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Feds expanding state access to immigration database for purpose of voter roll cleansing

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OLYMPIA, Wash. — The federal government is expanding access to an immigration database so that several states can use it to cleanse voter rolls, officials said Monday.

Homeland Security Department representatives first notified Florida officials last week that they could check to see if registered voters are actually noncitizens who should not be eligible to cast a ballot. State officials said Monday that the department is now offering similar access to other states who had been requesting the information.

“I’m pleased that DHS has agreed to work with states to verify the citizenship of people on the voter rolls and help reduce our vulnerability,” said Colorado Secretary of State Scott Gessler, who had renewed his request for the data last week, writing a letter with the support of several other states.

Elections leaders in Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, Georgia, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, New Mexico, Ohio and Utah had signed onto Gessler’s request. Five of the states — Colorado, Iowa, Michigan, New Mexico and Ohio — are expected to be competitive in the 2012 presidential race. Each of the election chiefs in those states is Republican.

The data work is supposed to help states identify people who may be legal residents but not citizens. Since states can’t monitor whether someone has become a citizen, the federal database will allow them to check the immigration status of those people.

Colorado has identified some 5,000 people that it wants to check.

The Obama administration had denied Florida’s request for database access amid an escalating legal battle with Florida about how it was handling its voter list. A U.S. judge blocked federal attempts to stop Florida’s voter review, and the federal government then relented on the database question.

Washington state has been requesting the data since back to the Bush administration. Shane Hamlin, the co-director of elections in Washington, said state officials aren’t getting full access to the database that they had sought but that they were pleased with the development.

To check against the database, states will have to provide a “unique identifier,” such as an “alien number,” for each person in question. Alien numbers generally are assigned to foreigners living in the country legally, often with visas or other permits such as green cards.

The database isn't likely to catch illegal immigrants who may have managed to get on the voter rolls, since those individuals likely wouldn't have an alien number.

Voting groups are concerned that the erroneous voter purges right now could make it difficult to correct mistakes in time for the election.

http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/feds-expanding-state-access-to-immigration-database-for-purpose-of-voter-roll-cleansing/2012/07/16/gJQA9c9SpW_story.html