

## Truckers seek help with weight limits in Vermont

By Terri Hallenbeck, Free Press Staff Writer

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MONTPELIER — When Abenaqui Carriers makes fuel deliveries across Vermont, its trucks are hauling less fuel than the trucks hold or having to use secondary roads, costing the company money and requiring more trips, company representative Chet Carrara told a Senate committee Wednesday.

That's because a federal pilot project expired in December that allowed heavier trucks on Vermont's interstates and efforts to extend it became caught in post-election turmoil in Washington.

Several truckers, including Carrara, went to the Statehouse on Wednesday looking for help from the House and Senate Transportation committees. Senate Transportation Committee Chairman Richard Mazza, D-Grand Isle/Chittenden, was having a hard time figuring out what state leaders could do.

Trucks on Vermont's interstates are limited to 80,000 pounds unless they have a single-use permit. The limit is less than is allowed on interstates in neighboring New Hampshire and New York, which have federal waivers Vermont lacks.

Through a pilot project Congress granted last year to Vermont and Maine, five-axle trucks weighing 90,000 pounds and six-axle trucks weighing 99,000 could travel the interstates with an annual permit. Truckers and state officials thought those limits would be extended, but congressional Republicans blocked the budget bill that contained the extension in December.

Capt. Jake Elovirta of the Vermont Department of Motor Vehicles enforcement division said the pilot program worked well. No crashes were reported involving trucks using interstates under the new limit, he said.

"It's gotten traffic out of the downtowns," said Ed Miller, a lobbyist representing the Vermont Truck and Bus Association. Using the interstates has also reduced driver fatigue and increased efficiency for trucking companies, he said.

House Transportation Committee Chairman Patrick Brennan, R-Colchester, said a bonus of the program was that the state gained \$600 in permit fees, as more out-of-state truckers bought annual permits.

Most trucks that motorists see on the highways are under the 80,000 weight limit, Elovirta said, but fuel oil, lumber, salt and gravel trucks are among those that typically weigh more.

After hearing truckers make their case for using the interstates Wednesday morning, Mazza said he agreed it was preferable to having heavy trucks lumbering through downtowns, but he asked them what he could do to help, considering this is a federal issue.

A letter from state leaders to Vermont's congressional delegation might help, Miller offered.

Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., doesn't need to be convinced that allowing trucks to use the interstate is preferable to using local roads, aide Ted Brady said.

"Sen. Leahy is trying to find another way to extend the pilot project," he said.

Miller also said lawmakers might want to renew an effort they tried last year: reducing the fine for trucks over the limit to a mere \$1.

"That seemed to perk up some ears in a hurry," said Roland Bellavance, who owns a Barre trucking company and is president of the association.

That idea also generated a letter last year from the Federal Highway Administration threatening to withdraw \$40 million in highway funding if the state makes what the administration considered a mockery of enforcement.

Carrara said reducing the fine was not a good solution because repeated violations could hurt a company's safety record and affect insurance rates.

"I don't want a bunch of overweight tickets," he said.

Brennan said he thinks writing letters can help.

"We have to let them be aware we're not going to roll over," he said. The letter might include a suggestion, he said, to put the extension of the pilot project in a congressional bill that is definitely going to pass, not one that is doomed to die.