

4.3: Dormant Commerce Clause

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Understand that when Congress does not exercise its powers under the commerce clause, the Supreme Court may still limit state legislation that discriminates against interstate commerce or places an undue burden on interstate commerce.
- Distinguish between “discrimination” dormant-commerce-clause cases and “undue burden” dormant-commerce-clause cases.

Congress has the power to legislate under the commerce clause and often does legislate. For example, Congress might say that trucks moving on interstate highways must not be more than seventy feet in length. But if Congress does not exercise its powers and regulate in certain areas (such as the size and length of trucks on interstate highways), states may make their own rules. States may do so under the so-called historic police powers of states that were never yielded up to the federal government.

These police powers can be broadly exercised by states for purposes of health, education, welfare, safety, morals, and the environment. But the Supreme Court has reserved for itself the power to determine when state action is excessive, even when Congress has not used the commerce clause to regulate. This power is claimed to exist in the dormant commerce clause.

There are two ways that a state may violate the dormant commerce clause. If a state passes a law that is an “undue burden” on interstate commerce or that “discriminates” against interstate commerce, it will be struck down. *Kassel v. Consolidated Freightways*, in Section 4.7, is an example of a case where Iowa imposed an undue burden on interstate commerce by prohibiting double trailers on its highways. *Kassell v. Consolidated Freightways*, 450 US 662 (1981). Iowa’s prohibition was judicially declared void when the Supreme Court judged it to be an undue burden.

Discrimination cases such as *Hunt v. Washington Apple Advertising Commission* (Section 4.6) pose a different standard. The court has been fairly inflexible here: if one state discriminates in its treatment of any article of commerce based on its state of origin, the court will strike down the law. For example, in *Oregon Waste Systems v. Department of Environmental Quality*, the state wanted to place a slightly higher charge on waste coming from out of state. *Oregon Waste Systems v. Department of Environmental Quality*, 511 US 93 (1994). The state’s reasoning was that in-state residents had already contributed to roads and other infrastructure and that tipping fees at waste facilities should reflect the prior contributions of in-state companies and residents. Out-of-state waste handlers who wanted to use Oregon landfills objected and won their dormant commerce clause claim that Oregon’s law discriminated “on its face” against interstate commerce. Under the Supreme Court’s rulings, anything that moves in channels of interstate commerce is “commerce,” even if someone is paying to get rid of something instead of buying something.

Thus the states are bound by Supreme Court decisions under the dormant commerce clause to do nothing that differentiates between articles of commerce that originate from within the state from those that originate elsewhere. If Michigan were to let counties decide for themselves whether to take garbage from outside of the county or not, this could also be a discrimination based on a place of origin outside the state. (Suppose, for instance, each county were to decide not to take waste from outside the county; then all Michigan counties would effectively be excluding waste from outside of Michigan, which is discriminatory.) *Fort Gratiot Sanitary Landfill v. Michigan Dep’t of Natural Resources*, 504 US 353 (1992).

The Supreme Court probably would uphold any solid waste requirements that did not differentiate on the basis of origin. If, for example, all waste had to be inspected for specific hazards, then the law would apply equally to in-state and out-of-state garbage. Because this is the dormant commerce clause, Congress could still act (i.e., it could use its broad commerce clause powers) to say that states are free to keep out-of-state waste from coming into their own borders. But Congress has declined to do so. What follows is a statement from one of the US senators from Michigan, Carl Levin, in 2003, regarding the significant amounts of waste that were coming into Michigan from Toronto, Canada.

Dealing with Unwelcome Waste

Senator Carl Levin, January 2003

Michigan is facing an intolerable situation with regard to the importation of waste from other states and Canada.

Canada is the largest source of waste imports to Michigan. Approximately 65 truckloads of waste come in to Michigan per day from Toronto alone, and an estimated 110–130 trucks come in from Canada each day.

This problem isn't going to get any better. Ontario's waste shipments are growing as the Toronto area signs new contracts for waste disposal here and closes its two remaining landfills. At the beginning of 1999, the Toronto area was generating about 2.8 million tons of waste annually, about 700,000 tons of which were shipped to Michigan. By early this year, barring unforeseen developments, the entire 2.8 million tons will be shipped to Michigan for disposal.

Why can't Canada dispose of its trash in Canada? They say that after 20 years of searching they have not been able to find a suitable Ontario site for Toronto's garbage. Ontario has about 345,000 square miles compared to Michigan's 57,000 square miles. With six times the land mass, that argument is laughable.

The Michigan Department of Environmental Quality estimates that, for every five years of disposal of Canadian waste at the current usage volume, Michigan is losing a full year of landfill capacity. The environmental impacts on landfills, including groundwater contamination, noise pollution and foul odors, are exacerbated by the significant increase in the use of our landfills from sources outside of Michigan.

I have teamed up with Senator Stabenow and Congressman Dingell to introduce legislation that would strengthen our ability to stop shipments of waste from Canada.

We have protections contained in a 17 year-old international agreement between the U.S. and Canada called the Agreement Concerning the Transboundary Movement of Hazardous Waste. The U.S. and Canada entered into this agreement in 1986 to allow the shipment of hazardous waste across the U.S./Canadian border for treatment, storage or disposal. In 1992, the two countries decided to add municipal solid waste to the agreement. To protect both countries, the agreement requires notification of shipments to the importing country and it also provides that the importing country may withdraw consent for shipments. Both reasons are evidence that these shipments were intended to be limited. However, the agreement's provisions have not been enforced by the United States.

Canada could not export waste to Michigan without the 1986 agreement, but the U.S. has not implemented the provisions that are designed to protect the people of Michigan. Although those of us that introduced this legislation believe that the Environmental Protection Agency has the authority to enforce this agreement, they have not done so. Our bill would require the EPA [Environmental Protection Agency] to enforce the agreement.

In order to protect the health and welfare of the citizens of Michigan and our environment, we must consider the impact of the importation of trash on state and local recycling efforts, landfill capacity, air emissions, road deterioration resulting from increased vehicular traffic and public health and the environment.

Our bill would require the EPA to consider these factors in determining whether to accept imports of trash from Canada. It is my strong view that such a review should lead the EPA to say "no" to the status quo of trash imports.

Key Takeaway

Where Congress does not act pursuant to its commerce clause powers, the states are free to legislate on matters of commerce under their historic police powers. However, the Supreme Court has set limits on such powers. Specifically, states may not impose undue burdens on interstate commerce and may not discriminate against articles in interstate commerce.

Exercises

1. Suppose that the state of New Jersey wishes to limit the amount of hazardous waste that enters into its landfills. The general assembly in New Jersey passes a law that specifically forbids any hazardous waste from entering into the state. All landfills are subject to tight regulations that will allow certain kinds of hazardous wastes originating in New Jersey to be put in New Jersey landfills but that impose significant criminal fines on landfill operators that accept out-of-state hazardous waste. The Baldessari Brothers Landfill in Linden, New Jersey, is fined for taking hazardous waste from a New York State transporter and appeals that ruling on the basis that New Jersey's law is unconstitutional. What is the result?
2. The state of Arizona determines through its legislature that trains passing through the state cannot be longer than seventy cars. There is some evidence that in Eastern US states longer trains pose some safety hazards. There is less evidence that long trains are a problem in Western states. Several major railroads find the Arizona legislation costly and burdensome and challenge the legislation after applied-for permits for longer trains are denied. What kind of dormant commerce clause challenge is this, and what would it take for the challenge to be successful?

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