

Senators vote to oppose longer trucks in highway talks

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The Senate voted on Tuesday to instruct its highway bill negotiators to oppose efforts to increase the length of twin-trailer trucks that are allowed on U.S. roads.

Trucking groups are pushing Congress to increase a current limit on the length of double-trailer rigs, from 28 feet to 33 feet, in the highway funding bill, which is the subject of an upcoming conference committee between the House and Senate.

The Senate voted 56-31 to instruct its negotiators to oppose the effort to increase the length of trucks to what are known as "twin 33s."

Supporters of the motion said the House's version of highway bill would override 38 states that have made longer trucks illegal on their roads.

"The question is whether we as a Senate, we as a Congress, we as a federal government are going to mandate to these 38 states that don't allow these to allow them on their roads," Sen. Roger Wicker (R-Miss.) said.

"We have 4,000 people killed every year from these trucks, in all kinds of horrific accidents, and they are not as long as this one," Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) added.

The proposal to increase the length of twin-trailer trucks was included in an earlier appropriations bill for the departments of Transportation and Housing and Urban Development that was passed by the House in June, over the objection of safety advocates. The longer trailer language was also included in an appropriations bill for the agency that was cleared by the Senate Appropriations Committee, and supporters of the provision are now hoping it is added to the highway bill in the upcoming negotiations between the chambers.

Trucking groups have said the twin 33 proposal is a "modest" proposal to increase the amount of cargo that can be shipped in the U.S. on a single trip without requiring drivers to work extra hours.

"We are disappointed the Senate has chosen to vote against this safe and efficient vehicle and in support of fear mongering special interests," the American Trucking Association said in a statement that was provided to The Hill on Tuesday.

"Contrary to the claims of Sens. Wicker and Feinstein, these vehicles – which are already operating safely in several states – will not be operating in urban areas, or even rolling down Main Street, USA," the ATA statement continued. "Much like their cousins of varying size, these twin 33s will be almost exclusively operating on the Interstate Highway System, roads designed for larger vehicles. To say otherwise, is quite simply, distorting the facts to fit an anti-truck agenda."

Opponents of the proposal countered that longer cargo vehicle will make U.S. roads less safe.

"There is a well-financed lobbying effort in Congress by a few select trucking companies to overturn state laws to allow monster-sized trucks pulling two 33 ft. trailers," Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety President Jackie Gillan said in a statement.

"These trucks will be at least as long as an eight-story office building on wheels," Gillan continued. "Big trucks are a big safety problem. Bigger trucks are even a bigger safety problem. Research shows double trailer trucks are more deadly, and the public overwhelmingly opposes them."

-This story was updated on Nov. 13 at 2:09 p.m. to correct an earlier version that misidentified the legislation the longer truck provision was attached to originally.