

SUBJECT: Axle-spacing requirements for vehicles hauling timber

COMMITTEE: Transportation — committee substitute recommended

VOTE: 6 ayes — Alexander, Siebert, Edwards, Finnell, Hartnett, Hill

0 nays

3 absent — Hawley, Pickett, Uher

WITNESSES: For — Daniel J. Dructor, Texas Logging Council

Against — None

BACKGROUND : Vehicle weight limits are specified in statute in Chapters 621-623 of the Transportation Code. Under those guidelines, the cargo weight determines the length necessary between the front and rear axles of the vehicle. For example, a five-axle truck (commonly known as an 18-wheeler) with cargo weighing 80,000 pounds must have an axle spacing of at least 51 feet.

Trucks carrying poles, pipe or unrefined timber must operate between sunrise and sunset and have a red flag or cloth attached to the rear of the load to warn drivers approaching the vehicle from the rear.

DIGEST: CSHB 2469 would reduce the axle spacing restrictions on vehicles carrying raw wood products. If necessary to transport the load, the spacing between the front and rear axles could be shortened by as much as 12 feet and still be considered legal for weight restrictions. CSHB 2469 would expressly provide that shortening axle spacing would not allow vehicles to violate weight limits on any bridges.

CSHB 2469 would permit the use of a strobe light as an alternative to a red cloth to warn rear-approaching drivers of pole or pipe loads.

CSHB 2469 would take effect September 1, 1997.

**SUPPORTERS SAY:** CSHB 2469 would give needed flexibility to the transportation requirements of the Texas logging industry. New techniques such as plantation harvesting require trucks hauling timber to carry raw, unrefined wood that varies widely in length. Current axle spacing restrictions prevent logging trucks from utilizing the maximum load capacity of their vehicles. Allowing axle spacing adjustments would enable timber truckers to safely carry heavier loads of raw timber from the forest to the processing mill, which would result in reduced transportation costs and an eventual reduction in the cost of lumber.

This bill also would reduce the risk that exceeding these weight limits would result in any problems to Texas roads and bridges. It would specifically state that any exception granted in axle distance would not provide an exemption to bridge weight limits.

Allowing the use of a strobe light instead of a red flag also would give more flexibility to the logging industry. A strobe light or flashing device can be much more effective in warning approaching drivers of the load on a particular truck. By adding strobes as an alternative, CSHB 2469 would permit those companies that want to provide such safety measures to do so, without mandating that all companies switch to such devices.

**OPPONENTS SAY:** The Department of Transportation has estimated that removing the axle spacing requirements for timber hauling vehicles could increase the stress on Texas roads. The greater the weight of the vehicles that travel over the road, the more often the road must be repaired. Allowing vehicles currently in use to carry additional weight will increase the strain on the roads. The fiscal note to the bill estimates it would cost \$2.5 million over the next five years to repair damages caused by these overweighted trucks, a compelling argument for caution in changing current law.

**NOTES:** The committee substitute to HB 2469 added the requirement that axle spacing could not be shortened by more than 12 feet and the restriction that any shortening of axle spacing would not allow a truck to exceed posted weight limits on bridges.