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Federal Government And Several States Disagree Sharply On Use Of Daylight-saving Time

by LADB Staff
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A tug of war is brewing between a handful of state governments and federal authorities regarding the use of daylight-saving time (horario de verano) in Mexico. Many state legislatures, supported by their governor, have adopted resolutions condemning daylight-saving time and threatening to ignore the federally mandated time change, scheduled to go into effect this year April 2. Mexico adopted the summer-fall schedule in 1996 to conserve energy and keep work schedules synchronized with key foreign markets and time zones (see SourceMex, June 1, 1996). Since its inception, however, the change has faced growing opposition from labor unions, citizen groups, and elected officials who argue that summer hours pose a danger to children. Many opponents also contend that daylight-saving time is a measure dictated by the US and other foreign governments and violates Mexico's right to self-determination. A public-opinion poll commissioned by the daily newspaper Reforma among more than 1,500 Mexicans in all 32 states showed widespread discontent with the time change. In the poll, conducted March 17-20, 48% of respondents opposed daylight-saving time, while 33% supported it. The remaining 19% either had no opinion or did not know how to respond.

Legislatures ask Zedillo to repeal time change

In 1999, at least nine states and the Federal District passed resolutions rejecting the time change but did not act on the resolution (see SourceMex, April 7, 1999). Opposition has resurfaced with greater force this year, with the state legislatures of Michoacan, Sinaloa, Tabasco, Quintana Roo, Guerrero, Oaxaca, San Luis Potosi, Chiapas, Colima, Jalisco, Coahuila, Sonora, and several other states passing full or partial resolutions opposing the time change. In most cases, the directives endorsed by the state legislatures and governors merely called on President Ernesto Zedillo to suspend the daylight-saving directive this year or to hold a broad referendum to suspend the measure in future years. The governors of Tlaxcala, Zacatecas, Baja California Sur, and the mayor of Mexico City, however, threatened to unilaterally ignore the directive to move the clocks forward one hour unless the federal mandate was suspended this year. "We doubt whether the change results in true electricity savings," said Zacatecas Gov. Ricardo Monreal. "In addition, the majority of citizens oppose this time change." Javier Gonzalez Garza, a top aide to Mexico City Mayor Rosario Robles Berlanga, acknowledged the Mexico City administration may not be able to ignore the federal mandate this year because citizens have been given little notice to prepare for a change. "All we are saying is that the issue needs more study because many citizens are against the time change," said Gonzalez Garza. Santiago Creel Miranda, representing the center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) in the July 2 mayoral election in Mexico City, has also called for a referendum to determine whether daylight-saving time should be maintained in future years. Jesus Silva Herzog, who will represent the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) in the Mexico City race, agreed that the city government has the responsibility to learn citizen positions on the time change. However, he questioned the timing of opponents, particularly Mayor Robles, who is campaigning heavily for PRD candidate Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador. "This is not something that should be discussed at
the last minute, less than a week before the directive goes into effect," said Silva Herzog. "We have to look at this issue outside of the electoral season." The issue has also surfaced in the presidential campaigns. PRI candidate Francisco Labastida has proposed limiting daylight-saving time to four months from its current period of six months. Federal legislators have also joined the debate. PRD Deputy Sergio Benito Osorio, who chairs the energy committee (Comision de Energeticos) in the lower house, said his party expects to offer a resolution to suspend daylight-saving time before it goes into effect April 2. PAN members are pushing for a nationwide referendum.

Zedillo administration committed to policy

The effort to bring the matter to a citizen vote faces an uphill battle, however, given the federal government's commitment to use daylight-saving time to conserve energy. The Secretaria de Energia (SE) has responded to the groundswell of opposition by pointing out that the measure saves Mexico an average of 600 megawatts annually, which is what a large power plant produces during the same period. In a recent interview, Energy Secretary Luis Tellez said daylight-saving time allows the government to manage power usage, preventing plants from becoming overextended. This guarantees that the government will not have to ration electricity, he said. "Daylight-saving time allows us to ensure that the peak usage for residences and for industry does not come at the same time," said Tellez. The SE argues that managing Mexico's electricity supply is increasingly necessary, given the infrastructure's inability to meet the rapidly growing demand. "The robust economic growth boosted demand for power by 6.3% in 1999, compared with initial forecasts of 5.5%," said Alfredo Elias Ayub, director of the Comision Federal de Electricidad (CFE). "This means that our country's electricity generation capacity must be increased by 1,767 MW per year."

To meet the growing power demand, the Zedillo administration has proposed changes to the Constitution to allow partial privatization of the CFE and Luz y Fuerza del Centro (LFC). But the proposal, intended to attract private capital into the electrical sector, has not come up for a vote because of stiff opposition from Mexican legislators, particularly the PRD and some members of the PRI. Earlier this year, Zedillo said he would leave the CFE and LFC privatization to the next administration because of the opposition in Congress (see SourceMex, February 2, 2000). Meanwhile, the Zedillo administration is promoting daylight-saving time as an environmentally friendly move, since reducing operating hours of thermoelectric plants also lowers the amount of harmful fossil fuels released into the environment. The SE says the summer initiative saves the government about 2 million barrels of oil per year. Trade Secretary Herminio Blanco, one of the administration's strongest proponents of daylight-saving time, said its repeal could isolate Mexico from the rest of the world. "If Mexico wants to become a modern nation, the use of daylight-saving time is part of the process," said Blanco. (Sources: The News, 03/09/00; The Boston Globe, 03/25/00; El Financiero, 03/27/00; Novedades, 03/21/00, 03/27/00, 03/28/00; Notimex, 03/21/00, 03/26-28/00; Reuters, La Jornada, 03/28/00; El Universal, 03/21/00, 03/24/00, 03/27-29/00; Excelsior, 03/21/00, 03/27-29/00; Reforma, 03/27-29/00; El Economista, 03/28/00, 03/29/00)