

§ 20-63. Registration plates furnished by Division; requirements; replacement of regular plates with First in Flight plates, First in Freedom plates, or National/State Mottos plates; surrender and reissuance; displaying; preservation and cleaning; alteration or concealment of numbers; commission contracts for issuance.

(a) The Division upon registering a vehicle shall issue to the owner one registration plate for a motorcycle, trailer or semitrailer and for every other motor vehicle. Registration plates issued by the Division under this Article shall be and remain the property of the State, and it shall be lawful for the Commissioner or his duly authorized agents to summarily take possession of any plate or plates which he has reason to believe is being illegally used, and to keep in his possession such plate or plates pending investigation and legal disposition of the same. Whenever the Commissioner finds that any registration plate issued for any vehicle pursuant to the provisions of this Article has become illegible or is in such a condition that the numbers thereon may not be readily distinguished, he may require that such registration plate, and its companion when there are two registration plates, be surrendered to the Division. When said registration plate or plates are so surrendered to the Division, a new registration plate or plates shall be issued in lieu thereof without charge. The owner of any vehicle who receives notice to surrender illegible plate or plates on which the numbers are not readily distinguishable and who willfully refuses to surrender said plates to the Division shall be guilty of a Class 2 misdemeanor.

(b) Every license plate must display the registration number assigned to the vehicle for which it is issued, the name of the State of North Carolina, which may be abbreviated, and the year number for which it is issued or the date of expiration. A plate issued for a commercial vehicle, as defined in G.S. 20-4.2(1), and weighing 26,001 pounds or more, must bear the word "commercial," unless the plate is a special registration plate authorized in G.S. 20-79.4 or the commercial vehicle is a trailer or is licensed for 6,000 pounds or less. The plate issued for vehicles licensed for 7,000 pounds through 26,000 pounds must bear the word "weighted," unless the plate is a special registration plate authorized in G.S. 20-79.4.

A registration plate issued by the Division for a private passenger vehicle or for a private hauler vehicle licensed for 6,000 pounds or less shall be, at the option of the owner, either (i) a "First in Flight" plate, (ii) a "First in Freedom" plate, or (iii) a "National/State Mottos" plate. A "First in Flight" plate shall have the words "First in Flight" printed at the top of the plate above all other letters and numerals. The background of the "First in Flight" plate shall depict the Wright Brothers biplane flying over Kitty Hawk Beach, with the plane flying slightly upward and to the right. A "First in Freedom" plate shall have the words "First in Freedom" printed at the top of the plate above all other letters and numerals. The background of the "First in Freedom" plate may include an image chosen by the Division that is representative of the Mecklenburg Declaration of 1775 or the Halifax Resolves of 1776. A "National/State Mottos" plate shall have in words the motto of the United States "In God We Trust" printed at the top of the plate above all other letters and numerals and have in words the State motto "To Be Rather Than To Seem". The background of the "National/State Mottos" plate shall include an image chosen by the Division that is representative of the American Flag.

(b1) The following special registration plates do not have to be a "First in Flight" plate, "First in Freedom" plate, or "National/State Mottos" plate as provided in subsection (b) of this section. The design of the plates that are not "First in Flight" plates, "First in Freedom" plates, or "National/State Mottos" plate must be developed in accordance with G.S. 20-79.4(a3). For special plates authorized in G.S. 20-79.7 on or after July 1, 2013, the Division may not issue the plate on a background under this subsection unless it receives the required number of applications set forth in G.S. 20-79.3A(a).

- (1) AIDS Awareness – Expired July 1, 2016.
- (2) Alpha Phi Alpha.
- (3) ARTS NC.

