



## PUT A STOP TO BIGGER TRUCKS

A proposed increase to semitrailer weights and lengths presents a safety risk, and would result in billions in infrastructure costs

By Sheriff Alex Hodge

**L**ike many of you, I have spent the majority of my career in law enforcement—nearly a decade as sheriff of Jones County (Mississippi) and 12 years as a state trooper previously. Also like you, protecting and serving the people of my county and state continues to be my top priority—it is what I was called to do—and that is why I am extremely concerned with some of the proposals on Capitol Hill that would undermine our ability to do our jobs.

I'm talking about the proposals right now in Washington, D.C., that would increase the size and weight of tractor-trailers on our nation's roadways. One special-interest group is pushing to increase the weight of trucks from the current 80,000-pound maximum limit to 91,000 pounds, while another group is pushing to increase the maximum length

of double-trailer trucks to 91 feet. These proposals would put motorists at risk, as well as the law enforcement officers who work crashes on the side of the road.

This is not the first time we have been confronted with the threat of bigger trucks. In 2015, I traveled to meet with my state's congressional delegation to voice our opposition to heavier and longer trucks as the president of the Mississippi Sheriffs' Association. Members of Congress listened to our concerns and voted down increases to both truck size and weight, with the House voting to reject heavier trucks by a 236-187 vote, and the Senate voting 56-31 to reject longer double-trailer trucks.

However, those lobbying for increases in truck size and weight continue to push forward this year as if their defeat in 2015 never

**“Profit margins should never obstruct the public's best interests in highway safety and infrastructure preservation.”**

happened. We, as law enforcement leaders, must continue to oppose these dangerous trucks in much the same way.

Considering my own strong opposition to heavier and longer trucks, you may not expect to learn that I also own a trucking company. That's right—my transportation company currently has 16 trucks in operation, and with an increase in truck size or



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weight, I certainly could haul more freight and increase my profit margins. And yet, I still strongly oppose any such increases.

Let me take you back to my childhood, when I grew up in the seat of an 18-wheeler next to my father. I witnessed many occasions while he was operating his rig when someone would pull out in front of him, and he would need to react quickly to avoid a collision. I can only guess what would have happened if he had been hauling five more tons during one of those maneuvers.

Now that I oversee my own trucking operation, I know firsthand what it takes to be responsible on the highway. We do not need to be selfish; we need to be safe.

My experience on patrol also tells me that bigger trucks are a bad idea, and decades of research back me up. At the request of Congress, the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) reviewed 30 years of academic studies and then gathered data from states where some of these bigger trucks currently operate. Last year, it delivered its final report to Congress on truck size and weight laws and regulations, and recommended against any heavier or longer trucks.

The findings on heavier trucks are staggering. In Washington state—where 91,000-pound, six-axle trucks currently operate—the DOT found crash rates that were 47 percent higher than today’s 80,000-pound trucks.

Further, the analysis found that trucks weighing over 80,000 pounds have 18 percent higher brake violation rates and

higher overall out-of-service violation rates. As law enforcement leaders, we know what this means: Heavier weights mean more dangerous trucks, and research backs that up. The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety published a study in December 2016 that found a truck with *any* out-of-service violation was more than three times more likely to be involved in a crash. Heavier trucks have bad news written all over them.

When it comes to increasing truck lengths by 10 feet, the DOT found in its study that longer double-trailer trucks, called “Double 33s,” need 22 more feet of stopping distance than the current double-trailer trucks. A truck driver’s job is hard enough, but adding braking distance only makes their job that much more difficult and dangerous. The analysis also found that twin-trailer configurations have 58 percent higher out-of-service violation rates. If that wasn’t enough, the 2000 DOT study found that multi-trailer trucks have an 11 percent higher fatal crash rate than single-trailer trucks.

The most recent DOT study also determined that heavier and longer trucks would significantly increase infrastructure damage. Increasing truck weights to 91,000 pounds would mean another \$1.1 billion in bridge maintenance and construction costs, and increasing truck weights to 97,000 pounds would double that to \$2.2 billion. Longer double-trailer trucks would add another \$1.1 billion, and these estimates don’t even include the damage to state and local infrastructure. In my home state of Mississippi, nearly 35 percent of our bridges are in fair/poor condition. We don’t have the budget to maintain and repair our infrastructure today, so it makes no sense to

compound these problems with even more damaging tractor-trailers.

While I don’t think that the handful of companies pushing for heavier and longer trucks have ill intentions, I believe that their only goal, quite frankly, is to increase the profit margins of their businesses. However, those profit margins should never obstruct the public’s best interests in highway safety and infrastructure preservation.

We have an opportunity to stop this legislation, but there’s no time to waste. The special interests pushing for truck size and weight increases are promoting their proposals right now on Capitol Hill. Please reach out to your congressional delegation today and ask that they oppose any legislation that would allow heavier and longer trucks. I’m confident they will appreciate your expertise and opinion as a law enforcement leader. ★

*Alex Hodge is Sheriff of Jones County (Mississippi).*

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