to roadway pavement, while providing additional braking power so stopping distances are not compromised.

"No change is needed to the horsepower or torque of current engines to haul an extra 17,000 lbs.," he says. "The engine models and trucks out there today are more than capable of handling more weight."

Not so fast, says Todd Spencer, executive vp of the **Owner-Operator Independent Drivers Assn. (OOIDA)** ([/topics/ooida](#)). "That much extra weight completely changes the handling characteristics of the tractor-trailer, how it corners, how it maneuvers, etc.," he explains. "It makes driving an 18-wheeler that much more challenging, and we already don't train drivers adequately anymore before we put them out on the road behind the wheel of a tractor-trailer."

More carrying capacity also doesn't compute from a dollars-and-cents perspective for truckers, Spencer claims. "The last time we changed weight limits was back in 1982 [when all states adopted 80,000 lbs. as the weight limit on all highways] and virtually overnight every federal and state fee associated with truck weights doubled or even tripled," he says, thus almost negating any potential gain in revenue from higher tractor-trailer carrying capacity. "Economically for truckers, raising weight limits would be suicide."