

Activist spotlights truck bill

Congress told state rushing to ease tractor-trailer rules

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North Carolina can expect more deadly truck crashes and more damage to roads and bridges if the General Assembly allows longer tractor-trailers on the state's highways, a national safety advocate told a congressional subcommittee Wednesday.

Gerald A. Donaldson of **Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety** spotlighted North Carolina in testimony at a Washington hearing on efforts across the country to relax limits on truck lengths and weights. He said the North Carolina legislature is rushing action on a bill to let truckers pull 53-foot semi-trailers on most roads. Forty-eight feet is the current limit, except on interstates and other major highways.

Citing a recent N.C. State University study, **Donaldson** said the longer trucks would make crashes more likely on narrow, two-lane roads.

Other studies and an investigative series in The News & Observer have shown that big trucks are speeding up the deterioration of North Carolina roads and bridges, **Donaldson** told members of the U.S. House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee's highway subcommittee. He said the state is not keeping up with growing repair needs.

"Along with an apparent disregard of the adverse safety and infrastructure impacts of allowing more longer trucks on more North Carolina highways -- trucks that will be heavier as well -- North Carolina legislators are acting as if nothing is wrong with the state's roads and bridges and that deferring infrastructure repairs will have little effect on the state," Donaldson said in remarks prepared for delivery at Wednesday's hearing in Washington.

Legislation the state Senate approved unanimously in June would increase the length limit for tractor-trailers on most roads, and would allow some heavier trucks that haul logs and cotton. The measure also would allow recreational fishermen and others to haul boats as wide as 10 feet without permits, day or night. The Highway Patrol has warned of nighttime collisions involving wide boats on narrow roads.

Safety advocates are pushing for changes in the measure, which will come before the House Finance Committee today. "Quite a few House members worry that the bill in its

current form does not sufficiently protect public safety," said Rep. Paul Luebke of Durham, who heads the committee. "I expect some amendments at Thursday's House Finance meeting, both concerning the 10-foot-wide trailers and the 53-foot trucks."

The 53-foot trailers have been used widely across the state for a decade, said Charlie Diehl, president of the N.C. Trucking Association. Trucking interests sought the legislation after state troopers stepped up enforcement of "an antiquated law" that limits where long trucks can go, he said.

"If it passes, it's going to change what is legal, but there won't be a significant increase of 53-foot trailers on highways where you don't have them now," Diehl said. "Trucking industry operators recognize that the trucks are not safe to use on some roads, and they don't use them on those roads now."

Donaldson is senior research director for the nonprofit Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety, a coalition of safety and consumer organizations and insurance companies. He said national highway statistics show that 204 people died in crashes involving large trucks on North Carolina highways in 2005 -- more deaths than in all but four other states.

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