

DATE: February 9, 2005
TO: House Transportation Committee
FROM: Gregg Dal Ponte, Administrator,
Motor Carrier Transportation Division
SUBJECT: House Bill 2353

INTRODUCTION

House Bill 2353 allows a combination of three vehicles to be up to 65 feet long if it's operated solely for personal use and consists of a motor vehicle pulling a recreational vehicle without motive power, attached with a fifth wheel hitch, that is pulling a small trailer with loaded weight less than 3,500 pounds. This combination is commonly referred to as a vehicle pulling a set of doubles.

WHAT THE BILL DOES

House Bill 2353 allows for a three-vehicle combination that includes a recreational vehicle. Under current law – ORS 818.110 – most vehicle combinations are limited to two vehicles.

Oregon highways are divided into three classifications – Groups 1, 2, and 3 – with Group 1 highways being the best roads in the state and Group 3 highways being the poorest (narrow, more curves, poor pavement condition, etc.). A two-vehicle combination that includes a recreational vehicle is currently only allowed to be 60 feet in overall length on Group 3 highways because longer combinations can't maintain their lane of travel on most of these narrow, winding roads. They would hit any oncoming vehicle they meet at a curve in the road. Yet many Group 3 highways lead to lakes and rivers that a long recreational vehicle combination would want to reach.

Many private citizens don't know about existing highway limitations. To help safeguard the traveling public and ensure that long combinations don't take Group 3 highways, it would be necessary to add signage to roads around the state. These would be similar to signs on OR242 warning about a 35-foot length restriction for McKenzie Pass. In each direction at each site, one advance sign would advise long vehicles to take another route and one sign would mark where the restriction begins (for ticketing purposes). Counties, cities, and road districts may need to also place signs on roads in their jurisdictions.

Our neighboring states have varying limitations on the number of trailers allowed for passenger cars and pickups. California and Washington allow one trailer, while Idaho and Nevada allow two trailers. Elsewhere around the country, 24 states allow passenger cars and pickups to pull only one trailer, while 22 allow two or more trailers.

House Bill 2353 raises concerns about the capability of hitches necessary for pulling the last trailer in this combination. Most manufacturers of 5th-wheel and regular travel trailers do not design their units to handle the stress or load of trailers attached to the rear bumper/frame area.

There is a further safety concern in allowing unqualified private citizens to operate long combinations. Backing up an articulated vehicle, for example, is the most difficult of tasks even for a professional driver. Yet individuals would be allowed to drive these combinations without any of the qualifications or special conditions imposed on commercial truckers operating similar combinations.

Currently, an Oregon truck driver needs a trailer endorsement to operate double and triple trailer combinations – ORS 807.035(5). To get that endorsement, a driver must first get a Class A CDL by passing (1) a CDL Combination Knowledge Test, (2) a behind-the-wheel drive test in a Class A commercial vehicle, and (3) a pre-trip inspection test. Then if the driver has a valid medical card or medical waiver, he or she must (4) pass the Doubles and Triples Endorsement Knowledge Test, and (5) pass a vision screening that ensures the driver has a visual acuity level of 20/70 or better when looking through both eyes (or one eye if the driver has usable vision in only one eye) and a field of vision of 110 degrees.

SUMMARY

House Bill 2353 allows for a 65-foot three-vehicle combination that includes a recreational vehicle, which would not be safe on many of Oregon's narrow, winding roads. The bill raises concerns about the capability of hitches necessary for pulling the last trailer in this combination. There is further safety concern surrounding the qualification of drivers operating such combinations.