

When an 18-Wheeler Hits a Houston Motorcyclist

How Federal Trucking Rules, Electronic Evidence, and Texas Fault Law Can Shape the Claim

A motorcycle may weigh only a few hundred pounds, while a fully loaded tractor-trailer can weigh up to 80,000 pounds under ordinary federal interstate limits. That size difference can make a truck-motorcycle collision especially dangerous for the rider, but the legal case still turns on evidence about how the crash happened and who caused it.

Commercial truck cases can involve rules that don't apply to an ordinary passenger vehicle. Depending on the carrier, vehicle, route, and type of operation, federal motor carrier safety regulations may govern driver hours, qualification, vehicle condition, and other safety obligations. Texas traffic laws still matter too, including the requirement that a driver [move from a lane only when the movement can be made safely](#).

At Smith & Hassler, our [Houston motorcycle accident attorneys](#) represent riders injured in crashes involving all types of crashes, including those with commercial vehicles. These cases often require an early investigation because some of the most useful records are controlled by the trucking company and may be retained for limited periods.

Which Federal Rules Can Matter After a Truck-Motorcycle Crash?

The Federal Motor Carrier Safety Regulations cover several areas that can become important in a serious truck crash. Parts 390 through 399 address topics such as driver qualification, hours of service, safe operation, equipment, and vehicle maintenance. The rules that apply in a particular case depend on the truck and operation involved, so a regulatory violation shouldn't be assumed before the carrier and trip are identified.

Hours-of-service rules are one of the clearest examples. For most property-carrying drivers subject to the federal rules, [FMCSA's hours-of-service limits](#) generally allow up to 11 hours of driving after 10 consecutive hours off duty and prohibit driving beyond the 14th consecutive hour after coming on duty. A 30-minute break is required after 8 cumulative hours of driving without at least a 30-minute interruption.

Those limits matter when fatigue is suspected, but a log violation by itself doesn't prove that fatigue caused the collision. The investigation still has to connect the driver's schedule, sleep opportunity, conduct, and crash evidence to what actually happened.

Federal regulations also place obligations on motor carriers. Under [49 C.F.R. Section 390.11](#), a carrier must require drivers to observe duties and prohibitions imposed by the federal safety rules. Under [49 C.F.R. Section 396.3](#), carriers must systematically inspect, repair, and maintain

vehicles under their control so safety-related parts and accessories remain in proper operating condition.

Blind Spots Don't Create a Free Pass for an Unsafe Lane Change

Large trucks have substantial areas around the tractor and trailer that can be difficult to see. FMCSA safety guidance tells commercial drivers to check mirrors frequently and stay aware of vehicles entering those blind spots. That guidance is useful context, but the legal duty in a Houston lane-change crash often comes from Texas law rather than a federal rule that literally says a driver must perform a particular mirror sequence.

Texas Transportation Code Section 545.060 provides that a driver may not move from a marked lane unless the movement can be made safely. Texas law also says a motorcycle is entitled to the full use of a lane, subject to the specific rules governing motorcycle operation. That means a truck driver's blind spot can be relevant to how the collision happened, but it doesn't automatically excuse moving into an occupied lane.

[Fault in motorcycle lane-change accidents](#) can turn on when each vehicle entered the lane, while [truck lane-change errors](#) often require a close look at visibility, timing, signaling, and the truck's movement before impact."

The Failures an Investigation May Look For

Depending on the facts, a truck-motorcycle investigation may examine:

- **Hours-of-Service Violations:** Electronic logging data, dispatch records, fuel receipts, toll records, and other supporting documents can help reconstruct when the driver was working, driving, and resting. A violation may support a fatigue theory when the rest of the evidence points in the same direction.
- **Unsafe Lane Changes:** Dashcam footage, side-camera footage, witness statements, vehicle positions, and physical damage can help show when a lane change began and whether the motorcycle was already occupying the lane.
- **[Following Too Closely](#):** Texas law requires drivers to maintain an assured clear distance that allows a safe stop under the conditions. FMCSA also warns that large trucks need substantially more stopping distance than passenger vehicles. A fully loaded truck traveling at highway speed may need nearly two football fields to stop.
- **Carrier Safety Failures:** Driver qualification records, training materials, prior safety issues, dispatch communications, and company policies may matter when the evidence suggests the carrier failed to require compliance with applicable safety rules or knowingly allowed unsafe practices.

- **Maintenance Problems:** Brake, tire, lighting, steering, and inspection records can show whether a mechanical problem contributed to the crash and whether the carrier's maintenance program complied with federal requirements.

Truck Electronic Data Doesn't All Come From the Same Place

Truck cases are often described as if every tractor-trailer has one universal "black box." It doesn't. The available data depend on the truck, engine, electronic control systems, telematics platform, dashcam system, and carrier equipment.

An electronic logging device, or ELD, primarily records driver duty status for hours-of-service compliance. It isn't the same thing as a crash event data recorder. An engine control module may store operational information or event snapshots on some vehicles, while telematics platforms can preserve GPS, speed, hard-braking, messaging, or fleet-management data depending on the system.

That's why [black box data in a Texas truck accident](#) has to be identified by source instead of requested as if it were a single record. A preservation letter may need to address the ELD provider, tractor data, dashcam footage, telematics, dispatch communications, maintenance systems, and other carrier records separately.

