

Texting while driving, smoking target of '10 laws



FILE - In this file photo taken Dec. 15, 2009, Tina Derby sends text messages while drivin...

By SCOTT BAUER, AP
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Texting while driving, smoking in public and cooking with artery-clogging trans fats will be that much harder under a bevy of state laws set to take effect around the country on Friday.

Faced with huge budget shortfalls and little extra money to throw around, state lawmakers exercised their (inexpensive) power to clamp down on impolite, unhealthy and sometimes dangerous behaviors in 2009.

Even toy guns were targeted.

Among the most surprising new laws set to take effect in 2010 is a smoking ban for bars and restaurants in North Carolina, the country's largest tobacco producer that has a history steeped in tradition around the golden leaf.

Starting Saturday — stragglers get a one-day reprieve to puff away after their New Year's Day meals — smokers will no longer be allowed to light up in North Carolina bars and restaurants. There are exceptions for country clubs, Elks lodges and the like, but the change is a dramatic one for North Carolina, whose tax coffers long depended on Big Tobacco.

Virginia approved a similar law that took effect Dec. 1, but it's more accommodating to smokers because it allows establishments to offer areas in which to light up as long as they have separate ventilating systems.

Not including Virginia and its partial ban, smoking will be banned in restaurants in 29 states and in bars in 25, according to the American Lung Association.

And 12 more states — including Florida, Michigan and Arkansas — have passed laws requiring manufacturers to make their cigarettes less likely to start fires, leaving Wyoming as the only state without such laws, according to the Coalition for Fire-Safe Cigarettes.

America's roads should be safer in 2010, as bans on texting while driving go into effect in New Hampshire, Oregon and Illinois. According to the Governors Highway Safety Association, that will make 19 states that have outlawed the practice, not including six states that prohibit using hand-held cell phones while behind the wheel.

"This legislation is important and will make our roads safer. No driver has any business text messaging while they are driving," said Illinois Secretary of State Jesse White, whose office regulates drivers.

Tina Derby, 42, of Warner, N.H., said she has no intention to stop texting while driving, despite the possible \$100 fine she could receive.

"I'd better start saving my money," Derby said.

A new Arkansas law prohibits retailers from selling toy guns that look like they real thing. But it may not have that big of an effect.

Imitation guns used for theater productions and other events are exempted, as are replicas of firearms produced before 1898, BB guns, paintball or pellet guns.

Major retailers in the state also say they don't expect any major changes from the new ban. Bentonville-based Wal-Mart Stores Inc. says it already follows similar federal restrictions prohibiting the sale of realistic-looking toy guns.

California will be the first state to partially ban the use of artificial trans fats in restaurants in 2010, following several major cities and fast-food chains that have erased the notorious artery-clogger from menus.

Starting Friday, the state's restaurants, bakeries and other retail food establishments will no longer be allowed to use products with trans fats in spreads or for frying. Restaurants will still be allowed to use trans fats to deep-fry yeast dough and in cake batter until Jan. 1, 2011.

And a new anti-paparazzi law is set to take effect Friday in the state with the movie star governor that will make it easier for celebrities to sue media outlets claiming invasion of privacy.

Fans of dog races will have to find another form of entertainment in Massachusetts, as the 75-year-old tradition has been outlawed starting Friday.

In New Hampshire, a new gay marriage law will replace a law that allows civil unions, which already provided gay couples with all the rights and responsibilities of marriage.

Starting Friday, a gay couple in a civil union can get a marriage license and have a new ceremony, if they choose. They also can convert their civil union into marriage without going through another ceremony. Couples who do nothing will have their civil unions automatically converted to marriages in 2011. Conservatives are seeking to repeal the law.

In Wisconsin, both same-sex and unwed opposite-sex domestic partners who work for the state and University of Wisconsin can sign up to receive health insurance benefits. A law that allowed same-sex partners to sign a registry to receive other benefits similar to what married couples get took effect in August.

Some other laws set to take effect:

_ Teenagers going to a tanning bed in Texas will have to be accompanied by an adult.

_ Oregon employers are prohibited from restricting employees from wearing religious clothing on the job, taking time off for holy days or participating in a religious observance or practice.

_ The sale of "novelty" lighters — devices designed to look like cartoon characters, toys or guns or that play musical notes or have flashing lights — are banned in Nevada and Louisiana.

"They're cute, they're little, but they can be deadly," said the Nevada bill's co-sponsor, Assembly Majority Floor Leader John Ocegüera, D-Las Vegas.

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