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A Pomp's Trucking & Landscape Supply, LLC logging truck is driven across Ray Nitschke Memorial Bridge on June 9 in Green Bay. SARAH KLOEPPING/USA TODAY NETWORK-WISCONSIN

Log trucks cut through Green Bay to avoid interstates, but that could change

Becky Jacobs

Green Bay Press-Gazette
USA TODAY NETWORK - WISCONSIN

GREEN BAY - As Justin Babik approached a series of roundabouts on Velp Avenue in early June, he not only watched the oncoming traffic to his left, but also looks to see if any cars tried to sneak around on his right.

Over on University Avenue, Babik braked early at a red light, ready to react to a pickup truck switching lanes to get ahead of the log truck Babik was driving.

To get from northeastern Wisconsin to a paper mill in Kaukauna, Babik can't drive on Interstate 41 once it meets Interstate 43 if he's hauling his typical 98,000 pounds. So, he cuts through Green Bay, using defensive driving skills as he maneuvers through city streets.

Logging industry advocates would prefer Babik avoid Green Bay altogether. They want log truck drivers to be able to stay on interstates, and hope federal legislation proposed by Wisconsin lawmakers will make that possible.

However, similar bills have failed in the past, and opponents continue to worry about the potential safety and infrastructure effects tied up in changing weight limit restrictions.

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Justin Babik drives a log truck in northeastern Wisconsin. When Babik drives through Green Bay, he has to watch for other drivers cutting him off and pedestrians walking into traffic. BECKY JACOBS/USA TODAY NETWORK-WISCONSIN

"We still need to get the wood to the mill. It's just, can we do it more efficiently by going on the interstate?"

Henry Schienebeck
Executive director of Great Lakes Timber Professionals Association

SUPREME COURT

COLLEGE ADMISSIONS

Ruling scraps race in process

Could impact schools' recruitment efforts

Kelly Meyerhofer

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel
USA TODAY NETWORK - WISCONSIN

The U.S. Supreme Court struck down the consideration of race in college admissions, a ruling that may complicate how Wisconsin's most competitive universities recruit diverse student bodies.

In a pair of closely watched cases, the nonprofit Students for Fair Admissions sued Harvard University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The nonprofit argued that considering race in admissions gives underrepresented minorities an edge, which they believe is neither equal nor fair.

The justices voted 6-3 along ideological grounds that the practice is racially discriminatory. The decision released Thursday overturns decades of legal precedent supporting race-conscious admissions as a way to promote more inclusive schools.

In Wisconsin, the ruling will be most felt at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, which accepted 49% of applicants last fall. The state flagship already struggles to recruit students of color. The student body in 2022-23 was 60% white, 9% Asian, 7% Hispanic, 4% biracial, 3% unknown, 2% Black and 15% who come from outside the U.S.

"The student must be treated based on his or her experiences as an individual - not on the basis of race," Chief Justice John Roberts wrote in the majority opinion. "Many universities have for too long done just the opposite. And in doing so, they have concluded, wrongly, that the touchstone of an individual's identity is not challenges bested, skills built, or lessons learned but the color of their skin. Our constitutional history does not tolerate that choice."

But he added that "nothing in this opinion should be construed as prohibiting universities from considering an applicant's discussion of how race affected his or her life, be it through discrimination, inspiration, or otherwise."

The court's liberal members dissented. Justice Sonia Sotomayor has said her own life is an example of how race-conscious admissions policies work. Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson said ignoring racism means racism will continue to persist even longer.

"With let-them-eat-cake obliviousness, today, the majority pulls the ripcord and announces 'colorblindness for all' by legal fiat," she wrote. "But deeming race irrelevant in law does not make it so in life."

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Log trucks

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What would the bipartisan Safe Routes Act do?

In April, Republican Rep. Mike Gallagher, of Wisconsin, and Democratic Rep. Jared Golden, of Maine, introduced the Safe Routes Act of 2023 in the U.S. House of Representatives. Wisconsin's Republican Senator Ron Johnson introduced a bill of the same name earlier this month in the U.S. Senate.

The act would allow log trucks across the country to travel on the interstate at weight limits set by the states they are located in.

The bill focuses on covered logging vehicles, defined as "transporting raw or unfinished forest products, including logs, pulpwood, biomass, or wood chips," "traveling a distance not greater than 150 air miles on the interstate from origin to a storage or processing facility," and "meets state legal weight tolerances and vehicle configurations for transporting raw or unfinished forest products within the state boundaries in which the vehicle is operating."

