

## on the road

# Collins' truck weight pilot advances

By Eric Russell  
BDN Staff



Sen. Susan Collins

BANGOR, Maine — An appropriations bill that includes a one-year pilot project exempting Maine highways from the federal truck weight limit passed decisively Thursday through the U.S. Senate.

The experiment would allow trucks weighing more than 80,000 pounds and up to 100,000 pounds to travel Interstate 95 between Augusta and Houlton. Such heavy trucks heading north now are forced off the interstate in Augusta onto secondary roads that travel through cities and towns, raising concerns about safety and road wear and tear.

The U.S. House version of the appropriations bill that previously passed did not include the pilot project provision, but its author in the Senate, Sen. Susan Collins, was hopeful that her proposal would be included in the final bill.

“It is very unfortunate that the House version does not include this,” Collins said Thursday afternoon in a telephone interview from her office in Washington, D.C. “But I’m going into conference with great Senate language, and I’m hopeful I can convince House members to support this.”

Now that both the House and Senate have approved appropriations bills for the federal departments of Transportation, Housing and Urban Development, representatives from each chamber’s committees will meet in conference to settle any differences. Sen. Collins said she would be a part of that process, which could begin as early as next week.

Ed Gilman, spokesman for U.S. Rep. Michael Michaud, said the congressman worked hard to get the pilot project included in the House bill but there was significant resistance. Instead, Gilman said Michaud was working on a more permanent solution to the truck weight issue with the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, which he sits on.

“The congressman is very supportive of the pilot project, which would be a great first step at addressing this issue permanently,” Gilman said.

Technically, an appropriations bill needs to pass before Oct. 1, the start of the federal government’s 2010 fiscal year, but Collins said that hardly ever happens. If the approved bill includes the pilot project, it would begin the day the bill passes.

Sen. Olympia Snowe, R-Maine, also voted in favor of the pilot project on Thursday.

“This is an issue of safety,” Snowe said in a statement. “For too long we have been forcing freight haulers to move their trucks onto state and local roads that were not constructed with these vehicles in mind. As a result, pedestrians are endangered as they cross local roads or travel along rural roads.”

Maine Gov. John Baldacci praised Thursday’s vote.

“Approval of Senator Collins’ one-year project is an important step in the long and hard-fought efforts to bring common sense to the truck weight limit issue for Maine,” the governor said in a statement.

The U.S. Department of Transportation first notified Maine officials in 1994 that heavy trucks on interstates violated federal requirements. Collins and other members of the state’s congressional delegation have been working since to change the law, which sets the weight limit at 80,000 pounds.

John Diamond, chair of the Bangor Region Chamber of Commerce board of directors, said weight limits harm Maine business.

“We’re convinced that the data that will come out of this pilot project will show that this should be a permanent change,” Diamond said. “It will have significant economic, safety and environmental benefits for Maine.”

Other groups, such as the Maine Association of Police and **Associated Builders and Contractors of Maine**, have strongly supported the truck weight pilot project.

Collins said truck weight limits have been a priority of hers for a long time.

“I believe as a resident of Bangor that this is potentially great news,” she said. “All of us remember the tragic death of the woman in Bangor who was hit by a large truck, so it’s a clear safety issue. But, also, our businesses and drivers are at a competitive disadvantage to those in bordering Canadian provinces who can deliver more goods.”

erussell@bangordailynews.net

990-8167