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Feds say they'll give four months warning before Alabamians need STAR ID to fly

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Get ready to scratch one chore off your end-of-year list.

Alabama's STAR ID – an extra-secure driver's license that everybody was supposed to get in 2016 – isn't likely to be required any time soon.

"I think a lot of people are being told they have to get it, but it's all saber-rattling," said Jim Harper, an analyst for the CATO Institute, a libertarian think tank that has long been critical of the ID program.

To date a little more than 95,000 of Alabama's drivers have STAR ID, which is a driver's license with extra security features to verify that the person holding the ID is indeed who they say they are. To get the little yellow star affixed to your driver's license, you have to show multiple forms of identification such as a birth certificate or military records.

It's part of a federal mandate known nationwide as "Real ID," which was passed by Congress after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. When investigators realized that some of the 9/11 hijackers had Florida licenses, lawmakers pushed for a more secure, uniform form of identification card.

That was a decade ago. Since then, deadlines for getting the card have come close, then been pushed back. When The Anniston Star last checked, about a year ago, federal officials said the cards would be required in 2016, possibly as early as Jan. 1. Without a star on your license, you'd need a passport to board an airplane, even for a domestic flight.

But no need to worry. The ID requirement is at least four months away, according to federal Homeland Security officials.

"DHS will ensure that the traveling public has ample notice (at least 120 days) before any changes are made that might affect their travel planning," Homeland Security spokeswoman Amanda DeGroff wrote in an email to The Star.

Another Homeland Security official said the ID might not be required for Alabama drivers until 2020. That's because the state is already on the list of states deemed already compliant with the Real ID law.

Even though only 95,000 of the state's 4.8 million residents have the ID. Harper said the federal government decided to cut its losses and declare states compliant even if they're making only minor moves toward implementing Real ID.

"Utah actually passed a law that barred it from compliance with the law," Harper said. "Today, DHS says they're in compliance."

The Real ID law is 10 years old, but it ran into opposition years ago from civil libertarians and from many states, where officials saw it as an unfunded mandate. Alabama officials have historically been friendly to Real ID, though the state has often struggled to bear the cost of providing regular driver's licenses.

Closures of driver's license offices – and long lines at existing offices – have been on Alabama residents' minds this year. On visits to license offices, Star reporters have often run into people seeking a STAR ID so they can get into federal facilities, a requirement that went into effect early this year, according to a schedule posted on the Homeland Security website.

Harper said he doubts even that requirement is really being observed. Most people who work at federal facilities already have federal IDs that they use to enter the workplace.

A Washington D.C. resident, Harper said he does have a Real ID driver's license. But he doesn't expect to need it in the near future.

"You're gaining experience with Real ID," Harper told a reporter. "It's always about to happen."