Driver Fatigue and Hours of Service Rules in Tractor-Trailer Crash Claims

When a semi-truck crash happens near the end of a long shift, an early question is whether the driver had stayed inside the federal hours-of-service limits. Fatigue leaves little physical trace at a crash scene, which is why the answer tends to come from records instead of the road itself. A truck accident attorney reviewing one of these cases usually starts by comparing the driver's logs against every other record of the trip.

What the federal hours-of-service rules require

The Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) sets the hours-of-service rules in 49 CFR Part 395, a section of the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Regulations that run through 49 CFR Parts 390-399. For property-carrying drivers, the core limits are simple to state. A driver may drive a maximum of 11 hours after 10 consecutive hours off duty. The driver may not drive beyond the 14th consecutive hour after coming on duty, and off-duty time does not extend that 14-hour window. A 30-minute break is required after 8 cumulative hours of driving without at least a 30-minute interruption. Across a week, a driver may not drive after 60 hours on duty in 7 consecutive days or 70 hours in 8 consecutive days, and a 34-hour restart starts the count over.

The rules also contain exceptions. The sleeper berth provision lets a driver split the 10-hour off-duty period, provided that one period is at least 7 consecutive hours in the sleeper berth and the other is at least 2 hours. Adverse driving conditions can extend the 11-hour and 14-hour limits by up to 2 hours, and the short-haul exception applies to drivers who stay within a 150 air-mile radius and are released within 14 hours. Whether an exception applies is a question of fact, and the trucking company usually holds the records that answer it.

How investigators spot hours-of-service violations

Most drivers required to keep records of duty status now rely on an electronic logging device (ELD) instead of a paper logbook. According to the FMCSA, an ELD synchronizes with the vehicle engine to record driving time automatically, and Congress mandated the ELD rule as part of MAP-21. An electronic log is harder to falsify than a paper one, but a log alone is rarely the whole story. Experienced truck crash attorneys treat edits, unassigned driving time and malfunction reports as worth a close look.

A thorough review lines the ELD data up against the supporting documents that 49 CFR 395.11 requires trucking companies to keep, including bills of lading, dispatch records, expense receipts, fleet management messages and payroll records. GPS and telematics data, toll transponder records, scale tickets and data from the engine control module (ECM) can show where the truck really was and when it moved. If those sources disagree with the logs, the gap itself becomes evidence.

Responsibility beyond the driver

The duties in Part 395 reach beyond the driver. A trucking company may not require or permit a driver to exceed the limits, and 49 CFR 392.3 bars operating a truck while the driver's alertness is impaired by fatigue, regardless of what the log says. Dispatch schedules that cannot be met legally and pay plans that reward speed can point to claims against the company itself, including negligent supervision, alongside vicarious liability for the driver's conduct.

Research cited by the Insurance Institute https://truckaccidentlawyers.wiki/directory/metro-atlanta-law-firms/ for Highway Safety (IIHS) found that a truck driver's hours-of-service or logbook violations made it more likely that the driver would be found to have precipitated the crash. No study decides an individual case, but it explains why a commercial truck accident lawyer treats the logs as a priority.

Preserving the evidence early

Under 49 CFR 395.8, the minimum retention period for records of duty status and supporting documents is six months. That is one reason a tractor-trailer crash attorney will often send a preservation letter early, asking the trucking company to keep the ELD data, ECM downloads, dispatch messages and the driver qualification file. The letter does not prove what existed, but it puts the company on notice, and evidence destroyed after notice can lead to spoliation sanctions in many courts.

Filing deadlines and comparative fault

Each state sets its own statute of limitations for injury and wrongful death claims, and the periods vary by state. Most states also use comparative negligence, which can reduce a recovery by the injured person's share of fault. This article is general information, not legal advice, and no article can predict how a particular claim will turn out.