

New Mexico's Motor Vehicle Registration Year & Annual Registration Deadline

New Mexico's first vehicle licensing law was approved June 8, 1912, five months after statehood was attained. This law established the annual license period as November 1, 1912 through October 31, 1913. The following year a revised motor vehicle licensing law, effective March 15, 1913, changed the period such that it ran from January 1 through December 31. Registrations paid under the 1912 law, in other words, those purchased through March 14, 1913, and which were set to expire on October 31, 1913, were given a free extension to December 31. The January 1 to December 31 period established by the 1913 law was to remain unchanged for almost seventy years. [1912 Laws of New Mexico, Chapter 28; 1913 Laws of New Mexico, Chapter 19.]

In most years vehicles could be registered (that is, license plates could be purchased) for the coming year beginning as early as November, but with motor vehicle numbers increasing year by year it became more and more difficult for both motorists and officials the Motor Vehicle Department to accomplish all of the registrations by the December 31 deadline. Consequently, in 1936 officials granted a grace period that extended to February 15 of that year. [Clovis Evening News-Journal January 20, 1936, p.1, c.5] In 1937 two extensions were given, the second one ending on February 1. [Lordsburg Liberal January 29, p.1, c.2]

Technically, the time extensions were illegal since the existing law was explicit in that December 31 was the expiration date. This may explain why no extension was given in 1938 [Santa Rosa News December 24, 1937, p.1, c.1], though an extension to February 28 was given in 1939. [Alamogordo News February 23, 1939, p.12, c.3]

In March 1939 the state legislature enacted a law which, while it kept the official expiration date at December 31, it provided for a permanent annual grace period ending on March 2 of each year. [1939 Laws of New Mexico, Chapter 101, Sec. (a)]

For the next 43 years no other changes were made to either the official registration year or the annual grace period, but having all annual renewals come due on the same date was imposing an untenable and ever-growing workload on the motor vehicle department's staff, all within the span of just a few months. This problem was resolved by legislation which authorized the use of a staggered registration system [1981 Laws of New Mexico, Ch. 361], implemented on April 1, 1982, whereby all *new* registrations would expire each year in the same month as the initial registration. Plates issued under this system receive validation stickers bearing both the month and year of expiration. (The very first of these received "MAR 83" stickers.)

Registrations already in force retained the December 31 expiration, and for several years these vehicles continued to be issued stickers bearing only the year of expiration, but in 1989 began receiving stickers showing "DEC" and the year. Once sold, a vehicle under the old calendar year schedule was automatically folded into the staggered system upon registration by the new owner.

(The two varieties of stickers in use 1983-1988 are illustrated on the following page.)

Coinciding with implementation of the new registration scheme was the introduction of new plates with a larger sticker box, necessitated by new stickers which had grown in size to accommodate the month as well as the year. The redesign also included thinner and taller serial number dies which increased in height from 2½" to 3", and a change in the state name and slogan from embossed to graphic characters in order to free up the extra half inch for the serial. These new plates went only to new registrations, while existing registrations continued to use the old plates (dating as far back as 1972) until the vehicle was sold.

Passenger plates in the new series started with serial number EHA-001; trucks started with GE-0001.

In 1985 stickers were again redesigned, wherein the positions and sizes of the year and the month designations were swapped, making it easier to read the specific month in which the vehicle's registration expired.

Certain types of plates are excluded from the staggered registration system, including House Trailer and Freight Trailer because they are permanent plates with no expiration date. Dealer plates have always been set to expire in December of each year, and therefore are an exception as well.

(Note: Many of the details given above on staggered registration were first reported in the "Notes from the States" column of the *ALPCA Newsletter* for April 1982.)

An optional 2-year registration became available as of January 2, 1999. Registrants who opt in receive a small discount (about \$2) for the longer registration period, and the Motor Vehicle Division saves time, labor and postage by having to process and mail out registration certificates and renewal stickers only half as often. ["Notes from the States" column, *ALPCA Newsletter*, February 1999.]



Upon implementation of the staggered registration system on April 1, 1982, *new* registrations received validation stickers bearing both the month and year of expiration. Stickers for existing registrations showed only the year through 1988, then beginning with 1989 received stickers showing DEC expiration each year. In 1985 the stickers were redesigned, wherein the positions and sizes of the year and the month designations were swapped, making it easier to read the specific month in which the vehicle's registration expired.