Idaho Senate passes bill allowing extra-heavy trucks more routes

BOISE – Any route in Idaho other than interstate freeways would potentially be fair game for extra-heavy trucks under legislation that passed the Idaho Senate on Wednesday.

Numerous North Idaho elected officials and entities protested the move, including the Idaho associations of cities, counties and highway districts, and an array of local sheriffs, mayors, county commissioners and fire officials. State Sen. Shawn Keough, R-Sandpoint, read the names off a list.

Senators disputed whether locals would have the ultimate say over whether extra-heavy trucks could run on their local roads. Such trucks weigh up to 129,000 pounds, compared with the current limit of 105,500 pounds.

The bill says cities, counties or highway districts “may” designate routes for the heavier trucks but must use criteria set by the Idaho Transportation Department to make their decision. It also says they “shall” issue permits for extra-heavy trucks on those routes.

“ITD will establish the criteria by which the locals will make the determination,” Keough told the Senate. “I ask you, is that local control?” She questioned whether a city, county or highway district would be vulnerable to a lawsuit if the group refused to let bigger trucks on a particular route, but ITD said yes.

The heavier trucks have been allowed for the past decade on 35 selected Southern Idaho routes through a pilot project that involved close study and monitoring. Just before its vote on SB 1117, the Senate unanimously passed another bill to allow the extra-heavy trucks on those 35 routes permanently.

State Sen. Bob Nonini, R-Coeur d’Alene, said his local highway district opposes SB 1117, as do area fire officials and other local governments. “As I weigh that final vote, tipping the scales to the government side or to the industry side, my scales tip toward industry,” Nonini said. “I think it’s good for industry. For the most part industry wants this. … It’ll help with their efficiencies.”

Keough warned that ITD’s standards show routes suitable for the heavy trucks include U.S. Highway 95 from Grangeville to Lewiston, Lewiston to Coeur d’Alene, Coeur d’Alene north through downtown Sandpoint to Bonners Ferry, and U.S. Highway 2 from Sandpoint to Priest River and Moyie Springs.

She said those routes aren’t suitable. “There is a difference between north and south on climate and terrain,” she said.

State Sen. Dan Schmidt, D-Moscow, said, “I’d like to draw your attention to U.S. Highway 95. Great road, Lewiston to Moscow. Five miles short of Moscow, it changes – dramatically. … In the last six years, that
stretch of highway has been the most lethal stretch of highway in the state of Idaho, and that highway will be open to these trucks. I don’t think this is a proper, balanced approach for this body to take.”

The bill now moves to the House.

How they voted

Here’s how North Idaho senators voted on SB 1117, the bill to expand routes for extra-heavy trucks statewide:
Voting yes: Sens. John Goedde, R-Coeur d’Alene; Dan Johnson, R-Lewiston; Bob Nonini, R-Coeur d’Alene; Sheryl Nuxoll, R-Cottonwood; and Steve Vick, R-Dalton Gardens.
Voting no: Sens. Shawn Keough, R-Sandpoint; and Dan Schmidt, D-Moscow.