Gallagher and Johnson claim keeping trucks on interstates, rather than state and local roads, is safer and more efficient.

What are current weight limits?

Currently, commercial vehicles can weigh up to 80,000 pounds on the interstate.

With a permit, timber loads are allowed on state highways at 98,000 pounds on six axles or 90,000 pounds on five axles, according to the Wisconsin Department of Transportation. This generally applies to local jurisdiction roads, too, unless posted otherwise.

There is also a timber permit that allows 164,000 pounds on 11 axles to facilitate "seamless borders" with Michigan, but it is "restricted to very specific state highway routes that have had engineering analysis on these load configurations" within 11 miles of the border, according to the DOT.

Logging industry claims bill increases safety

It is safer for log trucks to stay on the interstate than to cut through cities and rural communities, driving past schools, homes and businesses, according to the Great Lakes Timber Professionals Association and American Loggers Council, two organizations in support of the Safe Routes Act.

"If we weren't there, that actually makes it safer for the pedestrians, and it takes a little stress off the truck driver, too," said Henry Schienebeck, executive director of Great Lakes Timber Professionals Association, who operated and owned log trucks for more than three decades.

Driving through a city, drivers may cut off a log truck, Schienebeck said, or a pedestrian could walk into the street. Early mornings are especially busy as people travel to work and school, and "everybody's always in a hurry," according to Babik.

While driving through Green Bay on June 9, Babik was constantly shifting gears to speed up and slow down. As he turned right on Broadway from Dousman Street, Babik was careful to avoid a car at a stoplight in the tight space.

"You've got to watch what you're doing, and then watch what everybody else is doing at the same time," said Babik, who's worked as a log truck driver for about 14 years.

Alternatively, "going down the interstate, you just have cars to watch out for,



Justin Babik has worked as a log truck driver for about 14 years. He hopes a bill passes that would increase access for log trucks on interstates. BECKY JACOBS/USA TODAY NETWORK-WISCONSIN

and that's it," according to Schienebeck.

Supporters also insist interstates help log trucks save on drive time and vehicle miles, among other factors. With closures and industry changes over the years, there aren't as many mills as there used to be, meaning loggers have to travel further to sell the product.

"We still need to get the wood to the mill," Schienebeck said. "It's just, can we do it more efficiently by going on the interstate?"

Log trucks can already travel on some Wisconsin interstates

There are stretches of Interstate 41 and Interstate 39 where log trucks are "grandfathered in," Schienebeck said.

According to the Wisconsin DOT, log trucks permitted at the 98,000 or 90,000 configurations are allowed on I-41 between I-94 at the zoo interchange near Milwaukee, up to the I-43 interchange near Green Bay.

Trucks permitted for 98,000 can also haul on I-39 between State 34 at Knowlton and State 29 at Schofield. And trucks at 90,000 can drive on U.S. 51 between Wausau and State 78 and that portion of State 78 between U.S. 51 and the I-90/94 interchange near Portage.

The 100,000-pound permit is not allowed on any interstate, the DOT said.

In the last five years, two crashes involving log trucks were reported on the segment of I-39 from State 29 south to State 34, according to the DOT. Since 2018, three crashes involving log trucks were reported on that stretch of I-41. All five resulted in injuries and no fatalities.

"It is important to note these crashes represent a small percentage of incidents involving commercial motor vehicles on these interstate corridors," amounting to 0.3% of 1,575 total crashes involving commercial motor vehicles, the DOT told USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin in an email.

In the city of Green Bay, there was one crash involving a log truck in the last five years, according to the DOT; it was among the three listed above on I-41.

Opponents' concerns go beyond log trucks

There has been opposition over the years to increasing log truck access to



A Pomp's Trucking & Landscape Supply, LLC logging truck is driven June 9 through downtown Green Bay. SARAH KLOEPPING/USA TODAY NETWORK-WISCONSIN

interstates. Rep. Gallagher unsuccessfully ran the Safe Routes Act in 2021 and 2019.

Two organizations which oppose the 2023 version of the bill are the Coalition Against Bigger Trucks and Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety. Cathy Chase and Brad Roseberry, presidents of each group, respectively, say they are against putting heavier, bigger trucks on the interstate.

Schienebeck disputes this description. If the Safe Routes Act passes, there wouldn't be different log trucks going on the interstate. Rather, he argues, the 98,000-pound log trucks already permitted on Wisconsin roads would go on the interstate.

