Testimony of

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On

Truck Weights and Lengths: Assessing the Impacts of Existing Laws and Regulations

Before

U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Highways and Transit, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure

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Introduction:

Chairman DeFazio, Ranking Member Duncan and Members of the Committee, I am David Cole, Commissioner of the Maine Department of Transportation (MaineDOT). Thank you for the invitation to speak today on an issue of significant importance to Maine and our neighboring states and provinces – the impacts of existing laws and regulations related to truck weight and length. This is an issue that has been a focus-area for members of Maine's congressional delegation for many years and one that has the potential to have significant positive impact on highway safety – air quality - and our economy.

It's important to note that although I do serve as Chair of the AASHTO Special Committee on Intermodal Transportation and Economic Expansion, my testimony is offered today on behalf of Governor John Baldacci and the Maine Department of Transportation. They do not reflect any policy decisions of the AASHTO Board of Directors.

Background:

The State of Maine has 22,783 miles of public road of which 8,547 miles are state owned. In Maine, 6-axle combination vehicles are allowed to have a gross vehicle weight (GVW) up to 100,000 pounds on all roads, except for the non-exempt portions of the Interstate System, subject to bridge and road restrictions. On those portions of Interstate 95 from the New Hampshire State line to the northern terminus of the Maine Turnpike, (operated by an independent Authority and built with toll dollars prior to the federal interstate program) the maximum GVW is 80,000 on a minimum of 5-axles. This means that over 20,000 miles of Maine's roads, which are primarily secondary roads, allow 100K six-axle vehicles, while 110 miles of Maine's entire 360 mile Interstate System allows a maximum of 80,000 pound GVW. In addition, the total number of bridges on Maine's entire Interstate System, including the Maine Turnpike, is 344, compared to 2,722 bridges on the remainder of the system.

Under today's restrictions, all of Maine's Interstate highways except for the Maine Turnpike and I-95 in Kittery are subject to federal truck weight limits that are lower than those allowed on the vast majority of Maine highways. As a result, heavier trucks must divert from Interstate highways to state primary and secondary roads that pass through a number of Maine towns and villages. The impacts include less efficient movement of freight that burns more diesel – negatively affecting air quality, the cost to shippers making them less competitive, and the sustainability of our highways and bridges. Most importantly, it has been demonstrated that it unnecessarily makes our communities less safe. The state has two possible options for mitigating these impacts:

1) Congressional action to exempt the remainder of Maine's Interstate from federal weight limit, thereby allowing higher state truck weight limits on the remainder of Maine's Interstate System; or,

2) Reducing the state weight limit on state jurisdiction roads, thereby removing the need for truck diversion.

In 2002, the Maine Department of Transportation (MDOT) contracted with Wilbur Smith Associates to examine the impact that a federal weight exemption on currently non-exempt portions of Maine's Interstate System would have on safety, pavement and bridges. My comments summarize the safety, economic, environmental and infrastructure costs and benefits of the two options presented above.

SAFETY

According to a recent MaineDOT study, federal exemption legislation would reduce Maine's crash rate by more than three crashes each year by shifting heavy truck traffic to safer roadways.[1]

- The study noted that the crash-rate experience of 5- and 6-axle combination trucks was seven to ten times higher on Maine's non-Interstate highways than on the Maine Turnpike, which is currently exempted from federal weight limits.
- The study noted that this experience is consistent with national findings that rural Interstate highways are three or four times safer than rural secondary roads.
- A federal truck weight exemption would remove an estimated 7.8 million loaded truck-miles of travel from Maine's primary and secondary road system each year, diverting the traffic to the safer Interstate Highway system. Fewer trucks mean reduced exposure to crash situations, resulting in safer highways for all users.
- Allowing heavier trucks to use the Interstate would also reduce overall travel time, thereby saving driver hours and reducing the tired trucker problem.

