

Bigger Trucks; Smaller Autos

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Another recent drive on I-81 in Virginia has stirred my mind to thinking about the renewed effort of proponents of bigger, longer, heavier trucks. It is a never-ending campaign by certain trucking companies and some large freight shippers to seek an increase in permitted truck weights, up to 100,000 pounds, a 25% increase over the current federal limit. The irony here is that motorists are being encouraged to drive smaller, lighter cars. One fifty-ton truck might equal thirty medium-sized autos. On top of that, we cannot find the money to adequately maintain the roads and bridges we now have.

Make no mistake about it, North America moves by truck. That's a fact. So, none of the following is delusional in that regard. Moreover, the private U. S. rail industry has forfeited much of the market to trucking, yet the most promising future growth segment of freight rail relies heavily upon trucking to originate and deliver the so-called intermodal cargo, often over very long distances. So we are all in this together.

Nevertheless, the rail industry's trade group, the Association of American Railroads, has - not surprisingly -- come out strongly against the proposed increase in truck weights, fearing the loss of a substantial amount of existing rail freight business. The AAR does not specifically identify business segments at risk of diversion to highway. It is probably not so much their "intermodal"; more likely it would come from some of rail's otherwise "captive" customers, who now cannot afford to ship by highway. This would hit the rails where it really hurts, by eroding their current strong competitive position, otherwise known as pricing power.

Work now underway by VDOT to expand the capacity of I-81 in Virginia, euphemistically called "*truck climbing lanes*", reminds the passing motorist of the huge public cost of accommodating trucks, a cost not shared by the freight-haulers in proportion to their impact. Study after study confirms this, but there has not, to our knowledge, been a proportionate increase in truck taxes in Virginia for fifty years.

What could be done? Using available technology to compute weight-distance user charges, we ought to consider allowing the trucking interests to operate highway rigs that are as large, as heavy, and as long as they wish, subject only to bridge load limitations, provided they pay user fees that are fully allocated, and fully reflect, their direct and indirect user costs. That would include right-of-way acquisition costs, design, construction, maintenance, policing, emergency management, and eventual replacements costs. While such radical action could

increase the volume of truck tonnage, it might also divert some other truck cargo to private rail freight lines, generating for them revenue and income sufficient, one would hope, to access private capital markets and increase freight rail capacity and service. Moreover, the surviving motorists might be spared some part of the inevitable future gas tax increase.

Oh, Santa, are you listening? Happy Holidays to all!

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