- (4) Back Country Horsemen of North Carolina – Expired July 1, 2016.
- (5) Battle of Kings Mountain.
- (6) Big Rock Blue Marlin Tournament.
- (7) Blue Ridge Parkway Foundation.
- (8) Buddy Pelletier Surfing Foundation.
- (9) Carolina Panthers.
- (10) Carolina Raptor Center – Expired July 1, 2016.
- (11) Carolinas Credit Union Foundation – Expired July 1, 2016.
- (12) Choose Life.
- (13) Coastal Land Trust.
- (14) Colorectal Cancer Awareness.
- (15) Core Sound Waterfowl Museum and Heritage Center.
- (16) Donate Life.
- (17) Ducks Unlimited.
- (18) Farmland Preservation – Expired July 1, 2016.
- (19) First in Forestry.
- (20) Fox Hunting – Expired July 1, 2016.
- (21) Friends of the Appalachian Trail.
- (22) Friends of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.
- (23) Guilford Battleground Company.
- (24) Home Care and Hospice.
- (25) Hospice Care – Expired July 1, 2016.
- (26) In God We Trust.
- (27) Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity.
- (28) Keeping The Lights On.
- (29) Lung Cancer Research – Expired July 1, 2016.
- (30) Mountains-to-Sea Trail, Inc.
- (31) National Wild Turkey Federation.
- (32) Native Brook Trout.
- (33) NC Civil War – Expired July 1, 2016.
- (34) NC Coastal Federation.
- (35) NC Horse Council.
- (36) NC Mining – Expired July 1, 2016.
- (37) NC State Parks.
- (38) NC Surveyors.
- (39) NC Tennis Foundation.
- (40) NC Trout Unlimited.
- (41) North Carolina Aquarium Society.
- (41a) North Carolina Association of Fire Chiefs.
- (42) North Carolina Green Industry Council – Expired July 1, 2016.
- (43) North Carolina Sheriffs' Association.
- (44) North Carolina State Flag – Expired July 1, 2016.
- (45) North Carolina Wildlife Habitat Foundation.
- (46) North Carolina Zoological Society.
- (47) Order of the Long Leaf Pine.
- (48) Pisgah Conservancy.
- (49) POW/MIA Bring Them Home.
- (50) Red Drum – Expired July 1, 2016.
- (51) Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation.
- (52) Save the Honey Bee (SB).

- (53) S.T.A.R. – Expired July 1, 2016.
- (54) Stock Car Racing Theme.
- (55) Support Our Troops.
- (56) Travel and Tourism – Expired July 1, 2016.
- (57) United States Service Academy.
- (58) US Equine Rescue League – Expired July 1, 2016.

(c) Such registration plate and the required numerals thereon, except the year number for which issued, shall be of sufficient size to be plainly readable from a distance of 100 feet during daylight.

(d) Registration plates issued for a motor vehicle other than a motorcycle, trailer, or semitrailer shall be attached thereto, one in the front and the other in the rear: Provided, that when only one registration plate is issued for a motor vehicle other than a truck-tractor, said registration plate shall be attached to the rear of the motor vehicle. The registration plate issued for a truck-tractor shall be attached to the front thereof. Provided further, that when only one registration plate is issued for a motor vehicle and this motor vehicle is transporting a substance that may adhere to the plate so as to cover or discolor the plate or if the motor vehicle has a mechanical loading device that may damage the plate, the registration plate may be attached to the front of the motor vehicle.

Any motor vehicle of the age of 35 years or more from the date of manufacture may bear the license plates of the year of manufacture instead of the current registration plates, if the current registration plates are maintained within the vehicle and produced upon the request of any person.

The Division shall provide registered owners of motorcycles and property hauling motorcycle trailers attached to the rear of motorcycles with suitably reduced size registration plates, approximately four by seven inches in size, that are issued on a multiyear basis in accordance with G.S. 20-88(c), or on an annual basis as otherwise provided in this Chapter.

(e) Preservation and Cleaning of Registration Plates. – It shall be the duty of each and every registered owner of a motor vehicle to keep the registration plates assigned to such motor vehicle reasonably clean and free from dust and dirt, and such registered owner, or any person in his employ, or who operates such motor vehicle by his authority, shall, upon the request of any proper officer, immediately clean such registration plates so that the numbers thereon may be readily distinguished, and any person who shall neglect or refuse to so clean a registration plate, after having been requested to do so, shall be guilty of a Class 3 misdemeanor.

(f) Operating with False Numbers. – Any person who shall willfully operate a motor vehicle with a registration plate which has been repainted or altered or forged shall be guilty of a Class 2 misdemeanor.

