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Lawmakers kill paper-ballot bill

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DENVER – State lawmakers killed a proposal Thursday that would have forced counties to conduct paper-ballot elections this year, freeing them to use their controversial electronic voting machines.

The 8-1 vote by the Senate Appropriations Committee means the bill cannot be brought back this legislative session. Most lawmakers and Gov. Bill Ritter pulled their support from the bill Wednesday in the face of stiff opposition from county clerks and Secretary of State Mike Coffman. Colorado was one of five states considering moving to paper because of questions about electronic equipment. The reversal essentially puts the state back to where it was in December, before Coffman decertified most of the computerized voting equipment and optical scanners used in the state because of security and accuracy concerns.

La Plata and Montezuma counties would have been mostly unaffected by the paper-ballot plan. Both counties already use paper ballots as the primary voting method, and electronic machines are available for disabled voters or anyone else who prefers to vote by machine.

Coffman recertified all of them by the beginning of March after lawmakers agreed to let him reopen the process, test different fixes and get comments from clerks. California and Ohio have both moved away from using such machines. At a meeting in Denver on Thursday, the U.S. Election Assistance Commission voted to allow states that have decertified electronic machines to use federal money to help make the switch to new voting systems, including buying more scanners to read paper ballots.

However, commission chairwoman Rosemary Rodriguez said the measure also lets states use the money to equip electronic machines with paper receipt printers and doesn't endorse any voting system over another.

In Colorado, counties can now use their voting machines or paper ballots or a combination of both. Denver, the state's largest county, plans to run paper-ballot elections this year, and Boulder County has used paper ballots for several years. But other large counties like Jefferson as well as many Eastern Plains counties wanted to use their electronic machines.

La Plata County Clerk Linda Daley was out of town Thursday and could not be reached for comment. She has previously stated her opposition to paper ballots as the only method for statewide elections. In February, Daley said Colorado would become "a laughingstock" because larger counties would not be able to comply with a paper-only policy.

According to Coffman's office, all but 10 of Colorado's 64 counties have plans to at least offer paper ballots as a backup this year.

Herald Staff Writer Ted Holteen contributed to this story.