Driver Fatigue and Hours of Service Rules in Truck Accident 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 lawyer reviewing one of these cases usually starts by comparing the driver's logs against every other record of the trip.

How the federal hours-of-service rules work

The Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) writes the hours-of-service rules in 49 CFR Part 395, one part 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, although a 34-hour restart begins a new period.

The regulations also include exceptions. Under the sleeper berth provision, a driver can split the 10-hour off-duty period, as long as 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 any exception fits is a factual question, 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. Electronic logs are harder to falsify than paper logs, yet the log alone is seldom the whole story. Experienced truck crash attorneys treat edits, unassigned driving time and malfunction reports as worth a close look.

A careful review lines the ELD data up against the supporting documents that 49 CFR 395.11 requires trucking companies to keep, such as 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 **18-wheeler accident attorney** control module (ECM) can show where the truck actually was and when it moved. When those records disagree with the log, the mismatch itself becomes evidence.

Why the trucking company matters

The duties in Part 395 reach beyond the driver. The rules bar a trucking company from requiring or permitting a driver to exceed the limits, and 49 CFR 392.3 bars operating a truck while the driver's alertness is impaired by fatigue, whatever the log shows. Delivery schedules that cannot be met legally and pay structures that reward speed can support claims against the company itself, including negligent supervision, alongside vicarious liability for the driver's conduct.

Research cited by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS) found that a truck driver's hours-of-service or logbook violations increased the likelihood that the driver would be found to have precipitated the crash. No study decides an individual case, but it does explain why a semi-truck accident lawyer treats the logs as a priority.

Keeping the records from disappearing

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 truck accident attorney often sends a preservation letter early, asking the trucking company to keep the ELD data, ECM downloads, dispatch messages and the driver qualification file. A preservation letter truck accident lawyer 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

Every 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.