Critics of program fear Mexican trucks will pose a danger

by Paul M. Krawzak - CNS

WASHINGTON - Bush Administration plans to allow Mexican trucks to travel throughout the United States for the first time since 1982 will have to be modified - and could be delayed - as a result of bill about to become law.

The emergency war funding bill approved by Congress Thursday night includes requirements that the Department of Transportation get approval from its inspector general before it can open the border to unrestricted truck traffic from Mexico and disclose additional information on its plans.

The White House opposed the restrictive language but President Bush said he will sign the bill because it provides $100 billion for troops in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The bill requires the transportation department to get certification from its inspector general that the one-year experimental program is in compliance with more than a dozen safety conditions laid out by Congress before it can go forward.

It also includes a provision authored by Rep. Duncan Hunter, R-Alpine, requiring the government to publish how it will enforce requirements that Mexican drivers be able to communicate in English.

In addition, the bill compels the agency to publish details of U.S. safety audits of Mexican trucking companies authorized to participate in the program.

Administration officials contend their plan already has sufficient safeguards and is necessary to fulfill U.S. commitments to eliminate trade barriers under the North American Free Trade Agreement.

"The administration remains committed to implementing the cross-border trucking demonstration program while working with Congress to make good on a 14-year promise that will greatly benefit the American economy," the Department of Transportation said in a statement.

Mexican Embassy officials declined to comment on the legislation.

Critics of the administration program, who fear that Mexican trucks will pose a danger on U.S. highways,

applauded the new restrictions.

A spokesman for Hunter said the congressman views the requirements as a good "starting point." But spokesman Michael Harrison said Hunter will continue to press for passage of more far-reaching restrictions that have been approved by the House but not the Senate.

Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., also expressed satisfaction with the bill, which would prohibit Mexican trucks from crossing the border until American trucks are allowed into Mexico.

The Teamsters Union, a key critic of the program along with highway safety groups, praised the bill.

"We're encouraged that these additional provisions were included," Teamsters lobbyist Fred McLuckie said.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce, which backs administration efforts to open the border to Mexican trucks, said the restrictions are not as onerous as they could have been.

However, chamber spokeswoman Janet Kavinoky said she fears that opponents of the program may seize on additional details of the program that have to be published by the government to try to undermine it.

"If you take any piece of data in isolation you can create a story out of it," she said.

Critics of program fear Mexican trucks will pose a danger by Paul M. Krawzak - CNS