

Heavier limits weighed for big rigs on Texas highways

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IRVING - Heavier trucks could soon be allowed on Texas highways as the state prepares for a potentially massive increase in freight shipments across its roadways caused by the expansion of the Panama Canal.

State officials plan to ask federal officials as well as state legislators permission to allow trucks with six axles weighing up to 97,000 pounds on Interstate 45 from Houston to North Texas, Dallas County Judge Clay Jenkins said Wednesday. The current truck weight limit is generally 80,000 pounds on vehicles with five axles, although trucks heavier than that can -- and frequently do -- legally roll on Texas highways if they first pay for overweight permits.

Speaking to a panel at the 15th annual Transportation and Infrastructure Summit in Irving, Jenkins said Texas officials also would seek higher truck weights on a planned outer loop around Dallas and Fort Worth known as Loop 9 - a project that is expected to be built in the Metroplex over roughly the next 20 years. Parts of the loop are already being built in the eastern part of the region.

The idea would be to take advantage of larger container ships moving through the Panama Canal beginning in August 2014, and have those ships make call at ports in Texas instead of their traditional destinations, including Los Angeles and Long Beach, Calif.

"When the new Panama Canal opens up, somebody's going to be a winner and somebody's going to not be a winner," Jenkins said. "We're already behind."

Working together

Jenkins said he and Texas Department of Transportation executive director Phil Wilson had already broached the subject of designating I-45 as a heavy-truck corridor with their counterparts in Washington, in a test project of sorts. However, he said later, no official decision had been made about the test project, and no timetable was set for possibly rolling out the heavier trucks.

State lawmakers also might be asked to approve the higher weight limits during the next regular session that begins in January in Austin, Wilson and Jenkins said.

Taking advantage of increased freight traffic coming to through Texas from the Panama Canal fits in with the state's mission of creating jobs and expanding economic development in and around ports, Wilson, who also spoke at the summit, said later in the day.

"I-45 and Loop 9 is an opportunity to get this state and the Panama Canal working together," Wilson said. "Obviously Dallas-Fort Worth and the Metroplex is going to be a key part of the distribution system. Load limits is something we're exploring right now and would most likely require a federal fix and action from the state Legislature as well."

The Panama Canal is undergoing its biggest expansion since it was completed in 1914. It currently can handle ships up to 106 feet wide, 965 feet long and 39 feet deep, but after expansion will be able to handle ships up to 161 feet wide, 1,200 feet long and 49 feet deep.

Once expansion is complete, ships will be able to carry nearly triple their previous loads. But experts are debating whether those ships will stop in Texas, or instead stick with their traditional stops in the east or west coasts.

Level playing field

Not everyone agrees that canal expansion will be a major benefit for the Gulf Coast. Officials at Fort Worth-based BNSF Railway, for example, believe the impact will be minimal because of time factors. Given the United States' current infrastructure, a shipment going through the canal and arriving at Houston would take 10 days to two weeks longer to reach its destination than a shipment arriving at a West Coast seaport with a rail connection, one BNSF official has said.

A deep-water port is lacking on the U.S. southern shores, with few options for shippers between Los Angeles and Norfolk, Va. The Port of Houston, for example, plans to deepen its berths in front of its container terminals to 45 feet by 2014.

The state transportation department has created a canal stakeholder working group to help with the planning. The group includes BNSF, the Texas Association of Manufacturers, Texas Farm Bureau and Texas Motor Transportation Association.

Although allowing heavier trucks on I-45 could provide an advantage to the Port of Houston -- possibly making it the port of choice for shippers seeking to get their goods to the central U.S. -- other Texas officials have said that any action taken by the state in response to

Panama Canal expansion should create a fair competitive environment for all state ports.

"Texas doesn't need to be picking between Corpus Christi and Houston," Texas Transportation Commissioner Bill Meadows of Fort Worth said in May. "Let them all have their competitive gigs going on."

The working group is putting together a document over the next few months that will spell out the investment needed in Texas to take advantage of Panama Canal expansion - including a possible injection of \$1 billion to \$3.5 billion to prepare roads, rail lines and other components for additional freight.

Critics have said heavier trucks are a safety hazard because they need longer distances to brake in an emergency. But others say that trucks with a sixth axle carrying 97,000 pounds have the same stopping ability as a five-axle truck carrying 80,000 pounds.

Critics also say that the nation's crumbling roads and bridges will decay quicker if exposed to heavier vehicle weights.

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

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