

You heard the governor. Safety comes first

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

As northern Idaho's highways are opened to trucks that are heavier and presumably longer, safety should come first.

So says Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter.

"Safety must be the highest priority," said Otter, who signed into law an industry-backed plan to raise the truck weight limit from 105,500 pounds to 129,000 pounds.

We'll see if he means it.

Up ahead is a year-long process of drafting rules to implement that legislation. Idaho's Transportation Board will name a panel to review the terrain, take public comments and make its recommendations. Next year, lawmakers will decide whether to accept or reject the rules.

But if the committee - and the transportation board, for that matter - follow their governor's direction, they'll be compelled to take the following steps:

- Lawmakers spent a decade conducting a pilot study of heavier trucks on southern Idaho highways before making a permanent decision. No such review in northern Idaho was undertaken. So why not find southern Idaho's version of U.S. Highway 95? That would be a two-lane highway linking an entire region of the state. Passing lanes would be few and far between. The road would twist through river corridors and varied terrain. It also would bisect communities.

That way, they could extrapolate the findings of the southern Idaho pilot study and come up with a safe plan.

Can't find a highway quite like U.S. 95 in southern Idaho?

That would be a problem, wouldn't it?

- Contemplate the lessons of the mega-loads. When ExxonMobil anticipated sending more than 207 of the widest, tallest, longest and heaviest loads ever to proceed along U.S. Highway 12 toward Montana en route to Alberta's Kearl oil sands project, it had political support, expertise and confidence.

What could go wrong?

Public opinion, for one thing.

And U.S. 12's unpredictable winters for another.

Other than a test module that got as far as Lolo Hot Springs on the other side of the Montana state line, ExxonMobil moved nothing up that river corridor highway. To keep its schedule, it found other routes and other means - including cutting up loads parked at the Port of Lewiston and moving them in smaller parcels along U.S. 95.

File that under the best laid plans header.

- Pay heed to the people who now drive trucks along northern Idaho's highways. They can tell you what happens when a slow-moving truck backs up traffic along bottlenecks such as Winchester Grade and Reisenauer Hill.

Ask them what it's like to travel down an ice-covered hill with a 53-foot trailer connected to a 24-foot pup trailer by a 5-foot tongue.

While you're at it, have one of these truck drivers explain how wind shear affects an empty, longer truck.

- Bring in some engineers to explore how bridges and culverts built in northern Idaho's mix of soils and terrain will hold up under the added stress of 129,000 pounds.
- Fill the panel with ordinary motorists, truck drivers and independent traffic engineers who don't have a financial interest in this issue. Give industry groups a voice at the table, but not the means to dominate the outcome.

Then wait for the Legislature to reconvene. It may surprise Idaho's lawmakers what safety-first really means. - M.T.