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House  
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## PICKUPS HAULING "5TH-WHEEL" TRAILERS

House Bill 4357 as enrolled  
Second Analysis (8-1-90)

Sponsor: Rep. John D. Pridnia  
House Committee: Transportation  
Senate Committee: State Affairs, Tourism, &  
Transportation

### 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). Apparently, some 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 as to whether 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 both a fifth wheel trailer and another vehicle or trailer.

### THE CONTENT OF THE BILL:

The bill would amend the Vehicle Code to prohibit a pickup truck from pulling more than one vehicle or trailer unless certain conditions were met; require a person to obtain an R vehicle endorsement before operating such a vehicle combination; revise coupling device requirements; and prohibit a pickup with a fifth wheel assembly from towing a semitrailer unless the assembly conformed to a motor carrier safety rule that governs this device. (The "fifth wheel assembly" is a piece of metal located on the bed of a pickup truck 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.)

**Requirements For Towing Additional Vehicles.** A pickup truck with a towing rating equal to, or greater than, the weight being towed, equipped with a fifth wheel assembly which conformed with motor carrier safety rules, towing a semitrailer designed for recreational living purposes could tow an additional trailer or semitrailer under the following conditions:

- The additional trailer or semitrailer would have to be attached according to the bill's specifications 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 towing vehicle's frame;
- The total length of the pickup, 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 empty weight of the pickup truck or the empty weight of the semitrailer.

**R Vehicle Endorsement.** Before operating such a combination, a person would have to obtain an R vehicle endorsement, unless he or she had a Group A or B designation with a T vehicle endorsement. (A Group A designation is required when a vehicle being towed weighs over 10,000 pounds; Group B is required for a single vehicle weighing over 26,000 pounds, or a combination of vehicles with a weight over 26,000 pounds if the vehicle being towed does not weigh over 10,000 pounds; and a T endorsement applies to commercial motor vehicles pulling double or triple trailers.) Before a person could be issued an original R vehicle endorsement, he or she would have to pass a written examination and pay a \$10 fee, which would be in addition to any other original or renewal license fee. An R vehicle endorsement could not be issued to a person under 18.

**Attachment of Vehicles.** Currently, a vehicle or trailer drawn by another vehicle must be attached to that vehicle with coupling devices that will prevent the vehicle/trailer from being deflected more than six inches from the path of the towing vehicle's wheels. The bill would require, instead, that the vehicle or trailer be attached with coupling devices such that when the combination "is operated in a linear alignment on a level, smooth, paved surface," the distance of deviation is not more than three inches "to either side of the path of the towing vehicle."

**Other Provisions.** A pickup truck towing a semitrailer and additional trailer would be considered a passenger vehicle and would have to comply with the speed limit requirements that apply to such a vehicle combination. (The act generally sets a maximum of 55 miles per hour for these vehicles.) Finally, the bill would require the Office of Highway Safety and Planning to compile a study and report to the legislature on the bill's effect on highway safety within two years after it took effect.

MCL 257.312i and 257.721

### FISCAL IMPLICATIONS:

According to the Senate Fiscal Agency (SFA), the bill would have an indeterminate fiscal impact on the state and local governments. Revenues collected from and costs of issuing an R vehicle endorsement on an operator's or chauffeur's license could not be estimated. Other costs could be incurred depending on the number of violations and convictions. Also, according to the SFA, the Office of Highway Safety and Planning indicated that the study required under the bill would not affect budget expenditures of the Department of State Police. (4-24-90)

H.B. 4357 (8-1-90)

OVER

## **ARGUMENTS:**

### ***For:***

Currently, vacationing motorists pulling "fifth wheelers" and various recreational trailers appear to be neither clearly permitted to nor prohibited from doing so. The growing popularity of 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. In addition, the bill would require a special licensing endorsement for those who wished to drive these vehicle combinations and, thus, would ensure that persons driving them had the needed skills to safely do so.

### ***Against:***

According to the Transportation Research Institute at the University of Michigan, the third vehicle in a fifth wheel assembly should be only a semitrailer, not a trailer. Unlike a semitrailer, which has only one set of wheels, a trailer is a self-supporting vehicle, with wheels on both the back and the front that are steerable by an independent tongue that goes to the front vehicle. Because a trailer can be pivoted separately, it has a greater potential for instability.

### ***Against:***

It is questionable whether the average recreational driver has the skill and experience needed to safely guide "recreational doubles" up to 59 feet long. The driver often is unable to see the second trailer behind the travel trailer and 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. Although the bill would require drivers to pass a written test and procure an R vehicle endorsement, the Department of State believes that these requirements would be difficult to enforce. The department also reports that the bill would make Michigan the only state in the region to permit pickup trucks to tow two trailers.