Do I need a safety management system, and what does it look like?

Accreditation - checked 6 Nov 2026

It depends on whether you are accredited. For Heavy Vehicle Accreditation you must have one - every audit is against the SMS Standard 2026. If you are not accredited, the law doesn't name an SMS, but you still have a primary duty to keep your transport activities safe. A simple SMS is the clearest way to show you do.

What is a safety management system?

A safety management system (SMS) is how your business manages safety, written down and used every day. It is the policies, procedures and records that show how you find hazards, control the risks and check the controls are working.

For a trucking business, it covers the risks of your transport activities - fatigue and fitness for duty, speed and scheduling, loading and load restraint, vehicle maintenance, driver behaviour, and the routes and people your trucks deal with. The NHVR's SMS Standard 2026 sets out five areas it should cover.

Do you need one?

Your situation Do you need an SMS?

Heavy Vehicle Accreditation (HVA), or applying for it Yes. Your whole SMS is audited against the SMS Standard 2026 for General Safety Accreditation.

NHVAS accredited You need the systems for each module you hold now. You'll need a whole-of-business SMS when you move to HVA.

Not accredited Not by name. But you have a primary duty to make your transport activities safe, so far as reasonably practicable. An SMS is the clearest way to show how you do that.

Some customers also ask their transport suppliers to show they manage safety before they give them work.

What it looks like for a small business

Area Simple examples for 1 20 trucks

Leadership and commitment A one-page safety policy signed by the owner. Written procedures for how the work is done. A safety culture where drivers can speak up or report a problem without being punished for it (no reprisal). Safety on the agenda when you talk to drivers.

Risk management Hazards identified and reported - by you and your drivers. A list of your main risks - fatigue, loading, maintenance, reversing, weather - with how you control each one. Reviewed at least every few months.

People Inductions, licence and medical checks, and training records for each driver.

Assurance, monitoring and improvement Regular reviews: work diary reviews, quarterly risk reviews and an internal review of the whole system each year. Incident and near-miss reports, and a list of things to fix, with dates.

Safety systems Daily checks, fault reporting, servicing, load restraint and work and rest hours.

Keep it real

- Write down what you actually do, not what a template says.
- Keep records as you go - an auditor will want to see them.
- Talk to your drivers. They know where the risks are.
- Review it when something changes: a new truck, a new customer, a new type of load or an incident.

Scaled to your size

The NHVR applies the SMS Standard in proportion to the size of the business. An owner-driver isn't expected to have the same system as a big fleet - but it still needs to be written down, used and working.

General information, not legal advice.

Sources

NHVR - Safety Management Systems (SMS) - https://www.nhvr.gov.au/safety-accreditation-compliance/safety-management/safety-management-systems-sms

NHVR - SMS Framework - https://www.nhvr.gov.au/safety-accreditation-compliance/safety-management/sms-framework