

How Truck Driver Fatigue and Hours-of-Service Violations Lead to Crashes

A Fort Worth truck accident attorney can hold negligent parties accountable

You're driving home on I-35 when an 18-wheeler drifts across the lane line and slams into your vehicle. There was no ice, no blowout, no sudden obstacle. The truck simply stopped responding the way a properly controlled vehicle should.

What you may not learn until much later is that the driver had been on the road for far longer than the law allows and that the trucking company either knew it or didn't bother to check. That combination of exhaustion and corporate pressure is one of the most predictable and preventable causes of catastrophic [truck accidents](#) on Texas highways, and it happens far too often.

[Coby L. Wooten, Attorney at Law, P.C.](#) has decades of experience investigating truck accidents across Fort Worth, Dallas, Arlington, and throughout North Texas. We've handled many fatigue-related cases, and the pattern almost never changes. A driver pushed past their legal limit, a company looking the other way, and an innocent person left to deal with the consequences. Understanding how hours-of-service violations work and what they mean for your legal rights is one of the most important things you can do if you've been hurt by a tired truck driver.

What driver fatigue actually does to a person behind the wheel

Fatigue isn't just feeling sleepy. It's a physiological state that progressively degrades the cognitive and physical functions a truck driver depends on every moment they're operating an 80,000-pound vehicle.

Here's why that matters on a practical level:

- **Reaction time:** A fatigued driver reacts significantly slower to sudden changes in traffic, brake lights ahead, or road hazards. At highway speed on I-20 or I-30, a delay of even one second translates into dozens of feet of unchecked forward momentum.
- **Judgment and decision-making:** Fatigue clouds the cognitive processes that allow a driver to gauge following distance, assess merge situations, and recognize when conditions require slowing down.
- **Microsleep episodes:** When a driver is severely sleep-deprived, the brain can shut down involuntarily for three to fifteen seconds at a time – what researchers call microsleep. At 65 mph, a truck travels the length of a football field in roughly four seconds, effectively unguided.

- **Lane discipline:** Fatigued drivers struggle to maintain consistent lane position, often drifting before self-correcting, a behavior that frequently appears in dashcam footage before serious crashes.

Federal hours-of-service rules and what they require

Because the dangers of fatigued driving are so well documented, the FMCSA created [hours-of-service](#) (HOS) regulations that set strict limits on how long commercial truck drivers can be behind the wheel before resting. These aren't suggestions. They're federal law.

For property-carrying drivers, the core rules are:

- **11-hour driving limit:** A driver can operate a commercial truck for a maximum of 11 hours after taking 10 consecutive hours off duty.
- **14-hour work window:** All driving must be completed within 14 hours of coming on duty. Once that window closes, the driver can't get back behind the wheel until after a full off-duty period, regardless of how many hours they actually drove.
- **30-minute rest break:** After eight cumulative hours of driving, the driver must take a mandatory 30-minute break before continuing.
- **60/70-hour weekly cap:** Over a seven-day period, a driver can't accumulate more than 60 total on-duty hours. On an eight-day schedule, that limit is 70 hours. The clock resets after 34 consecutive hours off duty.

Why violations happen and who's responsible

HOS violations don't usually occur because a driver randomly decided to ignore the law. They occur because of pressure, and that pressure almost always traces back to the carrier.

Tight delivery windows, per-mile pay structures that reward speed over compliance, and a corporate culture that prioritizes getting the load there on time over getting it there safely all push drivers toward violations they know violate federal law. A driver who stops to take a mandatory rest break may miss a delivery window and face consequences from their dispatcher. A driver who completes the run and takes the violation may face nothing at all, at least until someone gets hurt.

For the purposes of a legal claim in Texas, this matters because liability doesn't begin and end with the driver. When a trucking company creates conditions that lead to a fatigue-related crash (through unrealistic schedules, inadequate supervision, or a willful failure to monitor compliance), the carrier bears direct responsibility for the consequences. Our attorneys investigate both the driver's conduct and the company's practices, because that's where the full picture of negligence often lives.

The crashes that fatigue tends to cause

Fatigue-related truck crashes have recognizable patterns. Understanding them can help you identify whether fatigue may have played a role in a crash that hurt you or someone you love.

