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Real ID rules still on hold, but Ohio in compliance

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A valid driver's license remains all the identification a traveler needs to board a U.S. domestic flight — for now.

Federal officials are warning that driver's licenses from some states soon might not be good enough for airport security under provisions mandated by the Real ID Act of 2005.

Passed after an analysis of the 9/11 attack, Real ID mandates that state driver's licenses meet certain standards when used for entering some federal facilities or boarding aircraft.

Under the phase-in schedule outlined in the law, the rules applying to aircraft could be enforced "no sooner than 2016." In theory, that could be as early as Jan. 1, but the Department of Homeland Security seems to be in no hurry to implement the standards, and the deadlines have changed several times.

Still, some travelers worry that they could show up at the airport and not be able to board their flight.

"Someone I know was getting ready to fly to Chicago and asked if he should be worried that he couldn't use his driver's license for ID," said Barbara Reed, a retired Columbus City Schools teacher.

"I travel a few times a year, but I hadn't really heard about (Real ID) until he brought it up. So I did some research online, and it was very confusing."

Just what Real ID standards entail is a matter of debate, but they include features said to make licenses more difficult to counterfeit and that would allow states to share identification information between themselves and with the federal government.

Many states, citing privacy or budgetary concerns, have resisted implementing Real ID standards.

Ohio and 22 other jurisdictions meet the current standards, according to the Department of Homeland Security, but 31 other states or U.S. territories have waivers granting more time for compliance with the law. The waivers vary in length, and many have been extended several times.

If Real ID is ever enforced, travelers with driver's licenses from states not meeting the federal standards would have to present a different form of secure identification, such as a passport, to board a plane.

Only Minnesota and the territory of American Samoa are listed as "noncompliant."

And the Homeland Security website states that "federal officials may continue to accept" driver's licenses from Minnesota.

The Ohio Department of Public Safety declined to comment on Real ID except to note that the state is currently deemed to be "materially compliant" with the act by the Department of Homeland Security.

No one from the Department of Homeland Security would comment for this story.

"There's no chance that on Jan. 1 people will start getting second-guessed about driver's licenses," said Jim Harper, director of information policy studies at the libertarian Cato Institute.

The federal government has continually given waivers and extensions to state governments that don't meet the Real ID requirements, said Harper, who has written several policy analyses about the act. "The so-called 2016 deadline is probably even less serious than the deadlines that have come and gone."

Harper said no state is in complete compliance with Real ID, and that even states that have declared their intent not to comply have been given waivers.

Several organizations, including the American Civil Liberties Union, have criticized Real ID as an intrusion on Americans' privacy with little real benefit to their security.

The Department of Homeland Security has stated that it will give a 120-day notice before implementing Real ID requirements for travelers from any state or territory.