

Truck Size & Weight

The federal weight limit of heavy trucks in the U.S. is 80,000 pounds, or roughly the weight of a 737 airplane. At this size, this most common truck on the road today only pays for about 80% of the damage it inflicts on roads and bridges.

At the same time, nearly half of the nation's bridges are at least 50 years old or considered structurally deficient, according to the Federal Highway Administration. And U.S. roads, the upkeep of which is publicly funded through outdated fuel taxes, received a "D" grade in the most recent Infrastructure Report Card from the American Society of Civil Engineers. Bigger trucks would be bad economic policy, and lawmakers should continue to oppose federal weight and size increases.

In Brief

Congress should reject proposals to allow longer and heavier trucks, including needless "pilot projects," that would increase the cost of maintaining highways and bridges, create more highway gridlock, worsen emissions, and divert freight from rail.

Background

Every year, Congress is lobbied by shipper groups that want a federal mandate forcing states to allow heavier trucks, longer trucks or trucks pulling more trailers—or as is currently the case, they seek congressional approval of bigger trucks under the guise of a 'pilot project' for states to 'test' heavier or longer trucks on the motorists in their states.

There is already abundant data showing what would happen if heavier trucks were allowed: the U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT) found in 2016 that 91,000-pound trucks would cause \$1.1 billion in immediate damage to bridges and \$1.2-\$1.8 billion in pavement damage every year. The Transportation Research Board has also proposed a "TSW Research Plan" to update this analysis and Congress reaffirmed in 2021 and 2023 that no changes in truck weight or length policy should be made until this research is completed. The so-called "pilot project" the current Congress is being asked to authorize is nothing more than a back-door truck size and weight increase.

Why It Matters

Since heavy trucks on the road today already fail to cover the full cost of their damage, heavier or longer trucks would deepen this subsidy. At 91,000 pounds, a 14% increase over the current limit, a heavy truck would only cover about 55% of its impact to roads and bridges according to USDOT.

Despite what proponents say, bigger trucks have never meant fewer trucks. Since Congress last raised truck weights, the number of trucks registered in the U.S. and the miles they drive have increased by 91%. Raising limits now would mean millions more tons of freight on already crowded highways at a time when we're not keeping up with existing infrastructure and when the average American already spends 54 hours a year in traffic.

Every ton diverted from rail also means higher fuel consumption and higher emissions. Because rail is 3-4 times more efficient than trucks, trains today move 40% of long-distance freight while contributing only 1.7% of U.S. transportation-related emissions. But bigger trucks would alter this landscape, with USDOT finding that a 91,000-pound weight increase would divert 4.4 million rail carloads and intermodal units annually.

The most common truck on the road today only pays for about 80% of its damage to roads and bridges.



Longer and heavier trucks would cover even less.

[Source: USDOT]