

Opening of border to trucks appears delayed

by Paul M. Krawzak

WASHINGTON - The Bush administration appears to be delaying the start of a one-year experiment that would allow 100 Mexican carriers free access to U.S. highways for the first time since 1982.

Congressional critics of the plan said they have been told by U.S. transportation officials that the administration will comply with legislation to delay the program until U.S. truckers receive the equivalent right to travel throughout Mexico.

Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., a sponsor of the measure, was informed about the change in plans by officials earlier this week.

"We were told the department would comply with the legislation even though there has not been an announcement," Feinstein spokesman Scott Gerber said. "If that's the case, Sen. Feinstein thinks that's great news."

The measure, also sponsored by Sens. Patty Murray, D-Wash., and Byron Dorgan, D-N.D., is part of a larger emergency spending bill that won passage in Congress this week.

The spending bill faces an uncertain future as President Bush has vowed to veto it because it contains a timetable for U.S. forces to withdraw from Iraq.

Melissa DeLaney, a spokesman for the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration, declined to confirm or deny that the agency will delay the program.

But she said the administration remains committed to opening the border and continues to work with congressional critics to address their concerns.

Critics - including Rep. Duncan Hunter, R-Alpine - charge the administration has failed to prove that Mexican drivers will meet the same safety standards as American carriers.

The administration insists the program is safe.

Another complaint is that under an agreement worked out between the United States and Mexico, American drivers would not be granted access to Mexican roads until up to six months after the program begins.

As recently as last week, U.S. transportation officials said they were pressing forward with the program and expected to certify the first Mexican carriers allowed to participate by early May.

DeLaney said Thursday she could not predict when the program would start.

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