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Coffman recertifies machines Last of electronic voting devices given OK

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DENVER – Colorado's top election official on Tuesday reinstated the last of the electronic voting machines he decertified just 12 weeks ago, but it was still unclear how Coloradans would cast their ballots in crucial national elections this year.

Secretary of State Mike Coffman recertified two types of Election Systems and Software optical scanners used by Jefferson and Mesa counties with some conditions. Coffman said the conditions provide extra security to protect against fraud or mistakes.

"These machines are secure, and they can count every vote," he said.

Coffman threw plans for this year's primary and general elections into confusion in December when he decertified most of the counties' computerized voting and ballot machines citing accuracy and security concerns. Legislative leaders moved ahead with a plan for conducting the 2008 elections mainly with paper ballots while also letting Coffman reopen the certification process to retest different fixes with input from county clerks.

The paper-ballot proposal would still require there to be at least one electronic voting machine in every voting location, as required by federal law. But now that the machines have been recertified many county clerks are pressing lawmakers to be able to use them rather than switch to a paper-ballot system, which they say could cost at least \$11 million. Coffman also opposes the paper-ballot proposal because lawmakers haven't committed to spending enough money to cover the extra costs.

A Senate committee was scheduled to vote on the paperballot proposal today.

Majority Leader Ken Gordon, D- Denver, said he thinks the state could be sued again if lawmakers don't press forward with the paper-ballot plan. Last week, Gov. Bill Ritter told clerks that widespread use of the machines wasn't feasible because of the risk of litigation and the lack of public trust in machines that were previously decertified.

Coffman has recertified the use of a total of four types of scanners used to count ballots and three types of computerized voting machines with dozens of conditions. They range from using Velcro to attach a locking box to protect anyone from meddling with the port of the ATM-like voting machines to warning voters to double check their paper ballots for stray marks before they are scanned.

The scanners recertified Tuesday were originally disqualified partly because ES&S didn't provide the correct software to read corresponding ballots fed through the scanners. The lack of correct software made it impossible to complete testing, Coffman said in a letter to ES&S. He said the company later provided new programming and ballots, and they were successfully tested.

State testers also found that the software was unable to track any changes made to the programming. The lack of a tracking mechanism could allow votes to be incorrectly tabulated. As a result, Coffman said counties that use the scanners will have to create a backup database of the layout of the ballot. If the programming is meddled with or changed accidentally, the backup would be used to help reconstruct which votes went to which candidate.

Paul Hultin, the lead lawyer in the 2006 lawsuit challenging Colorado's voting machines, said it didn't make sense to recertify the ES&S scanners, touch-screen machines and software because they still failed about one-third of the state's security tests.