(g) Alteration, Disguise, or Concealment of Numbers. – Any operator of a motor vehicle who shall willfully mutilate, bend, twist, cover or cause to be covered or partially covered by any bumper, light, spare tire, tire rack, strap, or other device, or who shall paint, enamel, emboss, stamp, print, perforate, or alter or add to or cut off any part or portion of a registration plate or the figures or letters thereon, or who shall place or deposit or cause to be placed or deposited any oil, grease, or other substance upon such registration plates for the purpose of making dust adhere thereto, or who shall deface, disfigure, change, or attempt to change any letter or figure thereon, or who shall display a number plate in other than a horizontal upright position, shall be guilty of a Class 2 misdemeanor. Any operator of a motor vehicle who shall willfully cover or cause to be covered any part or portion of a registration plate or the figures or letters thereon by any device designed or intended to prevent or interfere with the taking of a clear photograph of a registration plate by a traffic control or toll collection system using cameras commits an infraction and shall be penalized under G.S. 14-3.1. Any operator of a motor vehicle who shall otherwise intentionally cover any number or registration renewal sticker on a registration plate with any material that makes the number or registration renewal sticker illegible commits an infraction

and shall be penalized under G.S. 14-3.1. Any operator of a motor vehicle who covers any registration plate with any frame or transparent, clear, or color-tinted cover that makes a number or letter included in the vehicle's registration, the State name on the plate, or a number or month on the registration renewal sticker on the plate illegible commits an infraction and shall be penalized under G.S. 14-3.1.

(h) Commission Contracts for Issuance of Plates and Certificates. – All registration plates, registration certificates, and certificates of title issued by the Division, outside of those issued from the office of the Division located in Wake, Cumberland, or Mecklenburg Counties and those issued and handled through the United States mail, shall be issued insofar as practicable and possible through commission contracts entered into by the Division for the issuance of the plates and certificates in localities throughout North Carolina, including military installations within this State, with persons, firms, corporations or governmental subdivisions of the State of North Carolina. The Division shall make a reasonable effort in every locality, except as noted above, to enter into a commission contract for the issuance of the plates and certificates and a record of these efforts shall be maintained in the Division. In the event the Division is unsuccessful in making commission contracts, it shall issue the plates and certificates through the regular employees of the Division. Whenever registration plates, registration certificates, and certificates of title are issued by the Division through commission contract arrangements, the Division shall provide proper supervision of the distribution. Nothing contained in this subsection allows or permits the operation of fewer outlets in any county in this State than are now being operated.

The terms of a commission contract entered under this subsection shall specify the duration of the contract and either include or incorporate by reference standards by which the Division may supervise and evaluate the performance of the commission contractor. The duration of an initial commission contract may not exceed eight years and the duration of a renewal commission contract may not exceed two years. The Division may award monetary performance bonuses, not to exceed an aggregate total of ninety thousand dollars (\$90,000) annually, to commission contractors based on their performance.

The amount of compensation payable to a commission contractor is determined on a per transaction basis. The collection of the highway use tax and the removal of an inspection stop are each considered a separate transaction for which one dollar and sixty-eight cents (\$1.68) compensation shall be paid. The issuance of a limited registration "T" sticker and the collection of property tax are each considered a separate transaction for which compensation at the rate of one dollar and forty cents (\$1.40) and one dollar and sixteen cents (\$1.16) respectively, shall be paid by counties and municipalities as a cost of the combined motor vehicle registration renewal and property tax collection system. The performance at the same time of one or more of the transactions below is considered a single transaction for which one dollar and eighty-nine cents (\$1.89) compensation shall be paid:

- (1) Issuance of a registration plate, a registration card, a registration sticker, or a certificate of title.
- (2) Issuance of a handicapped placard or handicapped identification card.
- (3) Acceptance of an application for a personalized registration plate.
- (4) Acceptance of a surrendered registration plate, registration card, or registration renewal sticker, or acceptance of an affidavit stating why a person cannot surrender a registration plate, registration card, or registration renewal sticker.
- (5) Cancellation of a title because the vehicle has been junked.
- (6) Acceptance of an application for, or issuance of, a refund for a fee or a tax, other than the highway use tax.

- (7) Receipt of the civil penalty imposed by G.S. 20-311 for a lapse in financial responsibility or receipt of the restoration fee imposed by that statute.
- (8) Acceptance of a notice of failure to maintain financial responsibility for a motor vehicle.
- (8a) Collection of civil penalties imposed for violations of G.S. 20-183.8A.
- (8b), (9) Repealed by Session Laws 2013-372, s. 2(a), effective July 1, 2013.
- (10) Acceptance of a temporary lien filing.
- (11) Conversion of an existing paper title to an electronic lien upon request of a primary lienholder.

