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## Voting system needs \$1 million a year

By David Irvin  
Montgomery Advertiser

December 31, 2005

Alabama's Legislature will have to scrape together about \$1 million a year to maintain an integrated voter registration system required by a new federal law, Secretary of State Nancy Worley said Friday.

Alabama is one of 19 states that won't be in compliance with the Help America Vote Act when it goes into effect Sunday. The state hasn't installed an up-to-date statewide voter registration system required by the law to help prevent voter fraud.

The state received about \$40 million in federal funds to comply with the new mandates. About \$12 million is earmarked for the statewide voter registration system.

Implementing the system stalled because of confusion over licensing agreements and intellectual property rights, officials said. Worley was confident Friday all the details can be ironed out and the system will be up by June.

However, Alabama will likely have to make annual payments up to \$250,000 for software licensing to run the system. Add to that about \$600,000 to lease data line infrastructure and other administrative costs and Alabama will need about \$1 million a year to comply with the law.

The federal dollars from HAVA will be used to purchase the system, but the money is dispensed only once. To finance the system, the legislature will have to budget the costs annually, something it hasn't been willing to do.

"We have an antiquated system because it was not updated technologically on an annual basis. Now, we can be right back in that same boat," Worley said. "We can spend \$10 million on a new system, and if there's no money for the annual licensing fee agreement, we've got a little problem."

Non-compliance with the law could open Alabama up to being sued by the Justice Department. Election fraud also would be tough to prevent without the integrated system.

Recognizing the project's scale, DOJ officials have told states to choose carefully and not worry about enforcement yet. In an e-mail to the National Association of Secretaries of State, the officials wrote, "States should not twist themselves into knots about the prospect of getting sued by DOJ for barely missing a deadline, and start switching course solely because of that possibility."

The more realistic deadline is the first federal election of the year, which for Alabama could be June 6. By then, the statewide system would need to be in place to be in compliance.

Also by the deadline, voting machines will have to be accessible to disabled voters, produce a paper audit trail and have safeguards against someone "over voting."

Montgomery, Mobile and DeKalb counties used outdated voting systems in 2004, but recently

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Montgomery County obtained updated machines. Getting all the counties on board will be one challenge to making the June deadline, Worley said.

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