But in the eyes of Chase and Roseberry, allowing log trucks at those weights on the interstate count as bigger trucks because it goes above the current 80,000-pound limit.

"We're not opposed to trucks," Roseberry said. "... Everybody would agree they're vital to the economy and keeping everything going. The question is ... at what weight should these things continue to operate?"

Roseberry and Chase are concerned about heavier trucks in general, they said, no matter the product being hauled.

The Safe Routes Act is not limited to Wisconsin, but would have nationwide effects, and Roseberry said he worries about a "piecemeal approach." The bill is also not unique, Chase said, in that other industries and special interests have also sought exemptions.

If log trucks are allowed greater access to interstates, Chase said, then the question becomes "where do you stop" with different commodities and weights. It's a "whack-a-mole game," she said, fending off one-off exemptions.

Railroads have also "long been opposed to changes to truck size and weight limits," Jessica Kahanek, spokesperson for the Association of American Railroads, told USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin in an email. The association's website cites similar arguments to Roseberry and Chase, as well as effects on what, and how much, is transported by rail.

The Safe Routes Act is specifically focused on the forestry industry, Schienebeck said, and most of Wisconsin's forestry activity happens in the northern part of the state, which doesn't use short rail service like it once did.

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Log trucks

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What studies say about trucks and safety

Proponents and opponents of the Safe Routes Act each point to data they claim back up their arguments.

Chase refers to how, on average, 5,100 people die in crashes involving a large truck each year, and the number has increased in recent years. In 2021, 72% of people killed in large-truck traffic crashes were occupants of other vehicles, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

"We all know the basic science behind weight," said Steven Casstevens, who serves on the Coalition Against Bigger Trucks' law enforcement board. "The heavier the truck, the longer the stopping distance."

Meanwhile, Schienebeck's organization supported a study published in January by the University of Minnesota Department of Forest Resources that said overall, "allowing state-legal, loaded log trucks to operate on interstate highways would improve the safety and efficiency of timber transportation in Wisconsin and Minnesota."

"On a per load basis, log trucks have a lower fatality rate than other heavy trucks in 83% of the lower 48 states, including in those states that have higher GVW [gross vehicle weight] allowances on the interstate due to grandfathering," the study states.

Wisconsin, however, is one of eight states where other large trucks were safer than log trucks, the authors wrote.

There's also debate around infrastructure effects

Opponents of the Safe Routes Act argue that heavier trucks put more stress on roads and bridges, and it's costly to rebuild and replace an already-aging infrastructure system in the U.S.

Even if log trucks go on the interstate, they still have to get off at some point and travel on local roads, according to Patrick Vander Sanden, executive director of the Wisconsin County Highway Association, who spoke to USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin alongside the Coalition Against Bigger Trucks.

Wisconsin statutes already provide the basis for protecting roads from ex-

cess weights, Vander Sanden said, allowing a balance for sufficient road protection while keeping the transportation system reliable for public travel and commerce.

Schienebeck argues the Safe Routes Act would take stress off of local roads, especially as rural infrastructure, in particular, needs updates and funding. Plus, "design standards for the Interstate Highway System in the U.S. are generally higher than those on other roads within most states," according to the Minnesota study.

In 2016, the U.S. Department of Transportation completed its "Comprehensive Truck Size and Weight Limits Study," looking at larger trucks in general.

While some people may be tempted to pick out evidence to support a particular argument, the DOT stressed that no policy challenges should be made based on the report, due to limitations in the study.

"Despite recent Congressional action approving additional size and weight exceptions and waivers on a piecemeal and nationwide basis, DOT recommends a thoughtful approach to future policy making," the study states.

Why not make log trucks lighter?

As Chase pointed out, log truck drivers can already travel on interstates, as long as they stay at 80,000 pounds.

When asked about this, Schienebeck explained that most log trucks are very specialized in what they can haul, requiring expensive equipment. Logging operations are also guided by forest certification schemes, which take weather and other restrictions into account, meaning log trucks are limited on when they can operate.

"To help make up for this, most states allow additional weight either by permit or with an additional axle, or both, on state roads," Schienebeck said. "The extra equipment (axles) increases empty weight, which in turn would allow for less payload if log trucks were restricted to 80,000 lbs."

The extra equipment with more weight allows log trucks to better comply with forest management environmental standards and transport raw material, he said, without compromising safety.

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