

Are Trucking Companies Liable for Truck Crashes Caused by Driver Fatigue?

Our Truck Accident Lawyers Know How to Hold Negligent Parties Accountable

When a fatigue-related [truck accident](#) occurs, there's usually no squeal of brakes. There's no sudden swerve. In many fatigue-related truck crashes, the first sign that something is wrong is the collision itself, because the driver was already asleep and never even touched the brakes. An 80,000-pound tractor-trailer moving at highway speed does not need a tire blowout or a storm to become deadly. It only takes a driver whose eyes close for a few seconds, while the truck covers hundreds of feet with nobody really in control.

[Fried Goldberg LLC](#) has seen how quickly a fatigue crash can tear a family's life apart and how hard trucking companies work afterward to deny what really happened. Responsibility in a fatigue crash almost [never stops with the individual driver](#). Fatigue in trucking behaves more like a slow-moving chain reaction, where each link is a human decision: to push another load, to ignore another warning, to treat rest as optional instead of essential.

How The Law Connects Trucking Companies To Tired Drivers

Legally, trucking companies are not bystanders in fatigue crashes; they are usually central players. Under long-standing agency principles, a motor carrier is responsible for the negligence of its driver when that driver is on the job, even if the driver violated company policies in the process. In plain terms, if a truck driver rear-ends stopped traffic because he nodded off, the claim is typically brought against both the driver and the company that put him on the road.

Beyond that baseline, our civil justice system also recognizes that companies can create dangerous conditions long before a crash ever occurs. That is why trucking companies can face direct liability when their own choices help cause a fatigue-related wreck. Common legal theories include negligent hiring, negligent training, negligent supervision, and negligent retention. Each one focuses on who the company put behind the wheel, what that driver was taught, how the company watched for warning signs, and whether it ignored what it already knew.

When we investigate a case, we're not just asking whether the driver was tired. We're asking how many points along the way the company had an opportunity to prevent that driver from being on the road in that condition.

Company Conduct That Creates Fatigue Risk

Certain patterns in a trucking company's operations tend to show up again and again in fatigue cases. When we see these signs, they often point toward corporate responsibility, not just individual error:

- **Negligent Hiring and Retention:** A carrier hires or keeps a driver with a history of hours-of-service violations, prior fatigue-related incidents, or medical problems that make safe driving doubtful.
- **Negligent Training and Supervision:** The company doesn't meaningfully train drivers on fatigue dangers, fails to monitor logs and telematics for red flags, or tolerates obvious log falsification.
- **Unsafe Dispatch and Scheduling:** Dispatchers assign runs that can't be completed on time without driving into the early morning hours, skipping breaks, or "fudging" electronic logs.
- **Failure To Enforce Safety Policies:** Written policies against drowsy driving exist on paper, but in practice, drivers are rewarded for making deadlines and punished for turning down loads when they're tired.

Why Fatigue Is So Dangerous In Commercial Trucking

Most drivers know what it feels like when their eyelids get heavy on a long drive. In a passenger car, that alone is frightening. In a fully loaded tractor-trailer, it can be catastrophic. A large commercial truck has a much longer stopping distance and far more destructive force than a typical car, which means a few lost seconds of reaction time can be the difference between a close call and a multi-vehicle collision.

Safety research cited by agencies such as [the FMCSA](#) has shown that staying awake for around 18 consecutive hours can impair a driver as much as having a blood alcohol concentration of 0.08 percent, which is the legal limit for drunk driving in many states. In functional terms, a truck driver who started a shift before sunrise and is still driving late at night may be operating a massive vehicle while as impaired as someone who would be considered legally drunk.

Fatigue doesn't just slow reaction time. It also:

- **Reduces judgment:** Tired drivers misjudge closing gaps, cut it too close when merging, or assume they can "push through" just one more hour.
- **Narrows focus:** Peripheral vision and situational awareness shrink, so developing hazards do not register until it is too late.
- **Impairs self-awareness:** Fatigued drivers often feel "okay" and underestimate how close they are to falling asleep.

