

Remarks of Joan Claybrook
Washington, DC
Press Conference on the Safe Highways and Infrastructure Protection Act (SHIPA)
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Good morning. My name is Joan Claybrook and I am the Chair of Citizens for Reliable and Safe Highways, also known as CRASH. CRASH has come together with Parents Against Tired Truckers, or PATT, to form the Truck Safety Coalition which is committed to preventing truck crash deaths and injuries on our highways.

I stand here today with families who have lost loved ones in truck crashes and with truck crash survivors. They have traveled from all over the country to our nation's capital to urge Congress and the Administration to take action that will stop the unnecessary and unacceptable carnage taking place on our roads each and every day. Since CRASH and PATT were formed almost twenty years ago over 95,000 people have died in large truck crashes and thousands more have been hideously injured.

In 2011, which is the last year U.S. Department of Transportation data is available, 3,757 people were killed and 88,000 people were injured in crashes involving large trucks. Yet, there is a major disconnect between this cold, hard fact and actions in Congress and at the U.S. Department of Transportation.

Right now, there is a bill (H.R. 612, Rep. Michaud's bill, the Safe and Efficient Transportation Act) being considered that would allow states the option to significantly increase their truck weights on our nation's highways and bridges to 97,000 pounds, increase double trailer length limits from 28 to 33 feet, and gut the 1991 federal law restricting the spread of long double and triple trailer trucks throughout the United States.

The state option of course is no option at all. It is a political trap used routinely by corporate trucking interests. These mega-corporate trucking and shipping interests will storm state legislatures using campaign contributions to get some states to adopt the higher weight limits. Neighboring states will be pressured to follow suit.

Ultimately, special interests will come running to Congress urging truck size and weight uniformity across the country. It will press Congress to override objections and opposition from safety-minded states and require every state to have higher weight limits. This is a well-used strategy out of the playbook of trucking associations and shipper groups. That's what they did in 1982 to get 80,000 lbs. a federal requirement. The Michaud bill must be stopped and that is why we are here today.

It is clear from the results of the nationwide public opinion poll being released today that the American public does not want heavier trucks. In the Lake Research Partners survey, 68% of Americans said they oppose heavier trucks on our highways. Additionally, people understand that the extra money needed to pay for repairing the damage and destruction caused by overweight trucks to our highways and bridges will come from them, the taxpayers, and not from the trucking and shipping industries causing the damage.

The public overwhelmingly – by a margin of 88% - does not want to pay higher taxes for the road and bridge damage caused by heavier trucks. Unfortunately, Congressional leaders are tone deaf when special corporate trucking interests come calling. They ignore the reality that a state option will produce more profits for special trucking interests but more obituaries for innocent families and truck drivers.

Every year more than 4,000 people are slaughtered on our nation's highways while corporate trucking and shipping interests continue to push Congress for heavier trucks. Heavy trucks are deadly, dangerous and destructive. Families are paying with their lives and with their wallets. Corporate profit and campaign money are driving the agenda, not public safety.

When the battery in the new Dreamliner airplane caused concerns for safety, Congress weighed in and the federal government used significant resources to identify the problem and find a solution. And, thankfully there were no crashes or deaths associated with the Dreamliner.

Unfortunately we cannot say the same thing about what is happening on our streets and highways. Every year tens of thousands are killed or maimed because truck drivers are forced to drive unsafe hours under unsafe operating conditions. The federal response is either silence or submission to industry pressure. The federal government knows the problems, knows the causes of crashes, and knows that low-cost fixes are available and effective. It is time to put public safety in the driver's seat instead of corporate profits. Our elected officials must say no to bigger trucks, longer driving hours and more taxpayer subsidies. This is not what the public wants or expects from their elected officials.

Public safety has been run off the road to make way for corporate profits. Now is the time to change the disconnect between what the American public wants and deserves and what is happening in Congress and the Department of Transportation.

Demonstrating this type of leadership is Senator Lautenberg, who unfortunately couldn't be here today, and Congressman Jim McGovern. We thank them for their steadfast leadership on truck safety and for sponsoring the Safe Highways and Infrastructure Preservation Act.