

Some non-residents break law to license cars in Oregon

■ COSTS: Some residents violate the law rather than pay the high fees of licensing a vehicle in Washington

The Associated Press

VANCOUVER, Wash. — If car licenses are a guide, you might think you're already in Oregon when you reach the northern outskirts of Vancouver on a drive south on Interstate 5.

Washington state officials estimate nearly one in 10 vehicles in Clark County sport Oregon license plates, and it's not too hard to figure out why.

Licensing a modest, late-model car in Washington costs hundreds of dollars a year, compared to about \$30 for two years in Oregon.

"There's always been a high level of violations [in Clark County]," said Dallas Reel, a tax-discovery agent with the Washington Department of Revenue in Vancou-

ver. "With the vast influx of people now it's worse."

Some new residents break a law requiring that a car be licensed in Washington within 30 days of an owner's move to the state. Also, car buyers may give false Oregon addresses to save money on licensing and avoid Washington sales tax. Oregon doesn't such a tax.

"I think we probably have the worst problem in the state because of where we are," said Washington State Patrol Capt. Rick Phillips, commander of the Vancouver district.

Clark County isn't alone because Washington is a virtual high-priced oasis when it comes to licensing fees. Seattle and Spokane have similar problems with Washington residents who take advantage of lower licensing rates in Alaska and Idaho as well as Oregon.

While there are some attempts to catch drivers dodging the Wash-

ington tax, evidence shows the state is losing \$5 million to \$7 million in Clark County alone by assigning only a few people to target the estimated 15,000 to 20,000 cheaters.

If it were collected, the money would go mostly for transportation projects, public safety and criminal justice.

Presntly there are one full-time State Patrol trooper and three Department of Revenue employees who work part time on license cheating in Vancouver and several southwestern Washington counties. That's half the enforcement level of 1995, though one detective is expected to be added in a month or so to ferret out cases that include such things as fraudulent Oregon addresses.

"The public is getting cheated," said Randy Littlefield, senior revenue agent in the Department of Revenue's Vancouver office. "It's not just the state of Washington.

For every dollar that the state loses, the general public loses services as a result."

Law-abiding residents are frustrated and outraged that so many are flouting the system.

"I've turned in several people who don't license and nothing happens," said Paul Nelson, 52, a Salmon Creek salesman. "It's aggravating when you go to the State Patrol and tell them about these people and nothing gets done."

Not that enforcement doesn't pay.

State Patrol Trooper Mike Kesler's efforts brought in \$68,043 in February, \$50,670 in January and \$110,179 in December, according to State Patrol figures.

Motorists usually get a warning, but continually failing to comply could result in a succession of \$330 criminal citations, more severe fines and ultimately a year in jail.

State Patrol Capt. Marsh Pugh,

the agency's legislative liaison in Olympia, said the patrol has historically made requests to hire more people to enforce licensing.

But he said the agency has been told there is no general fund revenue available, especially with the spending limits mandated under Initiative 601.

At the Department of Revenue's Vancouver office, Reel estimated he spends only 35 percent of his time on vehicle-license fraud. His area includes Clark, Skamania, Klickitat and Cowlitz counties.

He collects over \$1 million per year in taxes, while his salary and benefits cost about \$45,000.

"If the Legislature would give us the positions, we could keep 10 people busy in Clark County," Reel said.

One program, run by a Revenue Department employee in Reel's office, began last year and enlists the help of local police officers working for 29 agencies.



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