

House OKs Tougher Driver's License Laws

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By SUZANNE GAMBOA

WASHINGTON (AP) - The House voted Thursday to make states verify that they're not giving driver's licenses to illegal immigrants and to grant judges broader power to deport political asylum seekers they suspect may be terrorists.

The legislation, passed by a 261-161 vote, also would allow the completion of a fence along the U.S.-Mexican border south of San Diego by waiving environmental hurdles.

States would have three years to comply with the new federal standards dictating what features driver's licenses must have. They could still issue special driving permits to illegal aliens, but those permits would not be recognized as identities for boarding airlines or allowing entry to federal buildings.

Republicans said the Sept. 11, 2001, hijackers had multiple driver's licenses that enabled them to slip through security and board the planes they flew into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and that crashed into the ground in Pennsylvania.

"There was a time when identification fraud was a matter of concern, principally, to bouncers and bartenders. But that was before Sept. 11, 2001," said Majority Leader Tom DeLay, R-Texas.

Ten states now don't require license applicants to prove they are citizens or legal residents: Hawaii, Maryland, Michigan, Montana, New Mexico, North Carolina, Oregon, Washington, Wisconsin and Utah. Tennessee issues driving certificates to people who cannot prove they are legal residents.

"Today there are over 350 valid driver's license designs issued by the 50 states," said the bill's author, House Judiciary Committee Chairman James Sensenbrenner, R-Wis. "We all know it's very difficult for security officials at airports to tell the real ID cards from the counterfeit ones."

Governors, state legislatures and motor vehicle departments protested the bill, calling it a costly mandate that forces states to take on the role of immigration officers. The Congressional Budget Office estimated the bill would cost local, state and tribal governments \$120 million over the next five years.

"The federal government can't seem to track the people it lets in the country, so it wants to put that burden off onto the states," said Cheye Calvo, a policy analyst for the National Conference of State Legislatures.

A similar measure was rejected by Congress and the White House in December when it was part of a bill reorganizing intelligence agencies. It won the Bush administration's support this week but still faces stiff opposition in the Senate.

The bill is drawing criticism from Mexico as well, particularly its call to complete the building of a fence along the U.S.-Mexican border south of San Diego.

"We oppose those measures and that our migrants be denied driver's licenses," said Interior Secretary Santiago Creel. "We're against building any wall between our two countries because they are walls that increase our differences."

Democrats tried but failed to strip the bill of provisions that would let judges deport asylum seekers if they find inconsistencies in their claims rather than let them remain in the country until appeals are exhausted.

"We might as well say, 'If you are being persecuted or you are being abused as a woman or raped as a child, don't come to America.' They are raising the bar beyond the abilities of the individuals that are fleeing persecution," said Rep. Kendrick Meek, D-Fla.

The bill is H.R. 418

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