(h1) Commission contracts entered into by the Division under this subsection shall also provide for the payment of an additional one dollar (\$1.00) of compensation to commission contract agents for any transaction assessed a fee under subdivision (a)(1), (a)(2), (a)(3), (a)(7), (a)(8), or (a)(9) of G.S. 20-85.

(h2) Upon the closing of the only contract license plate agency in a county, the Division shall as soon as practicable designate a temporary location for the issuance of all registration plates, registration certificates, and certificates of title issued by the Division for that county. The designation shall be posted at the former agency location for not less than 30 days and shall include the street address and telephone number of the temporary location. A former contract agent shall allow the posting of this required notice at the former location for a period of not less than 30 days. A failure to comply with the posting requirements of this section by a former contract agent shall be a Class 3 misdemeanor.

(i) Electronic Applications and Collections. – The Division shall accept electronic applications for the issuance of registration plates, registration certificates, salvage certificates of title, and certificates of title, and is authorized to electronically collect fees from online motor vehicle registration vendors under contract with the Division.

(j) The Division shall contract with at least two online motor vehicle registration vendors which may enter into contracts with motor vehicle dealers to complete and file Division required documents for the issuance of a certificate of title, registration plate, or registration card or a duplicate certificate of title, registration plate, or registration card for a motor vehicle, upon purchase or sale of a vehicle. Vendors under contract with the Division pursuant to this subsection may also enter into contracts with used motor vehicle dealers whose primary business is the sale of salvage vehicles on behalf of insurers to complete and file documents required by the Division for the issuance of a salvage certificate of title.

(k) Commission contract agents are authorized to enter into contracts with online motor vehicle registration vendors which are under contract with the Division to complete and file Division required documents for the issuance of a certificate of title, registration plate, or registration card or a duplicate certificate of title, registration plate, or registration card for a motor vehicle. (1937, c. 407, s. 27; 1943, c. 726; 1951, c. 102, ss. 1-3; 1955, c. 119, s. 1; 1961, c. 360, s. 4; c. 861, s. 2; 1963, c. 552, s. 6; c. 1071; 1965, c. 1088; 1969, c. 1140; 1971, c. 945; 1973, c. 629; 1975, c. 716, s. 5; 1979, c. 470, s. 1; c. 604, s. 1; c. 917, s. 4; 1981, c. 750; c. 859, s. 76; 1983, c. 253, ss. 1-3; 1985, c. 257; 1991 (Reg. Sess., 1992), c. 1007, s. 32; 1993, c. 539, ss. 333-336; 1994, Ex. Sess., c. 24, s. 14(c); 1997-36, s. 1; 1997-443, s. 32.7(a); 1997-461, s. 1; 1998-160, s. 3; 1998-212, ss. 15.4(a), 27.6(a); 1999-452, ss. 13, 14; 2000-182, s. 3; 2001-424, s. 27.21; 2001-487, s. 50(c); 2002-159, s. 31.1; 2003-424, s. 1; 2004-77, s. 1; 2004-79, s. 1; 2004-131, s. 1; 2004-185, s. 1; 2005-216, s. 1; 2006-209, s. 1; 2006-213, s. 4; 2007-243, s. 1; 2007-400, s. 1; 2007-483, s. 1; 2007-488, ss. 2-5; 2008-225, s. 8; 2009-445, s. 24(b1); 2009-456, s. 1; 2010-96, s. 40(a); 2010-132, ss. 2, 3; 2011-382, s. 4; 2011-392, ss. 1, 1.1; 2012-79, s. 1.12(a); 2013-87, s. 1; 2013-372, s. 2(a); 2013-376, s. 9(a), (b), (d); 2014-3, s. 13.2; 2014-96, s. 2; 2014-100, ss. 8.11(e), 34.7(b), 34.28(a); 2015-241, ss. 29.32(a), 29.40(a); 2015-264, s. 40.6(a); 2015-286, s. 3.5(a); 2016-120, s. 2; 2017-107, s. 1; 2017-114, s. 1; 2018-5, s. 34.27(a); 2018-74,

ss. 12(a), 16.10; 2018-77, s. 2(a); 2019-153, s. 2; 2019-213, s. 2(a), (e); 2019-231, s. 4.18(a); 2022-68, s. 19(a), (e).)