

PALM BEACH POST
AM 130000
SUN 140000

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07/10/89

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Firefighters warm to smoking ban

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Until recently, the towns of Palm Beach and Delray Beach had the only two fire departments in the county that did not hire smokers.

As of June 19, smoking firefighters can't work anywhere in the state.

A law signed by Gov. Bob Martinez prohibits fire departments from hiring anyone who admits to smoking or using tobacco products within a year of their application. But employed firefighters who smoke can't get fired.

Although the penalties for non-compliance vary in different departments — each department is free to set its own punishment — officials say termination is an option.

"It's because of the hazardous conditions we're in, the smoke of the fire, the heat, the stress," said Delray Beach Fire-Rescue Chief Kerry Koen. "We need to be in the best possible condition."

Firefighters who smoke face a drastically increased risk of lung cancer because they are exposed to chemicals that are more dangerous when combined with cigarette carcinogens already in their systems, supporters of the law say.

Delray Beach had already adopted a no-smoking policy in April, but it will not affect hiring standards until new recruits are brought in this fall, officials said.

Other local fire chiefs said they were not aware of the new law, but felt it would not really affect their stations because there are so few smokers applying and firefighters themselves support the law.

"I have no objection," said Boynton Beach Fire Chief Edward Allen. "But we only have a few who

smoke, not much over a half-dozen."

West Palm Beach Assistant Fire Chief Ron Johnson said that of 12 hires in October, only one was a smoker.

About 20 cities statewide, including two in Palm Beach County, have adopted no-smoking policies since 1984, said Bob Carver, president of the Professional Firefighters of Florida.

In 1984, when the county's fire departments consolidated, County Fire-Rescue Chief Herman Brice proposed that no smokers be hired by the department.

"It was a point of issue with the unions, but I think everybody has realized a smoke-free fire service is a healthier service," said Palm Beach County Fire-Rescue spokesman Ken Fisher.

The County Commission balked at the idea, Fisher said, and the union opposed it. Now the union supports the bill.

"We've just taken a realistic look at it and basically changed our minds," said union Vice President John Thompson. "We're encouraging all our members not to smoke."

Over the years, smokers have been losing their rights, said Jim Green, president of Florida's American Civil Liberties Union. Unless proponents can prove that smoking outside of work hurts an employee's work performance, the ACLU opposes smoking bans, he said.

The R.J. Reynolds tobacco company also fought the new law, arguing that it infringed on a person's right to choose to smoke, said Rep. Bob Shelley of Pompano Beach, one of the bill's sponsors. Shelley said some representatives made an unsuccessful effort to table the bill.

But firefighters associations helped push it through, he said.

"The firefighters themselves have made this a priority," Shelley said.