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House bills would alter trucking weights, sizes

Dallas Business Journal - by [Jeff Bounds](#) Staff writer

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An old debate about the appropriate weight and size of commercial trucks could come to a head this congressional session with the introduction of two diametrically opposed bills.

House Bill 1618, the "Safe Highways and Infrastructure Preservation Act," would limit truck sizes and weights on all roads in the National Highway System to what was in place as of June 1, 2008: 53 feet for trailers and 80,000 pounds for trucks. The only exception would be if a given state allowed larger or heavier trucks as of that date.

The legislation was introduced March 19 by Rep. James McGovern, D-Mass., in the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee.

At the other end of the spectrum is House Bill 1799, which would allow states to boost the weight of single-trailer trucks up to 97,000 pounds on interstate highways. Introduced by Rep. Mike Michaud, D-Maine, the "Safe and Efficient Transportation Act of 2009" would require such trucks to have a sixth axle, which supposedly allows for better braking and handling while allowing the truck's weight to be better distributed, reducing road damage. Commercial trucks in the U.S. normally have five axles.

Michaud's bill, which was introduced this week, also raises the Overweight Vehicle Tax to as much as \$800 annually, up from \$550 a year. That tax helps pay for any extra damage that very heavy trucks may cause on bridges.

"If you're adding another 17,000 pounds of freight that would move at the same price, that's a big economic advantage for (companies) who have heavy loads," says Rich Eberhart, president of Southwest Freight International, a Dallas trucking company.

Safety argument

The crux of the argument centers on issues like safety, the environment and the impact to roads and bridges. In a position paper, the American Forest & Paper Association, a Washington, D.C., trade group representing the forest products industry, argues that boosting truck weights will ease traffic congestion and cut pollution, as well as improve highway safety because trucks will travel fewer miles en masse.

But Rob McCulloch, transportation advocate at the Washington, D.C., headquarters of the environmental group Environment America, says one study shows that allowing heavier trucks has the "perverse affect" of eventually having more trucks on the road, because the trucking industry can operate more cost-effectively and thus increase its business.

McCulloch maintains that rail is more environmentally friendly.

Patrick Hiatte, general director of corporate communications at BNSF Railway Co. in Fort Worth, says the railroad doesn't have a problem with heavy rigs being on the road "as long as user fees reflect the additional highway maintenance costs required by heavier trucks."

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Jake Dean

LIGHT ON HIS FEET: Rich Eberhart of Southwest Freight International says increased truck weights would be a boost to trucking companies.

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