

# Congress Unlikely to Pass Truck Size Bill, Oberstar Says

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WASHINGTON — The chairman of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee said last week it was unlikely a recently introduced bill to expand truck size-and-weight rules would move forward this session.

Rep. James Oberstar (D-Minn.) also expressed doubts about how well a pilot program for larger trucks would test real-world conditions.

"I think that it would be the subject of a hearing next year," Oberstar said of the Safe Highways and Infrastructure Preservation Act, or SHIPA, which was introduced Oct. 23. "I think we want to give the issue its full airing and have language ready for the next authorization cycle — I don't think we'd bring that up separately. I look forward to being very strong on size-and-weight limitation."

The SHIPA legislation was brought to the House floor by Rep. James McGovern (D-Mass.) and 18 co-sponsors. Similar legislation has been introduced without success several times previously.

The bill would expand the current truck size-and-weight limits of 53 feet and 80,000 pounds beyond the "interstate highway system" and to the "national highway system," regardless of current state laws. Grandfather clauses allowing larger trucks in several specific areas would be included.

According to the Department of Transportation, the National Highway System contains more than 160,000 miles of roads and highways, dwarfing the roughly 47,000 miles of interstate highways.

"SHIPA takes away the flexibility states need to save lives, reduce highway congestion, lower vehicle emissions and promote economic growth," said Darrin Roth, director, highway operations, at American Trucking Associations.

"Without justification, the bill puts Congress in charge of determining local traffic laws, something Congress is simply incapable of doing," Roth said.

"Given the great diversity of needs, and the vastly different driving conditions on the nation's highways, states need more flexibility to determine appropriate size-and-weight regulations, not less."

Tom White, a spokesman for the Association of American Railroads, said he expected ATA to stand by its previous agreement with the rail group.

"In 2003, the AAR and the ATA reached an agreement on truck size and weight. The agreement requires both organizations to oppose any changes in federal policy on truck size-and-weight limits until expiration of the agreement in 2009," White said.

Oberstar said raising truck weights on the nation's highways was problematic because the system is already stretched. He noted that "well over 50%" of the bridges on the NHS were built in the 1960s, when there were 2 million trucks and about 90 million cars — compared with 235 million cars and 7 million trucks today.

"There's enormous pressure on our roads and our bridges that didn't exist 40 years ago," Oberstar said. "So I think we have to be ever more careful about adding weight to our road and bridge structures," especially in light of the collapse of the Interstate 35W bridge in Minneapolis.

Earlier this year, Oberstar said he would support a pilot test of larger, heavier trucks in a controlled environment of segregated lanes. Last week, however, he told reporters such a test may be difficult to carry out.

"Pilot testing is something we're still working on," Oberstar said. "It's very difficult to work out a real-world, pragmatic pilot project that will give engineers the opportunity to test the various items."

He added, "If you're doing a pilot program on, say, 100,000-pound trucks or 97,000-pound trucks, one of the concerns is that you're getting a much higher level of surveillance for safety purposes. Those trucks are going to be operated . . . very safely. That doesn't mean that in the real world if you lifted all trucks to that level, that similar conditions would be obtained."