

Underride Accidents and Truck Guard Failures in Alabama

When a Rear-End Collision Becomes Something Far More Dangerous

A car traveling behind a tractor-trailer on I-65 or I-10 in a routine rear-end collision should, in theory, result in a crumpled bumper and an airbag deployment, not a fatality. What often determines the difference is a single piece of equipment mounted on the back of the trailer: the rear underride guard. An [Alabama underride accident lawyer](#) regularly sees cases where a guard that failed, or was never properly installed, turned a survivable crash into a catastrophic one.

What Makes an Underride Accident Uniquely Dangerous

A passenger vehicle's crumple zones, airbags, and seatbelt systems are engineered around an impact with another vehicle of roughly similar height. A trailer bed sits well above a car's hood line, which means a car striking the rear of an unprotected trailer doesn't hit a bumper at all. Instead, the trailer bed can slide directly into the windshield and cabin area, bypassing the vehicle's entire crash safety structure.

Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards require trailers and semitrailers with a gross vehicle weight rating of 10,000 lbs or more to carry a rear impact guard designed to stop this from happening. A properly functioning guard engages the front of the striking vehicle and keeps the impact within the zone the vehicle's crumple zone and airbags were built to handle. When that guard fails, whether through damage, poor maintenance, or improper installation, the vehicle's entire safety design becomes irrelevant to the outcome.

Common Reasons Underride Guards Fail

Federal law requires most trailers to carry a rear underride guard, but a required guard that has been damaged, poorly maintained, or improperly installed offers little real protection in an actual crash. Identifying exactly why a guard failed is often the difference between a routine crash claim and a case built around a serious safety failure.

- **Corrosion and Rust Weakening the Guard's Structure:** Long-term exposure to road salt and moisture can quietly compromise a guard's strength long before any visible damage appears on the surface.
- **Improper Installation Below Federal Height Standards:** Federal regulations cap guard height at 22 inches off the ground, and a guard mounted higher than that standard defeats its purpose regardless of how strong the guard itself is.

- **Guard Detachment From Prior Minor Collisions:** A guard weakened or partially detached in an earlier low-speed impact may look intact on a routine inspection while offering almost no crash protection.
- **Absence of Side Underride Guards Entirely:** Federal law currently does not require side underride guards on trailers, leaving a significant protection gap during angled or T-bone underride crashes.
- **Substandard Aftermarket Guards Replacing Factory Equipment:** Guards that don't meet federal strength testing standards can be installed as cheaper replacements without a trucking company necessarily verifying compliance before returning the trailer to service.

Each of these failure points leaves behind different evidence, which is why identifying the specific cause of a guard failure shapes how a claim ultimately gets built.

Who Can Be Held Liable When a Guard Fails

Underride cases frequently involve more than one potentially liable party. A trucking company can be held liable for negligent maintenance or inspection failures if a damaged or corroded guard should have been caught and repaired before the trailer went back on the road. A guard manufacturer can face liability under product liability law if the guard was defectively designed or manufactured from the start, separate from anything the trucking company did or failed to do.

These two theories require different evidence and legal arguments, but they can often be pursued together when both a manufacturing defect and a maintenance failure contributed to the same crash. A trailer leasing or maintenance contractor may also share liability if maintenance duties were outsourced rather than handled directly by the trucking company, adding yet another party whose records and responsibilities need to be examined.

Building a Claim: Evidence That Proves Guard Failure

Underride claims depend heavily on physical evidence that can be repaired, discarded, or lost within days of a crash, which makes the early steps in a case unusually time-sensitive.

- **Inspecting the Guard Before Repair or Disposal:** The guard's actual physical condition at the time of the crash is often the single most important piece of evidence in the entire case.
- **Requesting Trailer Maintenance and Inspection Records:** These records can reveal whether known corrosion, damage, or wear was documented and ignored before the crash occurred.

- **Obtaining the Manufacturer's Design and Testing Specifications:** These establish whether the guard met federal strength and height standards when it left the factory.
- **Preserving Event Data Recorder Information:** Speed and braking data from either vehicle can help establish the force and circumstances of the impact.
- **Sending a Spoliation Letter Immediately:** A formal preservation request can legally prevent a trucking company from repairing or scrapping a damaged guard before it can be independently inspected.

Once a damaged trailer returns to service or gets sent for repair, much of this evidence becomes permanently unavailable, which is why the window to act on an underride claim is measured in days, not months.

Why Underride Crashes Produce Such Severe Injuries

When a guard fails, the impact occurs above the level a passenger vehicle's crash structure was designed to absorb, often striking the windshield, roof, and upper cabin area rather than the front bumper and crumple zone. This shifts the force of the collision directly onto the occupants rather than the vehicle's engineered safety systems.

Underride crashes involving guard failure are associated with a higher incidence of traumatic brain injuries, severe facial and upper body trauma, and, in the most serious cases, fatalities. The severity gap between a crash where the guard functioned properly and one where it failed is often the clearest evidence that the guard itself, not just the collision, played a central role in the outcome.

Strong Representation When You Need It Most

A failed guard shouldn't be the reason a family loses everything. [Dean Waite & Associates, LLC](#) has built a track record that includes a \$9,000,000 defective product settlement and a [\\$6,750,000 truck accident recovery](#), and our attorneys know how to dig into whether a trucking company's maintenance failures, a manufacturer's defective design, or both put your life at risk. It costs nothing to get started, and if we don't recover compensation for you, you owe us nothing. [Contact us](#) right away so we can inspect that guard before it's repaired or scrapped.