

Analysis: Real ID program on life support

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Earlier this week, the U.S. Senate [approved a \\$43 billion budget](#) for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) for fiscal year 2010, which began Oct. 1. The measure included substantial increases in DHS spending in several key technology areas, but slashed Real ID funding by 40%, from \$100 million to \$60 million in 2010.

That reduction all but ensures that Real ID is going nowhere, said Jim Harper, director of information policy studies at the Cato Institute. But continuing hesitation by Congress to kill the program entirely highlights the somewhat touchy political nature of the program, he said.

"A straightforward repeal of Real ID is too much for our Congress to handle at this point," Harper said. "There isn't any love for Real ID in Capitol Hill. Most in the Senate and the House don't want it."

At the same time, many lawmakers are reluctant to openly reject it for fear of being seen as being too soft on national security issues, he said.

The Real ID Act was approved by Congress and signed into law by President Bush in 2005 as part of the government's effort to combat terrorism. The law requires states to follow a single national standard for identifying and authenticating people who apply for a driver's license. It spells out specific technical and process requirements, including the use of biometric identifiers, for issuing licenses.

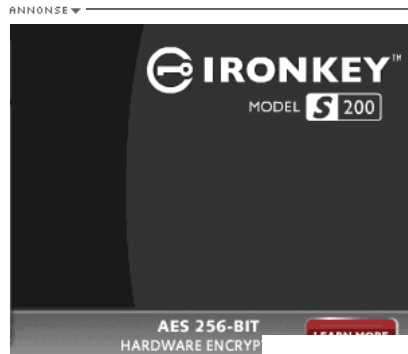
But the law has evoked widespread criticism from privacy advocates and civil rights groups who say it would create a de facto national identity card system that would be hard to manage and even harder to secure. Several have expressed particular concern over a Real ID requirement that all state driver's license databases be linked via a central hub for easier information sharing. Even the DHS itself, which is responsible for implementing the Act, has expressed reservations about Real ID security, privacy and logistics.

States, too, have railed against Real ID, largely because it requires them to pay for the program themselves. Many see it as an attempt by the federal government to force costly and unwanted ID standards on them. A majority of states have formally expressed their refusal to participate in the program, including Arkansas, Idaho, Maine, Montana, New Hampshire, Washington and South Carolina.

DHS Secretary Janet Napolitano, in fact, was one of the first to reject Real ID when she was the governor of Arizona -- a fact that many have said makes it especially hard for her to now try and push it on other states.

In a bid to make the idea of a national identity standard more palatable to states, several U.S. senators earlier this year introduced a bill [proposing some revisions to Real ID](#). That "Providing for Additional Security in States' Identification" Act of 2009, or Pass ID Act, has the same goal as Real ID, minus some of its more controversial provisions.

The DHS has also pushed back implementation schedules on numerous occasions in what is seen by some as an [attempt to push the issue down the road](#) until someone kills it.



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Pam Dixon, executive director of the World Privacy Forum, said that the proposed budget cuts make it impossible for Real ID to move forward in its present incarnation. "Congress is looking at this realistically and saying that states simply do not have the money to implement Real ID," she said. "For all intents and purposes, real ID has been put on the back-burner. But it isn't dead, yet."