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*...from the
director's chair*

60-foot containers: Here we grow again

The trouble with normal is it always gets worse, or so said Bruce Cockburn back in the 1980s. It's a warning of sorts that if we don't tackle our problems, we're on a slippery slope. If you're skeptical of a new normal, Canadian Tire's recent announcement that it has a 60-ft. intermodal container in the prototype stage probably gave you the fantods.

The naysayers will see this as an upending of the status quo requiring enormous expenditures for new equipment to keep up with customer demand; others will lament the idea of having to haul more stuff around for the same money.

But for those who welcome a new normal, these 60-ft. intermodal containers will be viewed as a ground-breaking move to increase productivity, maybe even one that lessens trucking's carbon footprint through improvements in freight efficiency; that is, moving more stuff with about the same amount of fuel.

For many years, normal was a 45-ft. trailer, with its roughly 3,200 cu.-ft. capacity. Trucking readily adopted 48-ft. trailers in the early 1980s, but industry veterans will recall the wailing and gnashing of teeth that preceded the introduction of 53-ft. trailers less than 10 years later. Industry had made substantial investments in 48-ft. trailers, and with many of them barely paid off, along came the 53-footer.

Canadian jurisdictions, Ontario in particular, were reluctant to allow the longer trailers, but with more and more of them showing up at the border thanks to the liberalization of US size and weight regulations, we pretty much had to go along with the change. Provinces and territories finally agreed to their widespread use in a 1994 amendment to the MOU on Interprovincial Weights and Dimensions.

Now, after nearly 20 years with the 53-footer, some sectors of the industry are looking seriously at 60-foot trailers – or more to the point – 60-ft. long intermodal containers, which presumably

will ride on container chassis of similar length.

Canadian Tire Corporation revealed plans recently (see story on pg 58) to begin testing 60-ft. long intermodal containers for domestic use, and says it already has the support of CP Rail, various Ministries of Transportation in Canada, and even a nod from the American Association of Railroads. While it may be some time before these big boxes make their way into the US, it seems Canada is ready to give them a whirl. And with a capacity of about 4,400 cu.-ft., why not?

It's been two decades since we have seen any real innovation in trailers. The industry has been preoccupied coping with new emissions systems and a ton of other regulatory requirements, so there hasn't been much horsepower left for this kind of forward-thinking. That all changed with the Walmart supercube truck.

When Walmart began thinking about the project, it consulted with several design experts, including those who helped craft Canadian truck configurations to comply with progressively more complex weights and dimensions. Much to everyone's surprise, it was determined that the truck fits into the existing envelope for a standard five-axle tractor-trailer combination. It looks huge, but inch for inch, the truck is totally legal.

Interestingly, the performance standards we use today have been around since the late 1980s. There was an agreement at the time that vehicle configurations going forward would be based on certain performance standards, the maximums being a two-metre swept radius on the trailer kingpin, a 12.5-metre wheelbase, and a 35% rear overhang. To everyone's surprise, even back then, the resulting possible trailer box length turned out to be 61 feet. Why nobody has gone back to those standards until now, with an eye toward maximizing the available cargo space, is anyone's guess. But it's as legal now as it was when the performance



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standards were first drawn up.

The Walmart truck behaves the same as a traditional 53-ft. tractor-trailer in all its dynamic testing, so from where the rubber meets the road, the truck is no different from anything else we are pulling today.

While we haven't yet seen any pictures from Canadian Tire, I have to assume the chassis the container sits on, like the Walmart trailer, will meet the performance standards laid out almost 25 years ago. It will be capable of being pulled by any day cab tractor, which one assumes will have a similar wheelbase to Walmart's COE tractor. That means virtually any drayage operator with a similar tractor will be able to pull the thing.

Much of Canadian Tire's freight, like Walmart's, is high-cube low-density cargo, meaning the overall weight won't be an issue, but the prospect of getting an additional payload of 13% (Canadian Tire's estimate) is pretty compelling. Transportation today is all about productivity, with a healthy measure of emissions reductions, be they CO₂, PM, NO_x or whatever. Moving an additional volume of cargo with the same amount of fuel and corresponding emissions is an achievement to be proud of.

Many drivers won't be happy with the idea of pulling a larger container, but really, it's not the larger container that puts them off, it's hauling it for the same money. I think drivers deserve a share of the spoils too, but that's up to the carrier, I suppose.

Drivers always have a choice of where they work, so when carriers start bidding on Canadian Tire jobs, the savvy ones will make sure there's a bit of extra money in it for the drivers too. Now, that's a new normal I'd like to see.