

Guest Column: Awake at the Wheel, How Fatigue Impacts Log Truck Driver Safety

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We have all experienced moments when fatigue creeps up on us, causing our eyelids to droop and our bodies to become sluggish. What most people do not experience is battling such overwhelming fatigue while maneuvering a massive log truck on the highway.

Fatigue for log truck drivers and how it impacts accident risk is a concern that affects not only the truckers' safety but also the safety of everyone else sharing the road. Researchers at the University of Washington's Pacific Northwest Agricultural Safety and Health Center studied the factors that impact fatigue and accident risk among log truck drivers. This Guest Column will share why fatigue poses a risk to log truck drivers and explore practical recommendations to help them stay alert while on the job.

The Pacific Northwest Agricultural Safety and Health Center at the University of Washington has been serving agricultural, fishing, and forestry workers throughout Washington, Idaho, Oregon, and Alaska since 1996. The goal of the center is to conduct research that supports the health and well-being of workers, strengthens communities, and enhances agricultural productivity.

The center's logging safety and fatigue project began in 2021. It was sparked by concern from industry stakeholders in Idaho in response to an increase in log truck accidents. The project had three main components: 1) an analysis of federal crash data, 2) a survey of loggers and log truck drivers, and 3) in-depth interviews with log truck drivers. The project aims to understand risk factors for injury or fatality in log truck crashes and how real-world log truck drivers are confronted and respond to fatigue on the job.

The findings ranged from the expected to downright surprising. Overall, those who responded to our survey reported a good quality of life and high job satisfaction. However, with regards to sleep and fatigue, 49 percent of respondents reported working more than 55 hours per week, and 21 percent started their workday between 1:30 and 4:30 a.m.

The analysis of the federal crash data uncovered a 34 percent increase in reported crash frequency from 2011 to 2019 between Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and Montana. Interestingly, log truck crashes in Washington or Oregon were significantly less likely to result in an injury or fatality relative to Idaho and Montana, a finding that could be the topic of future research.

As one of the drivers who was interviewed recounted, "Probably at least once a week there's a day where I didn't get enough sleep and notice myself getting that 1,000-mile stare. Like, 'Hunh, I don't remember much about the last 10 miles, but I don't hear any banging or squealing, so I don't think I ran anything over.' "

Long hours and lack of sleep can take a toll on even the heartiest driver's body and mind. When fatigue sets in, the consequences can be dire: fatigue impairs one's ability to think, reaction times, and decision-making abilities – key factors in safe driving.

It comes as no surprise that we can see more evidence of this relationship in publicly available data. According to the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA), driver fatigue is a contributing factor in around 13 percent of large truck crashes. Fatigue-related accidents often result in severe injuries and fatalities due to the sheer size and weight of trucks.

In our research using FMCSA data from Washington, Idaho, Oregon, and Montana, we found that 34 percent of accidents involving a log truck resulted in at least one injury or fatality. Many of these were likely influenced by driver fatigue.

Recommendations to Combat Fatigue:

1. **Prioritize Sleep and Rest:** It might sound obvious, but ensuring you get enough sleep before hitting the road is crucial. Aim for 7-9 hours of quality sleep each night. Adequate sleep helps your body and mind recover, keeping you more alert while in your truck. If you had a particularly tiring day, consider taking a power nap for 10-15 minutes before getting on the road.
2. **Plan Regular Breaks:** Driving can be monotonous, contributing to fatigue. Plan your daily route with scheduled breaks. During these breaks, step out of the truck, stretch your legs, and get some fresh air. These small breaks can work wonders in combating fatigue and revitalizing your focus.
3. **Stay Hydrated and Snack Smart:** What you put into your body affects how you feel. Dehydration can exacerbate feelings of tiredness, so keep a water bottle handy. Additionally, choose snacks wisely. Foods rich in protein and complex carbohydrates provide sustained energy, unlike sugary snacks that lead to crashes in energy levels.

The relationship between fatigue and accident risk among log truck drivers is important to be aware of, for loggers, log truck drivers, and everyone in between. Staying awake at the wheel is not just to get you to the mill faster – it is a matter of life and death. By entertaining these practical recommendations, log truck drivers can make a significant difference in their own safety and the safety of those around them.

Next time you're behind the wheel, remember: Rest well, take breaks, and fuel your body with the right snacks. Your actions can make a world of difference in preventing fatigue-related accidents and ensuring safer roads for everyone.

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