Microsleeps, which are involuntary lapses into sleep that can last from one to ten seconds, are particularly dangerous. At highway speed, a truck can travel the length of a football field or more during that brief window with no one effectively in control. If that microsleep occurs just before an intersection, a work zone, or the back of stopped traffic, the results are painfully predictable.

How The Trucking Lifestyle Wears Drivers Down

To understand why trucking companies bear responsibility for fatigue, it helps to look at the work environment they create. Long-haul trucking often means overnight routes, back-to-back loads, and delivery windows that leave very little room for delays. The human body, however, runs on a circadian rhythm that promotes sleepiness at night and in the early morning hours. When schedules constantly force drivers to work against that internal clock, the risk of fatigue goes up.

Industry research and federal data show high rates of chronic sleep deprivation among commercial drivers, with many reporting that they routinely sleep less than the recommended amount for safe performance. Long stretches of monotonous highway driving can accelerate mental fatigue even when a driver is technically within legal hours. On top of that, sleep disorders such as obstructive sleep apnea are strikingly common in the trucking workforce, particularly among drivers with obesity and other risk factors.

When companies build routes and expectations around making it work despite these biological realities, fatigue stops being an individual problem and becomes a structural one.

What Hours Of Service Rules Do And Do Not Protect Against

To reduce fatigue, the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration created [Hours of Service rules](#) that limit how much a property-carrying truck driver can legally work before resting. The core protections include:

- **The 11-hour driving limit:** A driver can drive a maximum of 11 hours only after 10 consecutive hours off duty.
- **The 14-hour window:** Once a driver goes on duty, they cannot drive beyond the 14th consecutive hour, even if part of that window was spent off duty.
- **The 30-minute break:** After 8 cumulative hours of driving time, the driver must take at least a 30-minute interruption from driving.
- **The 60/70-hour weekly cap:** A driver cannot be on duty more than 60 hours in 7 days or 70 hours in 8 days, depending on the carrier's schedule.
- **The 34-hour restart:** A driver can reset that weekly tally by taking at least 34 consecutive hours off duty.

These rules are the floor, not the ceiling, for safety. A driver can be fully legal under Hours of Service and still be too tired to drive safely, especially if they have a medical sleep disorder, are working rotating shifts, or are trying to function on consistently short sleep. When trucking companies treat the regulations as a shield instead of a baseline, they miss the larger point: the duty to put reasonably rested drivers on the road doesn't end just because a logbook looks clean.

Liability often arises when carriers fail to enforce Hours of Service in practice. For years, paper logbooks were jokingly called "comic books" in the industry because they were so easy to manipulate. Even though most interstate drivers must now use electronic logging devices that

automatically record drive time, enforcement agencies and safety groups have documented ways that some carriers and drivers still work around the system, including fake co-driver accounts, tampering with devices, or using unapproved systems that don't reliably record hours.

Know Your Rights After A Suspected Fatigue Crash

If you or a loved one has been hurt in a collision where you suspect a truck driver fell asleep at the wheel, the steps you take in the days and weeks afterward can make a real difference. Getting immediate medical care, following through with treatment, and preserving your own photos and notes from the scene are important. So is avoiding conversations with the trucking company's insurer before you understand your rights.

Equally important is having someone move quickly to secure the electronic data and records that can prove what really happened. The Atlanta truck accident attorneys at Fried Goldberg LLC know how fast that information can disappear and how hard carriers work to reframe a fatigue crash as an unavoidable crash. We don't accept that explanation without testing it against the facts.

Our firm also works with plaintiff's attorneys nationwide, offering seminars, training, and co-counsel support in complex truck accident cases. Lawyers across the country partner with the firm for its deep knowledge of trucking law, helping strengthen cases and improve outcomes for injured clients in jurisdictions throughout the United States.

If you're ready to talk about what happened and what accountability might look like in your case, we're here to listen. You can [contact our firm](#) to schedule a [free consultation](#) and talk about your situation and your options moving forward. We'll be glad to provide honest answers to your questions so you know what to expect.