



## OVERSIZE AND OVERWEIGHT COMMERCIAL VEHICLES

by *Kristen Koehler*

State and federal regulations set standards for the size and weight of commercial vehicles operated on public highways. A commercial vehicle is any vehicle used for commerce or that has a gross vehicle weight rating of 10,000 pounds or more. For commercial vehicles that exceed the established size and weight standards, a state permitting process provides legal access via routes that are safe for nondivisible, oversize and overweight vehicles to travel along. Standards and policy concerning the size and weight of commercial vehicles and permitting are important for several reasons:

- trucking costs are influenced by the amount of product that can be transported in a single load;
- highway construction and maintenance costs are impacted by the size and weight of the vehicles utilizing the roadways; and
- oversize and overweight commercial vehicles may exceed the design clearances of highways, bridges, and other roadway structures, presenting a hazard to the transportation infrastructure and to other motorists.

This *issue brief* discusses the regulation, permitting, and routing of oversize and overweight commercial vehicles.

### Federal Regulation

Federal limits on commercial vehicle weight and size were first enacted in 1956 through the Federal-Aid Highway Act. States are required to enforce federal minimum and maximum size and

weight standards where established, and to annually certify to the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) that they have an effective program in place for enforcing the standards.

#### ***Interstate and Defense Highway System.***

The Interstate and Defense Highway System (IDHS, a national system of divided highways) covers approximately 40,000 miles. Federal weight standards apply to commercial vehicles operating on the IDHS. For vehicles operating off of the IDHS, states may set their own commercial vehicle weight standards.

#### ***National Network of Highways.***

The National Network of Highways (NNH) is approximately 200,000 miles and includes the IDHS and other highways subject to federal size standards that are certified by the states to the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) as being capable of handling larger commercial vehicles. Federal size standards apply to commercial vehicles operating on all roadways within the NNH. Federal limits on the height of commercial vehicles have not been established, and states may impose their own standards. In addition, the federal government does not set a limit on the overall vehicle length of tractor-semitrailer operations on the NNH; however, federal law prohibits states from setting an overall length limit for these types of operations on the NNH.

Table 1 provides the federal size and weight standards, and the Colorado standards where there is no federal standard in place.

**Table 1. Federal and Colorado Legal Standards**

Vehicle Feature	Standard
Overall vehicle length	No federal limit is imposed, and states are prohibited from imposing a limit on overall vehicle length for truck-tractor-semitrailer combinations.
Trailer length	Federal standards prohibit states from imposing a trailer length limit of less than 48 feet on trailers operating in a truck-tractor-semitrailer combination on the National Network. Colorado's standard is 57 feet, 4 inches for trailers; and 70 feet for vehicle combinations coupled together.
Vehicle width	Federal and state limit of 8 feet, 6 inches.
Vehicle height	No federal limit on vehicle height. State height limit is 13 feet, except where designated 14 feet, 6 inches by the CDOT.
Vehicle weight	Federal and state limit on interstate highways is 80,000 pounds combined gross vehicle weight (CGVW). State limit on non-interstate highways is 85,000 pounds CGVW.

Source: Colorado Department of Transportation

**Failure to enforce.** If a state fails to adequately enforce the federal minimum or maximum weight standard on commercial vehicles operating on the IDHS, the state is in jeopardy of losing its entire National Highway System appropriation. If a state violates federal standards on commercial vehicle size, the state may be subject to civil action in federal district court. Furthermore, if a state fails to annually certify to the FHWA that it has enforced the standards, it may result in a 10 percent reduction of all federal-aid highway funds to the state for the next fiscal year.

### State Regulation

In Colorado, the legal dimensions and maximum weight limits for commercial vehicles are specified in statute. The Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) is responsible for regulating the movement of oversize and overweight vehicles on the state's highways and interstates, and accomplishes this by issuing permits and providing route guidelines for commercial vehicles that exceed the normal size and weight limits allowed by law.

**Permitting and routing.** If a commercial vehicle exceeds the size or weight standards established in law, the vehicle's operator must obtain an oversize or overweight permit from the CDOT, which will allow the vehicle to legally operate on designated highways specified in the routing guidelines. The CDOT estimates that about 1.5 percent of all commercial vehicle traffic requires an oversize or overweight permit. For oversize and overweight vehicles operating on city and county roads, the operator must also obtain permission or the appropriate permit from the local government to operate.

**Permitting process improvements.** In March 2012, the CDOT commenced an improvement plan to make the oversize and overweight commercial vehicle permitting process more streamlined and precise. The improvement team held stakeholder meetings, conducted reviews of the process, and collected data and research, with the goals of reducing waste, reducing costs to vehicle operators, and making the acquisition of permits quicker. Due to the changes implemented, by May 2013, the major error rate (errors that could cause structural damage to the Colorado transportation infrastructure or cause an accident that might result in bodily harm) had declined from 6.0 percent to 2.4 percent, and the time to issue permits also dropped significantly, averaging a reduction in processing time of about 42 percent.

The improvement plan also included the acquisition of an online permitting and routing system called the Colorado Oversize Overweight Permitting and Routing (COOPR) system. The system, which launched November 11, 2014, is expected to dramatically change the way permitting is handled in the state by allowing 24/7 access, fleet management abilities, and self-issue capabilities for some permit types.

**Permitting revenue.** The CDOT issues single-trip and annual permits to operators with extra-legal vehicles or loads. The cost for a permit varies based on the weight and dimensions of the vehicle, and if the vehicle will be traveling on interstate or non-interstate highways. For the five-year period of time between July 1, 2009, and June 30, 2014, the CDOT issued a total of 74,093 annual permits and 191,487 single trip permits, generating a combined total of approximately \$32 million in revenue. Revenue generated through the permitting process is credited to the CDOT's Construction and Maintenance budget.