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HEADLINE: Court Stops Longer Drives for Truckers

Byline: JESSE J. HOLLAND, AP Labor Writer

WASHINGTON -- A federal appeals court on Tuesday threw out a Bush administration decision to allow long-haul truckers to drive for up to 11 hours straight.

For 60 years, truckers could drive for 10 hours at a time. The Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration has been trying to change the rule to allow truckers another hour of driving time.

But the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit said in Tuesday's ruling that the FMCSA did not adequately explain its reasoning for adding the extra hour.

The court's decision repealing the 2005 rule takes effect Sept. 14.

"We are analyzing the decision issued today to understand the court's findings as well as determine the agency's next steps to prevent driver fatigue, ensure safe and efficient motor carrier operations and save lives," the FMCSA said in a statement.

The American Trucker Association, which supports the existing 11-hour rule, said it would ask the court to stay its decision and keep the current rule in effect.

"ATA believes the existing rules have proven to be a significant improvement over the old rules in terms of reducing driver fatigue and related incidents," said Bill Graves, ATA's president and chief executive officer.

But opponents of the new rule cheered the decision.

"We never thought it was a good idea to allow drivers 11 hours behind the wheel of a heavy piece of machinery," said Teamster President James Hoffa. "I hope this ruling forces the Bush administration to start paying attention to highway safety."

Public Citizen, Parents Against Tired Truckers, Citizens for Reliable and Safe Highways, Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety and the International Brotherhood of Teamsters sued to get the rule thrown out.

"In today's ruling, the court has once again sided with public safety and rejected FMCSA's illogical proposition that driving longer hours and working longer days will somehow solve truck driver fatigue," said Judith L. Stone, president of Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety.

The FMCSA first decided to increase number of hours truckers can drive in 2003, but the D.C. appeals court struck it down the next year. Congress reinstated the rule later that year.

The rule that was overturned by the court Tuesday was then created by the administration in 2005.