

[← Back to Original Article](#)

Editorial

Roadblock to free trade

It's time to comply with NAFTA and open U.S. highways to Mexican trucks. Groups worried about safety and job security should work with President Obama to assuage their concerns.

January 15, 2012

Nearly 20 years after President Clinton signed the North American Free Trade Agreement, a key provision that grants Mexican trucks access to U.S. highways remains stalled. Staunch opposition from unions and consumer groups in this country, which argue that unsafe foreign trucks and inexperienced drivers put U.S. jobs and lives at risk, have successfully shut down even the most modest attempts to comply with NAFTA.

In October, the Obama administration tried again, with a pilot program granting three Mexican trucking firms limited access to U.S. roads. So far, just two carriers have sent trucks into the country — a small but positive development. But now, the Teamsters union and the consumer advocacy group Public Citizen have asked a federal judge in Washington to shut down the program because transportation officials failed to comply with national regulations that require environmental impact tests before starting any pilot program.

Their objections are specious, and old news. Both groups made the same sort of legal arguments when President George W. Bush announced plans to start a similar pilot program in 2001. And in 2004, the Supreme Court found that the Bush administration did not need to conduct environmental impact tests and that the U.S. could allow Mexican trucks across the border. The program was finally started in 2007 but came to a halt in 2009 when Congress pulled the funding.

If the Teamsters and other groups are so worried about safety and job security, they should work with the Obama administration to develop additional guidelines and tests that will assuage their concerns. The administration has already shown itself willing to collaborate by adopting some of their demands, such as requiring monitoring devices in all Mexican trucks as a way to track the number of hours drivers spend on the road, as well as mandatory drug testing and language proficiency rules — even though there is little reason to believe that Mexican drivers pose a greater hazard than Canadian truckers, who already have access to U.S. roads and are not required to meet similar standards. In fact, an 18-month study conducted during the Bush administration's pilot program found that the safety records of Mexican truckers were comparable to those of their U.S. counterparts.

The United States can't continue to violate its free-trade obligations. Mexico is too important a trade partner, and failure to meet our end of the bargain has already led to retaliation. In 2010, Mexico slapped hefty tariffs on nearly 100 U.S. products — including California wines, strawberries and oranges — totaling well over \$2 billion. The U.S. signed on to NAFTA. Isn't it time it made good on its word?

