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More than 30 million Americans will need passports to take domestic flights

New tighter security rules will mean that driving licences from several states will no longer be accepted as valid ID documents

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Millions of Americans will have to apply for passports before being allowed to board an aircraft, even if it is for a domestic flight.

Until now airlines have accepted driving licences as valid ID documents without any objection from the federal government.

But licences issued by four states – and American Samoa – have not met the stricter rules which will come into force next year.

The changes will hit just over 30 million people living in New York, New Hampshire, Louisiana and Minnesota – equivalent to nearly 10 per cent of the US population.

A far lower percentage of Americans have passports than other major industrial countries. One study earlier this year said the proportion had reached an all-time high at 38 per cent.

In the UK about 75 per cent of people have passports and in Canada the proportion is 60 per cent.

A new passport currently costs Americans \$135 (£88.50).

The requirement for all driving licences to comply with new tougher standards was incorporated in the Real ID Act which was passed in 2005, even though implementation has been delayed until 2016.

Its purpose was to improve security not only on flights but also at federal buildings throughout the country.

It required states to add a number of additional features on their driving licences.

The law also demanded that states verify driver's immigration status if they were not US citizens before issuing a licence.

However, it has faced strong opposition from civil liberties groups and a number of states who claim it is an attempt to create a national ID card through the back door.

Opponents have also said that the requirement would create a costly burden.

In an attempt to persuade states to comply, the federal government has offered millions of dollars to cover at least some of the cost of bringing the licences up to standard.

But several states refused, passing laws opposing the act. Although most have now complied, four are still holding out.

New Hampshire, whose motto is "Live Free or Die" **has a strong libertarian streak.** With the federal deadline approaching, there are suggestions that the final four states will back down and finally comply.

But organisations such as the **Cato Institute**, a Washington based free-market think tank said it believed that the federal government was more likely to concede defeat.

The Department of Homeland Security said people from New York, New Hampshire, Louisiana and Minnesota should inquire before travelling to see what other forms of identification would be acceptable.

"States have made considerable progress in meeting this key recommendation of the 9/11 Commission to make driver's licences and other identification more secure and every state has a more secure driver's licence today than before the passage of the act," it said. "We will continue to work with states ahead of phase four enforcement, which will affect identification requirements for boarding aircraft."