

WASHINGTON STATE ENHANCED DRIVER'S LICENSES VS. U.S. PASSPORTS

Radio Frequency Emitting IDs and Your Privacy

What is an Enhanced Driver's License?

Starting in January 2008, Washingtonians can apply for an Enhanced Driver's License (EDL), a new kind of driver's license that can be used instead of a U.S. passport for some border crossings. The EDL is optional and may not be right for all drivers. Before you decide to apply for an EDL, you should carefully consider both the benefits and the drawbacks of using this alternative to a passport.

Three main differences between passports and EDLs

While older passports don't have electronic components, all passports issued since August 2007 contain a small computer chip that contains a copy of the information printed on the passport. Here are some key differences between EDLs and these newer e-passports.

Passport	EDL
Works for all international travel	Only works for re-entry into the United States at land and sea borders when traveling from Canada, Mexico, Bermuda, and the Caribbean
Usually carried only when traveling abroad	Carried all the time in the United States
Built-in security	No built-in security – relies on users keeping the EDL in its protective sleeve

RFID and the EDL

RFID stands for radio frequency identification. RFID tags were originally used as a way to track objects like boxes in a warehouse. In the EDL, the RFID comes in the form of a tag built into the new driver's license. This tag stores an identifying number that is broadcast to compatible readers using a specific radio frequency. These devices send the number on to a computer system that matches the number to a database containing identifying information, such as a cardholder's identity, picture and a history of each time the RFID tag was read.

The EDL will transmit a unique identification number to RFID readers. This number will be permanently associated with you, like a Social Security number, and will not change each time the EDL is read. The RFID in the EDL is expected to be capable of transmitting this number to any reader within 20 feet asking for the information.

Is the RFID in the EDL secure?

Washington's proposed EDLs will not have built-in security, and so the Department of Licensing will ship them with a protective sleeve designed to block the RFID transmission. When an EDL is within the sleeve, the transmission of the unique number will likely be blocked. However, there is no on/off switch. The RFID is always ready to transmit information, and each time an EDL is taken out of the sleeve the signal will be broadcast to compatible readers within range.

Travelers usually only carry their passports when they are crossing an international border. However, drivers will carry their EDL with them all the time. This daily use of EDLs greatly increases the risk of unauthorized reading by RFID readers, especially if the driver forgets to keep the EDL in its protective sleeve.

Security differences between passports and EDLs

The RFID in the EDL is not protected by the same types of security features that are built into the U.S. e-passports.

Passport	EDL
Random identification number generated each time RFID is read	Same identification number used each time RFID tag is read
Data is encrypted	Identification number transmitted without encryption
Outside cover of the passport blocks RFID data transmission when passport is completely closed. (Note: protection fails when passport is open >1/4 inch)	EDL does not have built-in security. A “shielding” sleeve will be distributed with new cards for cardholders to physically place around licenses to block RFID transmission. EDL must be in sleeve to be protected
RFID tag transmits over short distances (a few feet)	RFID tag expected to transmit over longer distances (up to 20 feet)

The EDL is just broadcasting a number — why worry about privacy?

The EDLs’ RFID will store and transmit only one thing – a unique personal identification number. Unique personal identification numbers are not new – Social Security numbers originated as a way for the Social Security Administration to identify people. And just like the Social Security number, an EDL number can be used for unintended purposes.

Could a third party track my movements through my EDL number?

Yes. Any person, organization, or company with a compatible reader can record your EDL number, and build up a database of information about when and where your EDL was detected. Companies could add information about your movements to other information about you, like a profile of product purchases or credit card data. Law enforcement could scan your EDL number without your knowledge or consent to identify your presence at certain areas or events. There’s nothing stopping entities from building and sharing such a history of your whereabouts based on where an EDL was detected.

Current law does not prohibit the unauthorized reading, recording or sharing of RFID information. Any third party with a compatible RFID reader could remotely read and record personal identification numbers. No laws or restrictions govern or limit the use of that data. When people or companies use the EDL to collect information about your movements, they can do whatever they want with that information.



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