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WISCONSIN STATE SENATOR

Senate Bill 80

March 25, 2015

Good morning, and thank you for this opportunity to testify on Senate Bill 80.

Under current law, local highway authorities have the ability to set special or seasonal vehicle weight limits on highways under their jurisdiction. This authority is commonly used during the spring thaw season when many county highways and town roads are under vehicle weight restrictions. Similarly, local highway authorities may designate highways under their jurisdiction as class "B" highways, on which the maximum gross weight and per-axle vehicle weight is limited to 60 percent of standard vehicle weight restrictions. There are limited exceptions to these weight restrictions in current law, such as those for snowplows and emergency vehicles.

Senate Bill 80 would create an additional exemption to these weight limits for public utility, telecommunication or certain cooperative association vehicles responding to various service outages in order to allow these vehicles to operate legally in times of emergency. In general, local authorities have recognized that these practices are necessary and allow the limited operation of these vehicles, however, these practices do not currently align with the statutes.

Despite the "spring thaw" designation, March and April can still be very cold months, and our constituents should not have to go without power or heat simply because a service truck cannot access a road to fix a downed power line. This exemption is intended to be very limited in scope and would only be used to address emergency service outages. As under current law, a vehicle operator remains liable for any damage to a roadway caused by the operation of that vehicle. For regular maintenance operations, these vehicles would remain subject to special, seasonal or class "B" weight restrictions as required under current law.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to speak on this bill today. I would be happy to answer any questions at this time.

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Senate Bill 80 – Road Access for Utility Vehicles in an Emergency
Senate Committee on Transportation and Veterans Affairs
March 25th, 2015

Thank you to the committee members for holding a public hearing on Senate Bill 80 today. This legislation aims to protect the public health, safety, and welfare of Wisconsin residents by creating an exemption to road weight limitations for public utility, telecommunication or certain cooperative association vehicles responding to service outages. The goal is to allow these vehicles to operate legally in times of emergency, and ensure that our constituents do not have to go without power or heat simply because a service truck cannot access a road necessary to fix a downed power line.

Under certain conditions, local highway authorities have the ability to set special or seasonal vehicle weight limits on highways under their jurisdiction. This authority is commonly used during the spring thaw season when many county highways and town roads are under vehicle weight restrictions.

Similarly, local highway authorities may designate highways under their jurisdiction as class “B” highways, on which the maximum gross weight and per-axle vehicle weight is limited to 60 percent of standard vehicle weight restrictions. Currently, there are limited exemptions to these weight restrictions, such as those for snowplows and emergency vehicles.

This exemption created by SB 80 is intended to be very limited in scope and would only be used to address emergency service outages. For regular maintenance, these vehicles would remain subject to special, seasonal or class “B” weight restrictions.

SB 80 is supported by the Wisconsin Public Service Corporation, Wisconsin Energy Corporation, Cooperative Network Association, Xcel Energy, and Wisconsin Utilities Association Incorporated. I will be glad to answer any questions you may have.

Testimony of Pete Wurl, Wisconsin Public Service Manager of Customer Service for Tomahawk and Rhinelander, for the Wisconsin Senate Committee on Transportation and Veterans Affairs 3-25-2105

I support Senate Bill 80 concerning Road Access for Utility Vehicles in an Emergency. Thank you for accepting my written testimony as I'm unable to attend in person today due to poor road conditions.

One of the many responsibilities that I have as a manager for Wisconsin Public Service is to provide service restoration to our customers in the event of a power outage. We work hard to maintain a reliable power delivery system, but severe weather and other events sometimes cause power outages that require many hours and even days to address. For most of the year we are able to access the lines and associated equipment that feeds our customers' homes and businesses to make the necessary repairs in the event of an outage. However, every spring seasonal weight restrictions are placed on rural roads (county highways, township roads, etc.). For many years we've been extremely fortunate that most local units of government have been cooperative and have given WPS permission to travel on those roads for our emergency work.

Permission granted to us for access to service restorations has varied, and has become more challenging over the last several years. Most local units of government have given us a "no limitations, handshake agreement", but others now want us to call in first for permission. For a typical single power outage, simply determining what the township requires, and who has the authority to make the decision, would add time to the outage restoration. Often times the outages we experience during seasonal weight restrictions are those that can last multiple days, frequently using mutual aid crews from other utilities unfamiliar with the local units of government. Adding complexity is when the outages occur (middle of the night, weekends etc...) which would further contribute to a delay in getting the permission granted and result in longer restoration times. Having the ability to access the lines we need to repair through approval of Senate Bill 80 will allow our field personnel to focus their efforts on repair.

I'd also like to comment on the possible amendment of this bill with regards to adding a 72 hour notification to the authority in charge of maintenance of the highways. If our restoration efforts involved access to a single geographic area or a single address (for example point A to point B and back), this would not be so difficult. Given the nature of outage restoration, most often we require multiple trips, to multiple areas on different roads, many times not directly associated with the address (or addresses) that are experiencing the outage. The sheer magnitude of keeping track of these records would be difficult, if not impossible.

Passage of Senate Bill 80 would provide our field personnel the authority for road access to make restoration efforts more efficient and minimize outage duration time. Thank you for allowing me to provide my testimony.

Pete Wurl

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