

THE 97,000-POUND WEIGHT LIMIT

Good for trucking, good for Texas?

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Would raising the 80,000-pound gross vehicle weight limit on Texas state highways be good for Texas trucking, and good for Texas?

Speakers and panelists tried to answer that question during a Heavyweight Container Summit on January 28 in Houston and it's been a hot topic since. The event was sponsored by the Texas Trucking Association and the Texas Coalition for Transportation Productivity.

The summit's topic concerned whether or not Texas should raise its current standard weight limit on state highways. Many states have raised their limits on state highways, while many have received federal exemptions to carry heavier weights on interstates.

TXTA has opposed raising the weight limit in the past. However, a bill by Rep. Rafael Anchia, D-Dallas, in the 2015 legislative session caused the association to move its position to neutral and begin reassessing.

That bill would have increased the maximum weight for trucks carrying ocean-going shipping containers on three-axle trailers to 97,000 pounds. It also would have given the Texas Department of Transportation the ability to limit trucks from traveling over roadways and bridges that could not handle the weight. Finally, it would have imposed a \$7,000 permit fee, 90 percent of which would have been deposited into the State Highway Fund with the other 10 percent deposited into the Texas

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Department of Motor Vehicles Fund.

Filed late in the 2015 session, the bill did not pass. There were too many questions. But the idea will surely surface again during the next legislative session.

The Houston summit gave a divided Texas trucking industry an opportunity to consider whether it will remain neutral or perhaps take another stance. The event included three speakers and four panel discussions. It began with an address by Curtis Whalen with the American Trucking Association's Intermodal Carriers Conference comparing the nation's ports, which was followed by an overview of the heavyweight container issue by Brian Fielkow, CEO of Jetco Delivery. The rest of the morning involved four panel discussions about issues related to infrastructure, shipping, transportation, and local and state regulations. The day ended with an address about highways by John Woodrooffe, former director of the University of Michigan Transportation Research Institute's Commercial Vehicle Research and Policy Program.

Speakers and panelists presented differing views on the subject. Of course, safety is the primary concern. Heavier trucks potentially create more of a danger, but that

danger could be mitigated by improving safety technology and better driver training. Of particular interest is how increasing the weight limit might affect motor carriers' bottom lines. Raising the limit from 80,000 pounds to 97,000 pounds would represent a 30 percent payload increase. Would heavier weight limits result in fewer hauls, or would it make Texas trucking more competitive and therefore increase business for all? How badly does the Port of Houston need higher weight limits to remain competitive with ports in other states? How will heavier trucks affect Texas' highway infrastructure? Finally, how will raising the weight limit affect the public's perception of trucking?

Texas motor carriers were split on raising truck weight limits before the summit. They still are. The good news is that the summit was evidence that TXTA is working to formulate its position on this important issue. A working group is being planned to continue the conversation.

The goal is to be ready before the 2017 session, which starts January 10. As the American Trucking Associations long has pointed out, "Trucks bring it." That won't change. How much they bring, and on what? That might. ★