ECONOMY

Maine's businesses are at a competitive disadvantage with businesses in surrounding jurisdictions due to the current lower weight limits on Maine's Interstate system. Enacting a federal truck weight exemption would help Maine's businesses level the playing field, by reducing overall transportation costs.

- Allowing the use of loaded 6 axle combination trucks on the Interstate would increase payloads by nearly 40 percent over that carried by the 5 axle combination truck, thereby reducing the number of trucks needed to transport given levels of commodity and reducing the overall impact on Maine's transportation infrastructure.

[1] Wilbur Smith Associates; "Final Report; Study of the Impacts Caused by Exempting the Maine Turnpike and the New Hampshire Turnpike from Federal Truck Weight Limits"; June 2004.

- A federal truck weight exemption would reduce the amount of fuel required to transport a given volume of load in Maine by approximately 6 percent.
- A federal truck weight exemption would enhance the trade corridor between Canada and the northeastern U.S. by eliminating the current 200 mile truck weight limit "gap" that exists along non-exempt portions of Maine's Interstate system.
- The federal truck weight exemption would lower transportation costs by decreasing truck mileage, fuel usage and reduce dependence on foreign oil, resulting in cost savings for consumers; especially those challenged by higher inflation in the states most impoverished rural areas.

INFRASTRUCTURE

The current disparity in truck weight limits often forces heavier weight trucks onto the state's primary and secondary highway systems, which are not built to the same structural standards as the Interstate highway system. According to the U.S. DOT's Comprehensive Truck Size and Weight Study, the load equivalency factor of a 6-axle 97,000 pound combination truck compared to a 5-axle 80,000 pound combination truck is less due to the advantage of adding an additional axle to offset the weight increase and the reduced number of trips required by the loaded vehicle to transport a given load.

- MaineDOT study findings indicate that an Interstate truck weight exemption would save the state of Maine between $1.3 million and $2 million annually in bridge and pavement costs.
- A companion MaineDOT study of the currently exempted Maine Turnpike estimated that the federal truck weight exemption on that highway, which allows higher state weight limits, saves the state between $2.1 and $3.2 million annually in bridge and pavement costs.[2]
- Lowering the state truck weight limit would reduce the per vehicle infrastructure impacts. However, the increased number of loaded trucks at the federal gross vehicle weight limit of 80,000 pounds would more than offset any gain from having lighter vehicles. Actually this configuration does more net damage to the system due to the number of trips necessary to move an equivalent load.

ENVIRONMENTAL

The federal truck weight exemption would also reduce Maine's and the nation's dependence on foreign oil by eliminating the need to divert to less direct routes and increasing payload capacities, thereby reducing the number of truck miles traveled. Fewer trucks on the road result in lower emissions - a direct environmental benefit.

CONCLUSION

A federal truck weight exemption for the remainder of Maine's Interstate system will significantly improve overall roadway safety and the economic competitiveness of Maine's businesses, while reducing fuel and infrastructure costs and environmental impacts. It is a no-cost opportunity that benefits not only the state of Maine, but also the northeastern U.S. and eastern Canada.

In summary – enabling this waiver will make Maine highways safer and makes economic, environmental and common sense.

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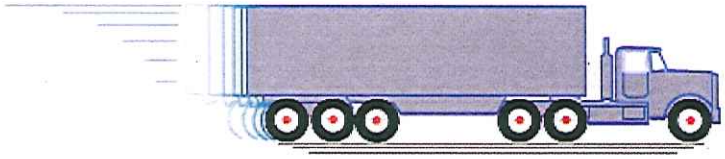
[2] Wilbur Smith Associates; "Final Report; Study of the Impacts Caused by Exempting the Maine Turnpike and the New Hampshire Turnpike from Federal Truck Weight Limits"; June 2004.

