



**House  
Legislative  
Analysis  
Section**

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**THE APPARENT PROBLEM:**

An increasing number of people are choosing to vacation in Michigan in so-called "fifth wheel" travel trailers — semitrailers designed for recreational living purposes that are constructed to be pulled by pickup trucks with fifth wheel coupling (that is, a hitch built into the bed of the truck and similar in design to the hitches on "semi" truck tractors). Many people vacationing in these "fifth wheelers" attach additional trailers behind their travel trailers in order to tow boats or other recreational vehicles. Although current law prohibits passenger vehicles from towing more than one trailer or vehicle, apparently some confusion exists concerning whether or not it is legal for a pickup truck to pull a trailer in addition to a "fifth wheel" travel trailer. In fact, according to one report, one motorist was given two contradictory opinions by state police officers in towns only 30 miles apart as he was driving north on vacation. Some believe the legislature should end this confusion by specifically allowing a pickup truck, under certain circumstances, to pull a "fifth wheel" travel trailer in addition to a trailer.

**THE CONTENT OF THE BILL:**

The bill would amend the Michigan Vehicle Code to prohibit pickup trucks from driving on highways pulling more than one vehicle or trailer unless the pickup truck and the additional vehicle met certain specifications. A pickup truck attached with a semitrailer designed for recreational living purposes could tow an additional trailer or semitrailer if the pickup truck weighed at least 8,500 pounds and was equipped with a fifth wheel assembly which conformed with motor carrier safety rules. (The "fifth wheel assembly" is a piece of metal located on the bed of pickup trucks which is attached to a metal arm originating from the vehicle being towed and which serves as a secure pivot point for both vehicles during a turn.) However, the additional trailer or semitrailer would have to be attached according to specifications in the act and safety chains used to secure the vehicle would have to be attached at the extreme outer edge of the additional semitrailer with a locking mechanism. In addition, the towing vehicle hitch would have to be of substantial material and would have to be attached in a proper and skillful manner to the frame of the towing vehicle. Also, the total length of the pickup truck, semitrailer designed for recreational living purposes, and additional trailer or semitrailer could not exceed 59 feet and the gross weight of the additional vehicle could not exceed the weight of the pickup truck or the weight of the semitrailer.

Under the bill, any vehicle towing a trailer or another vehicle would have to be attached in such a manner so that when the combination was operated in a straight line on a level, smooth, paved surface, the movement of the towed vehicle or trailer could not deviate more than three inches to either side of the path of the vehicle that towed it. This provision would replace language requiring that a vehicle being towed be attached in such a way as to

**PICKUPS HAULING "5TH-WHEEL" TRAILERS**

House Bill 4357 as introduced  
First Analysis (5-4-89)

**RECEIVED**

Sponsor: Rep. John D. Pridnia  
Committee: Transportation

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prevent it from being deflected more than six inches from the path of the towing vehicle's wheels.

MCL 257.721

**FISCAL IMPLICATIONS:**

According to the Department of State, the bill would not affect state expenditures. (5-3-89)

**ARGUMENTS:**

**For:**

Right now, vacationing motorists pulling "fifth wheelers" and various recreational trailers appear to be neither clearly allowed to engage in this practice nor prohibited from doing so. The growing popularity of these "fifth wheelers," not to mention the importance of tourism to the state, provides a compelling reason for Michigan to clearly legalize an existing practice. Not only would the bill remove existing confusion over the legality of the practice, it could also possibly make that practice safer by regulating it.

**Against:**

According to the Transportation Research Institute at the University of Michigan, there are inherent dynamic problems with articulated vehicle systems such as those that would be permitted by the bill. Although some combinations of a pickup truck pulling two trailers could be safe, other combinations would definitely be unsafe. The safety of a particular combination, moreover, depends on a variety of interrelated factors, including the distribution and selection of tires (many recreational trailers are "under tired"), the relative lengths of the two trailers, the weights and distribution of the loads on each trailer, and where the back hitch is located relative to the center axle of the first unit. However, the bill does not address all of these factors, and even when it does, certain problems remain. For example, although the gross weight of the second trailer relative to the pickup and the lead trailer does affect the performance of the entire combination, it does not do so in any simple way. If the pickup and lead trailer were massive relative to the second trailer, the combination would be relatively safe. But if the second trailer weighed as much as the first, there could still be safety problems, depending on the other factors mentioned above. What is more, some of the provisions intended to address the safety issues do not do so. For example, according to the Transportation Research Institute, there is no recognized road safety test for the provision requiring that trailers be attached in such a way that they do not swerve more than three inches to either side of the towing vehicle when pulled in a straight line on a smooth, level, paved surface. And even if there were specifications for performing such a test, the test would not address the dynamic problems inherent in articulated vehicle systems. The institute has conducted research for the legislature on double-bottom commercial rigs carrying flammable liquids and currently is conducting research for

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the Michigan Department of Transportation on the feasibility of 53-foot semitrailer length limits. Before proceeding with House Bill 4357, the legislature might well request further research into the safety issues involved.

***Against:***

Quite apart from the complex dynamic problems of two-articulated vehicle combinations, however, is the issue of whether or not the average recreational driver has the skill and experience necessary to safely guide such loads. A pickup truck and trailer combination totaling up to 59 feet in length requires a kind of skill and experience that many, if not most, recreational drivers do not possess. The driver often is unable to see the second trailer behind the travel trailer, and definitely needs special driving skills to avoid signs, curbs, trees, parked cars, and other obstacles when turning at intersections or stopping at rest stops, service stations, state parks, and other locations. If recreational drivers are to be allowed to tow such loads, they at least ought to be required to obtain special licenses (along the lines of those required of truck drivers) demonstrating a minimum level of skill and experience. In addition, minimum mirror requirements ought to be specified.

***POSITIONS:***

The Michigan Association of Recreational Vehicles and Campgrounds (MARVAC) supports the bill. (5-3-89)

The Department of State Police takes no position on the bill. (5-3-89)

The Department of State opposes the bill. (5-3-89)

AAA Michigan opposes the bill. (5-3-89)

The Office of Highway Safety Planning within the Department of State Police opposes the bill. (5-3-89)