Dozens of video poker truck-stop casinos across Louisiana are on a mad dash to pave parking lots and make other improvements by Jan. 1 so they won't lose their video poker licenses.

Louisiana State Police Lt. Brad Tullier said truck stops that do not comply with new standards that take effect Jan. 1 can expect to lose their video poker licenses.

Tullier said 51 of the state's 105 truck-stop casinos fell short of meeting the standards when they were inspected in November, most because they lacked paved parking for...
casino deadline looms

50 tractor-trailer rigs.

Many of the truck stops are scrambling now to get the work done by Jan. 1, Tullier said.

“My people out in the field say that a lot of them are laying asphalt and concrete,” Tullier said. “One of my sergeants told me he drove by one of these places and they were laying asphalt under floodlights.”

The truck stops were licensed before July 1, 1994, when a new law took effect that was aimed at clamping down on the proliferation of “sham” truck-stop casinos.

The 1994 legislation set higher standards to qualify as a truck stop, but gave existing truck stop casinos until Jan. 1, 1996, to comply.

The requirements include paved parking for 50 trucks, an on-site 50-seat restaurant that is open 24-hours a day and other amenities needed to qualify for a truck-stop video poker license.

Tullier said he is dispatching troopers to reinspect truck-stop casinos Jan. 3 and the agency will then start procedures to revoke the licenses of those that don’t meet the new standards.

While some truck-stop owners have complained, Tullier said state law is clear that they must comply with the provisions to stay in the video poker business after Jan. 1.

See CASINO, Page 2B
There will be no exceptions granted, Tullier said.

"What you've got to realize is they've had 18 months to get their business straight," Tullier said. "Some of them just waited until the last minute to deal with it."

Tullier said the "uncertain political climate" for video poker in Louisiana apparently made some truck stop owners reluctant to pour big bucks into major improvements.

Gov.-elect Mike Foster wants to put gambling to a vote of the people and polls have consistently shown that the scandal-tainted video poker industry is in trouble with voters.

Tullier said he was told it can cost $200,000 to put in a 50,000-square-foot, paved parking lot - the size required to comply with the statute. Three truck stop owners confirmed the cost figures.

Frank Relan, owner of the Redman of Louisiana video poker truck stop in Gonzales, said he recently paved his parking lot to meet the requirements but wasn't happy about it.

"This is the only business in the United States that you can spend $200,000 on a parking lot and not know whether you're going to be open next year or not," Relan fumed. "I did not have to spend that," Relan added. "I had a good enough parking lot."

Earl Stark, president of the Louisiana Travel Centers Association, an association of truck stop owners, said political uncertainty led many owners to wait until the last minute to make improvements.

"The political climate in Louisiana has been such that we don't know from Monday morning to Friday afternoon what's going to happen in Baton Rouge on the political end of it," Stark said.

"Everybody was trying to wait," Stark said. "Most of the people I've talked to have waited until it was an absolute requirement. We assume we're going to still be in business on Jan. 3."

Stark said he expanded his parking area to accommodate 50 trucks even though his truck stop is on a two-lane road and mostly gets logging trucks passing through, not interstate truckers.

"We haven't had 50 trucks here at one time, I guess, since God made this earth," Stark said. "We get truckers hauling logs from woods to the mill, but they don't sit out here or sleep here."

Sal Diesi of Diesi's Little Capitol in Breaux Bridge said he, too, is paving his parking lot.

"It's probably costing in the vicinity of $175,000 to $180,000," Diesi said. "If we're going to have no respite, then we've either got to do it or close up, so there's not much of a choice."

Stark said he expects most existing truck stop casinos to sink the money into improvements needed to stay open, despite uncertainty about the future of their businesses. However, Stark said a few probably will shut down.

"I just know some are marginal and it would probably be foolish for them to sink more money in," Stark said.

Tullier said some truck stops that do not meet the new standards for a license later.

Truck stop casinos in Louisiana raked in $156.3 million from gamblers for the fiscal year that ended June 30, state police records show.

The $156.3 million "take" — what is left in the till after winning players are paid — is before taxes. State and local government collected $50.8 million of that amount through a 32.5 percent franchise fee.

Truck stops are allowed to have 50 video poker machines. Bars, restaurants and similar establishments are allowed up to three of the gambling devices and are taxed at a lower rate than truck stops.

State police records show 15,414 video poker machines were operated at 3,797 locations on June 30 — including 3,850 in 105 truck stop casinos.

Tammy Pruett, an attorney for the state police video poker division. "They'll have appeal rights to district court."

Pruet and Brett Sulzer, another state police attorney, said the 1994 law puts state police on more solid ground than they have been in the past if any court fight develops over the issue.

The 1994 video poker law also requires truck stops to sell at least 100,000 gallons of fuel a month — 40,000 of it diesel — to qualify for a license for 50 video poker machines.

They get fewer machines if fuel sales are lower.

State police said fuel sale averages for the first three months of 1995 will be used to compute the number of machines each truck stop can have when they apply to renew their licenses in July.

The number of machines allowed can go up or down as the year progresses, depending on average fuel sales for each subsequent quarter during the year state police said.