Common crash types linked to driver fatigue:

- **Rear-end collisions:** A fatigued driver fails to register that traffic ahead is slowing and doesn't break in time. Given the stopping distance a loaded semi-truck requires, even a moment's delayed reaction produces devastating results.
- **Lane-departure and head-on crashes:** Microsleep episodes cause trucks to drift across lane lines, sometimes into oncoming traffic, without the driver ever consciously registering the movement.
- **Jackknife accidents:** When a fatigued driver finally reacts, overcorrecting at highway speed can cause the trailer to swing outward, jackknifing across multiple lanes.
- **Roadway departures:** Trucks that drift off the road edge into medians, barriers, or embankments without braking are often the result of a driver who has entered a microsleep state.

For example, imagine a driver finishing a 13-hour run on I-35W approaching Fort Worth, pushing past the 11-hour limit because a dispatcher's message said the delivery window was closing. Traffic slows ahead of a construction merge. The driver is in a microsleep episode for four seconds. They don't brake. The result is a rear-end collision that sends the passenger vehicle into a concrete barrier. That driver's logbook (if accurately maintained) becomes a central piece of evidence in what happens next.

Finding the evidence that proves a fatigue case

One of the defining challenges of HOS violation cases is that the most important evidence is highly time-sensitive. Trucking companies don't always volunteer records that incriminate them, and some data systems overwrite themselves within days.

Our attorneys move quickly to identify and preserve evidence such as:

- **Electronic Logging Device (ELD) records:** ELDs automatically record a driver's duty status, driving hours, rest periods, and route history. When compared against GPS data or delivery timestamps, they can reveal violations the paper log was designed to conceal.
- **Black box and Event Data Recorder data:** These devices capture speed, braking force, throttle position, and steering inputs in the seconds before impact, producing an objective record that doesn't depend on anyone's memory or subjective reporting.

- **Driver qualification files:** A driver's hiring records, training documentation, prior violations, and medical certifications can establish a history of fatigue-related behavior that the carrier knew about or should have caught.
- **Dispatch records and internal communications:** Emails and text messages between dispatchers and drivers frequently reveal pressure to violate HOS limits to meet delivery windows.
- **Fuel receipts and toll records:** Travel documentation that contradicts a driver's logged rest periods can confirm a violation was occurring even when the electronic record appears clean.
- **Shipping manifests and bills of lading:** Delivery schedules sometimes make physically impossible demands on a driver's time, which means a compliant driver couldn't have made the delivery when the truck arrived, which proves the driver wasn't compliant.

Black box data can be overwritten within seven to thirty days on many systems. Driver logs may only be retained for six months before routine destruction becomes legally permissible. That's why we send a formal preservation demand to the carrier as early as possible after a serious crash, to create a legal obligation to hold all relevant evidence before it disappears.

What you can do after a fatigue-related truck crash in Fort Worth

If you've been injured in a crash involving a commercial truck on I-35, I-20, I-30, or anywhere in the DFW area, the steps you take in the immediate aftermath matter enormously when [pursuing compensation](#).

Here's what we recommend:

- Call 911 and request medical attention, even if injuries feel minor. Adrenaline masks serious damage, and same-day medical records are key to your claim's success.
- Photograph the scene, vehicle positions, the truck's carrier markings, license plate, and any visible road evidence before the scene is cleared.
- Note the driver's demeanor. Confusion, slurred speech, bloodshot eyes, or slow responses at the scene can indicate fatigue and are worth documenting in your own notes while memory is fresh.
- Avoid giving a recorded statement to the trucking company's insurance provider. Their goal is to protect the carrier, not to help you understand your rights.
- Contact our firm as quickly as possible so we can send a preservation demand and begin investigating before key evidence is overwritten or destroyed.

Talk to a Fort Worth truck accident lawyer about what happened

Fatigue behind the wheel of an 18-wheeler isn't a freak occurrence or a minor lapse in judgment. It's the predictable outcome of a system that sometimes values delivery timelines over the safety of everyone else on the road. When that system produces a crash that changes your life, the trucking company and the driver need to be held accountable.

If you or a loved one was hurt in a truck accident in Fort Worth, Dallas, Arlington, or anywhere in North Texas and you believe driver fatigue may have played a role, [contact us](#) for a free consultation. We know where to look and how to build these cases, and we're ready to fight for the accountability and recovery you deserve.