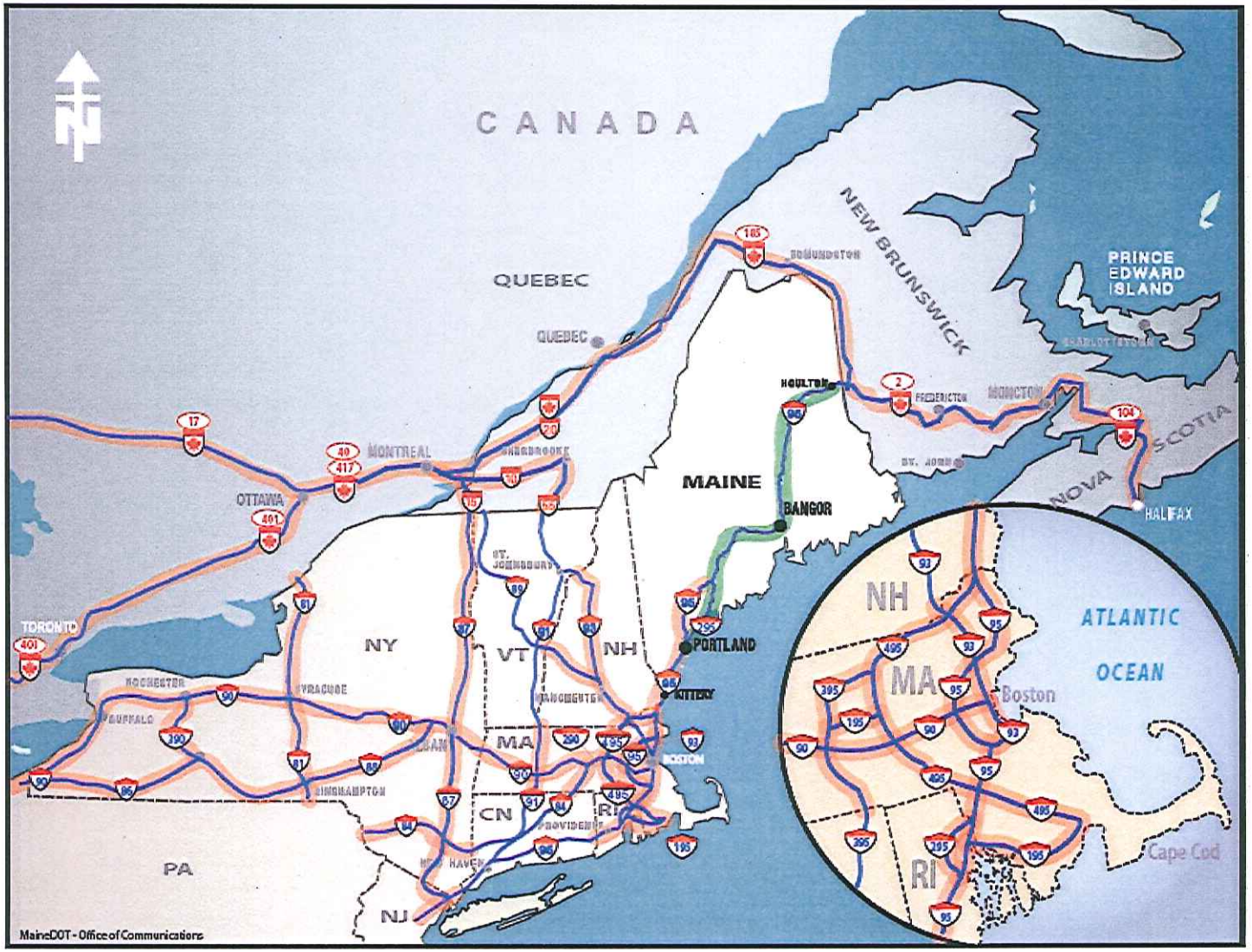
6 AXLE
COMMERCIAL VEHICLE



MAXIMUM GROSS WEIGHT LIMITS

INTERSTATE / TRANS-CANADA HIGHWAYS

2007



99K INTERSTATE NETWORK

MAINE EXEMPTION REQUEST