

Taking lobbying to new lengths

Efforts by the European Commission to enforce border restrictions on loaded truck lengths could hurt efficiency if the sector does not act, writes **Costantino Baldissara**



“**O**ne of the roles that we set ourselves at ECG is ‘lobbying and representation’. This is one of the five core objectives that collectively make up our mission statement. As an industry we can either choose to sit back, see what our legislators decide and then find the best way to work within the constraints, or we can opt to try to influence their decisions and help determine our own future.

One good example arose in 2010 when the changes to the legislation governing cabotage came into effect. Only then did we understand the impact this would have on the UK market, where it would restrict the long-standing practice of bringing in trucks from elsewhere in Europe to support the two market peaks each year. Without this additional resource there is insufficient capacity to achieve the required lead times. We are proud to say that ECG was instrumental in initiating and leading a three-year campaign, which resulted in getting the UK government to introduce legislation at a national level to relax the rules that Brussels had introduced. This allowed the market to return to a proven and efficient way of working. Along the way we enlisted the help of other organisations in the sector, notably the SMMT and the Road Haulage Association, and our combined voices delivered this result in a remarkably short time in political terms.

Now we are flexing our muscles in Brussels – and indeed in Strasbourg. For many years we have campaigned for a Europe-wide harmonisation of the many different national rules for vehicle transporters that govern the allowable loaded length and permit a variety of front and rear overhangs according with the cargo. However, this long-term objective has been somewhat overtaken by the proposals of the European Commission for replacing the relevant Directive, known as 96/53/EC, and given us new focus.

Why would we suddenly change our objectives? The reason is simple. For years we have seen this area as an opportunity to improve our operating environment and to improve efficiency. Now we see that without action the new legislation could result in a serious step backwards for our industry in Europe. Despite initially recognising our niche sector as a special case, and including vehicle transporters in the public consultation that they launched, the European Commission eventually decided not to include us in their revision proposals. However, their proposals are likely to remove some of the grey areas in existing legislation and put increased

focus on enforcement by the member states. All of this means that, if we do nothing, we could find that any international vehicle transporter crossing the border of any member state could be restricted to a loaded length of 18.75 metres. In other words, we could lose all the various overhangs at the front and rear that have been permitted at national level in previous years.

The potential downside is that we could easily lose two vehicles off every load on international movements! The results can be easily imagined: more fuel, more costs, and more CO₂. In turn this means more transporters needed adding to the problem of congestion. This is why we must act.

So what can we do? The European Commission let us down but the legislative process is now in the hands of the European Parliament and, specifically, with the members of the European Parliament (MEPs) who sit on the Transport & Tourism Committee (known as TRAN). We have been working hard to garner their support and to get amendments tabled in support of our cause. The next step will be to make sure that we have enough members of TRAN supporting us to get a majority on our side when this is voted on by the committee on 11th February. All of this means spending time with them, not only in Brussels but also in Strasbourg, where contact can be easier.

Of course, even if we are successful in achieving this there is still a long way to go and the European Parliament is scheduled to vote in plenary in mid-April. All of this is making the art of finished vehicle logistics look simple by comparison, but by now you are probably asking “What can I do to help?”. Well, anyone can contact the MEPs in their area whose job it is to represent them. You should certainly use the position paper, which is available on our website (<http://www.ecgassociation.eu/home.aspx>). The more that we get to with this message the better and the ECG Secretariat stands ready to support wherever possible.

Sadly, and despite these planned dates, we cannot count on anything in 2014 yet. At the end of May, we will all be electing our MEPs for the next five years. Some estimates expect that 50% of the current members will not return. Even worse, the plenary vote could well be delayed and slip into the new parliament. That means we could have to start the education and lobbying process all over again. But for now we will stay focused and our New Year’s wish will be to see a satisfactory resolution to this long-standing issue. ◊