

Congress aims to slow flow of Mexican trucks in U.S.

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Gannett News Service

Sept. 24, 2004 08:15 AM

WASHINGTON - Congress tried this week to slow Mexican trucks from rolling throughout the United States unless they fully comply with U.S. safety and pollution laws.

The House voted Wednesday to block Mexican trucks from traveling beyond the current 20-mile border zone unless they meet safety standards. On Thursday, California's senators offered their own bill to require those vehicles to comply with U.S. environmental laws.

"Heavy-duty diesel trucks cause 40 percent of all nitrogen oxide emissions in California," said Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif. "It is time to take reasonable steps to protect our communities, as millions of foreign trucks are added to our highways."

Under the North American Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA, the United States agreed to give Mexican trucks full access to U.S. highways in 2000, but U.S. truckers, environmental groups and others have fought to prevent that from happening. Currently, Mexican trucks drop off their loads in the border zone and U.S. shippers pick up the loads.

The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in June in a lawsuit filed by environmentalists and truckers that the Bush administration had the right to allow Mexican trucks full access to U.S. highways without a more extensive environmental review. But Congress could still make changes to the trucking rules.

No date has been set that gives Mexican trucks full access to U.S. roads, said David Longo, spokesman for the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration.

The House voted 339-70 Wednesday to add an amendment to a transportation spending bill that would require all foreign trucks to prove they contain the proper equipment before operating in the United States.

"Five thousand people a year are killed by car-truck crashes in the United States," said Rep. James Oberstar, D-Minn. "If we let those unsafe trucks in from Mexico, that number will go up astronomically."

But Rep. Jim Kolbe, R-Ariz., said the amendment was aimed at blocking free trade with Mexico. All Mexican truck owners must certify their vehicles' safety, but the amendment would block mainly trucks more than 10 years old that have lost their manufacturer's equipment label, a technicality that is required under law, he said.

"This issue is not about highway safety," Kolbe said. "Pure and simple, this amendment is about protectionism."

Truck crossings from Mexico into California, Arizona and Texas nearly doubled in the past decade to about 4.5 million annually in 2000, the latest available data, according to a Transportation Department Study.