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Carlos Navarro

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Transportation Issues Emerge with Enactment of NAFTA

by Carlos Navarro

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One of the most important tasks facing the US, Mexico, and Canada after the enactment of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) on Jan. 1, 1994, is to harmonize regulations governing transportation.

According to the terms negotiated under NAFTA, all applicable standards should be made compatible by December of 1995. In fact, negotiations on transportation standards are due to start by April or May. Meantime, NAFTA allows Mexican truck drivers to travel 30 miles into the US during 1994. By December of 1995, access will be allowed throughout the four US states bordering Mexico. And by the year 2000, Mexican truckers will be allowed to transport goods anywhere in the US.

In the interim, some problems have emerged with the different regulations regarding insurance, and size and weight specifications between Mexico and the US. These problems have become especially apparent in Texas, where a large percentage of Mexican trucks enter into the US. According to the Journal of Commerce, state police in Texas have instituted a system of random spot-checks to ensure that drivers of Mexican truck companies are properly insured. The stricter enforcement was prompted by a crash in El Paso, Texas, in which a Mexican truck driver was blamed in the deaths of two children. The state police are turning back any Mexican truckers who do not carry the appropriate coverage from a licensed insurance company.

A number of the Mexican truckers had obtained coverage at very cheap rates from unlicensed carriers, located mostly in the British West Indies. This, in turn, prompted the US trucking industry to complain that Mexican truckers will gain an unfair advantage if allowed to operate with cheap insurance. Meantime, a recent study published by two researchers at the Center for Transportation Research at the University of Texas recommends that special checkpoints be placed in the US states that border Mexico to ensure that Mexican trucks entering the US comply with weight and size requirements.

The authors of the study cited a recent report by Mexico's Communications and Transportation Secretariat (Secretaria de Comunicaciones y Transporte, SCT) which indicated that five-axle trucks on average carried 109,000 pounds, surpassing Mexico's weight limit of 91,000 pounds. In contrast, US trucks are required to adhere to weight limits of 80,000 pounds.

According to the report, until uniform regulations are in place, the overweight Mexican trucks that are allowed to enter the US could cause extensive pavement damage and also increase the danger of accidents. Nevertheless, once the US, Mexico, and Canada are able to enact laws to harmonize their transportation regulations, new cooperation efforts are anticipated. In fact, in mid- February, Kansas Governor Joan Finney presented a formal proposal to the SCT for Mexico, the US, and Canada to construct a new direct highway linking the three countries. Governor Finney presented the proposal to the SCT's deputy secretary for transport, Gustavo Patino Guerrero.

The proposed highway would provide an alternate route to the Interstate 35-Interstate 29 corridor, which ends in Laredo, Texas, and is considered a very congested crossing point. On the other hand, tight budgets could eliminate or delay construction of new highways, bridges, and other infrastructure projects.

For example, earlier this year the US Department of Transportation recommended that the construction of a second international bridge connecting Eagle Pass, Texas, and Piedras Negras, Coahuila state, be suspended for at least the next four years. Eagle Pass counsel David Riojas told the Mexican government news agency Notimex in mid-February that the directive was issued by Transportation Secretary Federico Pena, who cited a study indicating that a second bridge was not necessary for now at the Eagle Pass-Piedras Negras crossing.

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