



White House has weighed tapping National Guard to address mounting supply chain backlog

The idea appears unlikely to proceed but underscores extent of administration brainstorming to resolve snags

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October 19, 2021

White House officials have explored in recent weeks whether the National Guard could be deployed to help address the nation's mounting supply chain backlog, three people with knowledge of the matter said.

The idea appears unlikely to proceed as of now, the people said, but reflects the extent to which internal administration deliberations about America's overwhelmed supply chain have sparked outside-the-box proposals to leverage government resources to address the issue.

The people involved in discussions stressed the White House has looked at the option as part of its due diligence in assessing all potential ways to address the backlog, which has slowed down imports and shipping all over the country. One person with knowledge of the matter said the White House has not considered activating the National Guard at a federal level but could instead work through states to deploy service members.

Major questions remain unresolved as to how the National Guard could be deployed, given the extent of the logistical challenges. White House officials have weighed whether members of the guard could drive trucks amid a shortage of operators, or if they could be used to help unload

packages and other materials at ports or other clogged parts of the supply chain. As part of the review, White House officials have studied what kinds of driver's licenses are held by National Guard members and if they would be sufficient to deploy them as truckers without hurting their ability to fulfill their existing responsibilities to the guard, the people said.

The discussions have involved senior members of President Biden's economic team, as well as those tasked with addressing supply chain bottlenecks at the Transportation Department, the people said. At least one private sector company has also raised the idea with the White House.

The people spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss internal deliberations that have not yet been made public.

The supply chain bottleneck has emerged as a major challenge for Biden as concerns mount about the coming holiday shopping season. The backlog has been caused primarily by a spike in demand and changing economic behavior during the coronavirus pandemic.

The White House announced last week that the Biden administration has a new plan to keep the Port of Los Angeles open "24 hours a day, seven days a week," while also touting commitments from private sector firms to use the expanded hours to try to clear the backlog and expedite shipping of goods.

The Labor Department and Agriculture Department are also working on ways to help agricultural exporters, while the Transportation Department has tried helping states issue more commercial vehicle licenses while exploring other ways to resolve the trucker shortage.

Part of the difficulty facing the White House is that much of the supply chain is controlled by private operators both in and outside the United States, limiting their options.

"The challenge is that many industrial and consumer goods rely on truly global supply chains, and the production and distribution that occurs within the United States involves thousands of private firms," said Kevin DeGood, director of infrastructure policy at the Center for American Progress, a think tank that is often supportive of Biden administration economic policies. "There isn't one pinch point but many that fall mostly outside the direct control of governments."

A White House spokeswoman pointed to Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg's remarks on "Meet the Press" on Sunday, in which he responded to a question about the National Guard by saying, "We're constantly going to reevaluate all our options." Buttigieg also said, "Right now, we're focused on some other steps that we think are making a difference," such as making it easier for commercial drivers to receive licenses.

The American Apparel and Footwear Association has sent a letter to the Biden administration touting "creative ideas" to deal with the backlog, including using either the National Guard or naval ports to help unload cargo, drive trucks and take other measures.

Asked about that request, White House press secretary Jen Psaki on Tuesday said she would not "take options off the table" but said the administration had made progress on resolving the backlog.

Scott Lincicome, a senior fellow in economic studies at the Cato Institute, criticized the idea of deploying National Guard members to the Southern California ports.

"It strikes me as entirely fanciful unless the National Guardsmen have experience in any of the aspects of ports and logistics work that would be needed," he said.

While labor shortages have contributed to the supply bottlenecks, the need is for skilled personnel such as commercial truck drivers. There are also security considerations: Drivers must undergo a background check and obtain a government-issued Transportation Worker Identification Credential, called a TWIC card, before being allowed to enter a U.S. port. And even if the guard were deployed, they would confront the same shortages of truck chassis and other specialized gear that have bedeviled supply chains all year.