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Trucks on federal highways could soon be heavier

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Drivers could share the highways with much heavier trucks if Congress decides that the efficiencies of larger loads trump road damage and safety.

The Safe and Efficient Transportation Act would raise the maximum weight for commercial trucks that routinely travel 100,000 pounds in Texas and most other states.

The current threshold in most places is 80,000 pounds unless the truck has a permit to be overweight.

Supporters of the proposal, including many companies that ship household goods in tractor-trailers, argue that it would decrease fuel use and ultimately keep prices lower for consumers.

About 200 companies have banded together to support the bill as the Coalition for Transportation Productivity -- including Depot and MillerCoors, which operates a large brewery in south Fort Worth.

Critics say heavier trucks would severely damage roads and especially bridges, many of which are crumbling and the nation can't afford. In Tarrant County, 29 bridges had poor scores on their most recent inspections, the *Star-Telegram* after reviewing the National Bridge Inventory.

The review also concluded that, nearly five years after a Minneapolis bridge collapse killed 13 people and injured 145, arguably worse.

Driving safety is also a concern. Bill opponents say a heavier truck needs 25 percent more room to stop. In 2010, crashes killed 3,675 people, up about 9 percent from the year before, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's annual report.

Supporters of the bill, however, say the increased limit would apply only to trucks that have a sixth axle. They say such a truck gives the heavier trucks essentially the same braking capacity as an 80,000-pound truck with five axles.

While the safety effects can be debated, there is no denying the lack of funds for repairing the nation's aging bridges.

The U.S. has a \$70.9 billion backlog of bridge work, and heavier trucks could make the situation much worse, said Andrew Herrmann, president of the American Society of Civil Engineers.

"You have the prospect of shortening the lives of our bridges," Herrmann said. "The trucks with their heavy loads are rattletrains on bridges faster. We're lacking the funds right now to upgrade them."

Trucking on the rise

Even without the bill, record numbers of overweight trucks are already passing through Texas, documents show. Their permits cost \$4,000, in part to offset damage to roads and bridges.

Last year, 590,980 oversize/overweight permits were issued to trucks -- less than 1 percent of overall truck traffic in the state -- for \$114 million for the state's highway and general funds, according to Texas Department of Motor Vehicles records.

If Congress allows heavier trucks on U.S. highways, many could pass through the state as a matter of course, without