Limiting Trucks' Speeds on Highways

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Recently, two members of the United States House of Representatives introduced a bipartisan bill that aims to limit trucks' speeds on our nation's highways. Rep. Lucy McBath and Rep. John Katko proposed the Cullum Owings Large Truck Safe Operating Speed Act on May 25, 2021. The exact details of the bill are not entirely clear, but the legislation would codify a long-considered “speed limiter” rule. In doing so, the legislation would instruct the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) to mandate that certain commercial vehicles have speed-limiting technology installed. Additionally, drivers would be required to use any pre-existing speed-limiting technology in the vehicle while operating it. Finally, the bill would require that vehicles employing the technology be limited to a maximum speed of 65 mph. Certain advanced safety technology, such as automatic emergency brakes, could allow truck drivers to increase this speed to 70 mph.

This topic has a long history of consideration. In 2006, the American Trucking Associations (ATA) introduced the idea to the NHTSA and the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA). These two bodies asked for public comment on the issue in 2007. Then, in 2016, NHTSA and FMCSA announced a notice of proposed rulemaking regarding the technology. No action occurred prior to the 2016 election, and the new administration decided not to pursue the issue. Finally, the bill was introduced in 2019 by two United States senators.

The bill is named after a young man from Atlanta who was killed in a collision with a truck in 2002. It was supported for a long time by Johnny Isakson, a former U.S. senator from Georgia, and has been endorsed by members of the trucking community. For example, Steve Williams, the former chairman of the ATA and co-founder and president of the Trucking Alliance, said, “Millions of motorists are within a few feet of 80,000 lb. tractor-trailer rigs each day and there is no reason why that equipment should be driven at 75 or 80 or 85 miles per hour … This legislation will reduce the severity of large truck crashes and make the nation's roadways safer for our drivers and all of us.”

However, not everyone in the trucking community is supportive of the idea of installing speed limiters. The Owner-Operator Independent Drivers Association (OOIDA) has opposed installing such technology in vehicles for a long time. The group believes that speed limiters would create dangerous conditions on the roads, saying, “OOIDA is opposed to mandatory speed limiters because they are dangerous for all highway users … Highways are safest when all vehicles travel at the same relative speed. This has become more and more apparent to states that previously had split speed limits for large trucks, and they are trending toward removing such policies.”

The future of this bill, as displayed through previous attempts to enact such rules, is uncertain. With Congress handling many major legislative priorities, it is unclear whether this bill will be given attention. MG+M will continue to monitor the bill's progress and its potential impact on trucking companies.

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