Evidence Source	What It May Show	Why Timing Matters
ELD / Duty Records	Driving time, on-duty periods, rest periods, and HOS compliance.	Federal RODS and supporting documents generally must be retained for six months.
ECM / Vehicle Data	Potential speed, braking, engine, or event information depending on the system.	Data availability and overwrite behavior vary by manufacturer and device.
Telematics / GPS	Location, speed history, hard braking, routing, and fleet activity depending on the platform.	Carrier retention policies vary and data can be overwritten or lost.
Dashcam / Video	Lane position, traffic movement, signals, impact sequence, and driver behavior.	Video systems may overwrite older footage on short cycles.
Maintenance Records	Inspection, repair, brake, tire, lighting, and other vehicle-condition history.	Federal retention rules differ by record type and vehicle status.

FMCSA states that motor carriers generally must retain ELD records of duty status and supporting documents for [six months](#). Other systems can have very different retention periods. That difference is one reason [timing matters in truck accident claims](#) and why preservation efforts should identify the actual systems in use instead of relying on a generic request for electronic data.

What Happens to a Rider When a Truck Makes Contact?

Imagine a scenario involving a motorcycle rider traveling northbound on I-45 in Houston during moderate traffic. A tractor-trailer in the adjacent lane begins moving right, and the trailer

contacts the motorcycle. The rider is thrown from the bike and lands in another lane or on the shoulder. The physical contact may last only seconds, but reconstructing it can take months.

The investigation may compare roadway marks, vehicle damage, motorcycle scrape patterns, dashcam video, witness accounts, tractor and trailer dimensions, and available electronic data. A reconstruction expert may also analyze whether the motorcycle was visible in the driver's mirrors, when the truck crossed the lane line, and whether either vehicle had enough time or distance to avoid the impact.

Injuries That Can Define Truck-Motorcycle Crashes

A rider has little physical protection compared with someone inside a passenger vehicle, so contact with a commercial truck can cause multiple injuries in the same event.

- **[Head and Brain Injuries](#)**: A rider who strikes the pavement, a barrier, or another vehicle can suffer a concussion, intracranial bleeding, or another traumatic brain injury. Symptoms can involve memory, concentration, mood, balance, vision, and physical function.
- **[Road Rash and Degloving Injuries](#)**: Sliding across pavement can damage skin and deeper tissue. Severe road rash may require wound care, skin grafting, or reconstructive treatment and can leave permanent scarring or nerve damage.
- **Orthopedic Injuries**: Fractures and dislocations involving the arms, shoulders, pelvis, hips, knees, and legs may require surgical fixation, prolonged weight-bearing restrictions, and months of rehabilitation.
- **Internal Injuries**: Blunt-force trauma can injure abdominal or chest organs and cause internal bleeding even when there isn't an obvious external wound.
- **[Spinal Cord and Neurologic Injuries](#)**: A severe impact can fracture vertebrae or damage the spinal cord, potentially causing weakness, loss of sensation, paralysis, or long-term mobility limitations.

How Texas Law Handles Fault Between a Rider and a Trucking Company

Texas follows a modified proportionate-responsibility rule. Under [Texas Civil Practice and Remedies Code Section 33.001](#), a claimant can't recover damages if the claimant's percentage of responsibility is greater than 50%. If the rider is 50% or less responsible, the award is generally reduced by the rider's percentage of fault.

That makes [fault allocation](#) critically important in truck-motorcycle cases. A carrier or insurer may argue that the rider was speeding, following too closely, riding in a prohibited position, or remaining where the truck driver couldn't see the motorcycle. Those allegations still have to be tested against the actual evidence.

Commercial truck drivers aren't automatically subject to a separate, categorically "higher" common-law duty simply because they hold a CDL. They do, however, operate under safety regulations and vehicle-specific rules that can become relevant to whether reasonable care was used under the circumstances. A proven regulatory violation may be important evidence, but it doesn't automatically decide civil liability or causation.

The same analysis applies to the carrier. The trucking company may face responsibility for the driver's conduct under applicable agency principles, and the facts may also support separate claims involving negligent hiring, qualification, supervision, maintenance, or other company conduct. The available theories depend on the evidence and shouldn't be assumed before the records are reviewed.

Fatal Truck-Motorcycle Crashes Raise Separate Claims

When a motorcycle rider dies from crash-related injuries, Texas wrongful death law allows the deceased person's surviving spouse, children, and parents to bring a wrongful death action. That is narrower than saying that any surviving family member automatically has a claim.

Texas generally applies a two-year limitations period to personal injury claims, and an action for injury resulting in death generally must be filed within two years after the death. Exceptions, tolling rules, and other deadlines can change the analysis, so the limitations period shouldn't be treated as a reason to wait.

Families facing a fatal crash can review how [wrongful death claims](#) work while the investigation focuses on preserving the trucking records, medical evidence, and financial information needed to establish the losses.

Our Houston Attorneys Can Build the Case Before the Evidence Disappears

A trucking company may have investigators, insurers, defense counsel, and internal safety personnel working on the crash almost immediately. The rider deserves an investigation focused on the rider's side of the evidence.

Our [Houston truck accident lawyers](#) can work to identify the motor carrier, driver, tractor, trailer, electronic systems, witnesses, maintenance history, and records that may matter. When an 18-wheeler is involved, we also look beyond the driver's conduct to determine whether the carrier's scheduling, qualification, maintenance, or safety practices contributed to the collision.

A collision with a semi-truck, tractor-trailer, or another large commercial vehicle can leave a rider facing enough financial pressure without adding an upfront legal bill. That's why at [Smith & Hassler](#), we handle personal injury cases on a contingency-fee basis, so you pay no upfront attorney's fees and owe no attorney's fee unless we recover compensation for you.

If you or someone in your family was injured while riding a motorcycle in a Houston crash involving a commercial truck, [contact us](#) for a free consultation. We can review the collision, identify evidence that may need to be preserved, and explain the potential next steps for pursuing a claim for the maximum compensation you may deserve.