How Hours of Service Violations Can Shape a Tractor-Trailer Crash Claim

After a tractor-trailer crash on a long-haul route, an early question is whether the driver was within the federal hours-of-service limits. Fatigue leaves little physical trace at a crash scene, so the answer usually comes from records rather than the roadway. A truck accident lawyer looking at one of these claims 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 found in 49 CFR Parts 390-399. The core limits for property-carrying drivers are simple to state on paper. A driver can 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. Over the 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 begins a new period.

The regulations also include exceptions. The sleeper berth provision lets a driver 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 covers drivers who remain inside a 150 air-mile radius and are released within 14 hours. Whether an exception applies is a question of fact, and the trucking company typically has the records that answer it.

Finding an hours-of-service violation

Most drivers who must keep records of duty status now use an electronic logging device (ELD) rather than paper logs. The FMCSA explains that 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 accident attorneys know that edits, unassigned driving time and malfunction reports deserve a close look.

A careful review compares the ELD data with 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 **semi tractor-trailer lawyers** control module (ECM) can show where the truck actually was and when it moved. If those sources disagree with the logs, the gap itself becomes evidence.

Why the trucking company matters

Part 395 places duties on more than 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, whatever the log shows. Delivery schedules that cannot be met legally and pay plans 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 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 truck crash attorney puts the logs near the front of the line.

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 often sends 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 gives the company notice, and destroying evidence after notice can lead to spoliation sanctions in many courts.

Deadlines and shared fault

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