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## **Government Scrambling to Switch Mexican Consumers to Digital Television before Constitutionally Mandated Deadline**

*by Carlos Navarro*

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One of the changes required by the telecommunications reforms that Congress approved in 2013 was a scheme to switch the country from an analog broadcast system to a fully digital television broadcast spectrum ([SourceMex, March 27, 2013](#)), and President Enrique Peña Nieto's administration is facing a constitutionally mandated deadline of Dec. 31 to make the switch. The move to switch to digital broadcast signals, known as the *apagón analógico*, would free up spectrum, which the government plans to use for a wholesale wireless network.

The problem is that the changes will leave many Mexicans without access to television unless the government is able to distribute enough digital televisions to segments of the population that still own a set that relies on analog signals. The telecommunications law stipulates that the government must make the switch once 90% of low-income households, as defined by the Secretaría de Desarrollo Social (SEDESOL), have received digital sets.

The government, via the Secretaría de Comunicaciones y Transportes (SCT), has worked furiously to provide sets to low-income households but appears to be falling short of the goal. Authorities now anticipate a total distribution of 9.7 million sets, about 300,000 more than initially projected.

"The most serious problem is not the delay in providing televisions to low-income households but that the required target of 90% of enrollees in SEDESOL might not be met," Maricarmen Cortés, a financial columnist for the daily newspaper *Excélsior*, said in mid-October.

In an interview with the daily newspaper *El Financiero* in early November, telecommunications expert Gabriel Sosa Plata said the government must distribute more than 49,000 units daily through the end of the year to meet the Dec. 31 deadline.

If the government goes forward with the Dec. 31 deadline without completing the distribution of television sets, a large segment of the population would not have access to over-the-air television. The estimates for the number of people who would be affected vary between 7 million and 17 million. Mexico's population was estimated at about 123 million as of July of this year,

The government has been making the switch gradually, initially targeting certain cities like Tijuana, Monterrey, Cuernavaca, and Querétaro. The changeover in those selected locations has exposed the problem that the government could face in switching the entire country to digital television. In Monterrey, which was switched to digital signals in September 2015, more than 500,000 people are not now receiving any free broadcast signals, even though this is one of the wealthiest areas in the country. The population of Monterrey was estimated at 1.14 million as of 2014.

### ***Opposition senators propose extending deadline***

The situation has raised tensions between the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) and the opposition parties. Sen. Javier Lozano Alarcón, a member of the center-right Partido Acción

Nacional (PAN) and chair of the communications and transportation committee (Comisión de Comunicaciones y Transportes) in the upper house, has proposed extending the deadline another year to the end of 2016, which would give the government sufficient time to ensure that most everyone has a digital television.

"We want to make sure that we do not have two classes of Mexicans in access to television," said Lozano. "That is why it is important to extend the deadline."

Lozano's proposal has received strong support from the center-left Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD). PRD Sen. Zoé Robledo Aburto also asked for an extension but also supported the continuation of a gradual switch and said the cities and communities that had already made the change should be allowed to continue receiving digital signals.

The problem is that the Dec. 31 deadline is mandated by the Constitution, and any extension would require a constitutional amendment. The date for the analog switch-off to be completed at the end of 2015 was initially set in 2010 during the administration of former President Felipe Calderón, and the deadline was written into the Constitution in 2013 as part of changes in telecommunications laws under Peña Nieto.

Outgoing PRD president Carlos Navarrete suggested that the SCT do everything within its power to comply with the telecommunications reforms before the Congress considers an amendment. "The first thing we have to do is ask the government to expedite all efforts to guarantee that all Mexicans would have access to the television networks by Jan. 1, 2016," Navarrete said in an interview.

The PRI delegation in the Senate is adamant that no extension of the deadline is needed. Sen. Raúl Pozos Lanz, the floor leader for the PRI in the upper house, said legislators have been assured by the SCT, SEDESOL, and the semi-autonomous telecommunications regulator, the Instituto Federal de Telecomunicaciones (IFT). "There are no reasons to postpone this important step in the transformation of our broadcast system, which will bring important benefits to Mexican families," Pozos Lanz told reporters.

The IFT said the institute was up to the task in trying to comply with the deadline. "The IFT is working within the framework of the law and with the resources provided by the law," the regulator said in a statement.

"If [the opposition in Congress] had not wanted the transition to digital TV to be completed by Dec. 31, why did they approve that date?" a defiant IFT noted.

Mexico's largest broadcaster Grupo Televisa is willing to leave analog signals on for a longer period if the deadline were to be extended. "We do not want to boycott [the switchover], but we want to defend the rights of the population to retain access to over-the-air television," Televisa chair Emilio Azcárraga Jean said in an interview with Radio Fórmula. He cited concerns about the number of people in Monterrey that were left without access to television when the switchover was made in that city in September.

### *Annual campaign supports middle-income consumers*

While the focus has been on converting low-income households to digital TV, a relatively high number of middle-class Mexicans could also be left out if they do not make the change by Dec. 31. Economy Secretary Ildefonso Guajardo said the government will take advantage of El Buen Fin

campaign to ensure that middle-class consumers have access to low-cost digital televisions. El Buen Fin, which has been described as a government-supported Black Friday, is an effort to help Mexican retailers by encouraging consumption ahead of the Christmas and Epiphany holidays. The federal government supports the effort, launched in 2011, by providing some funding for promotional activities and giving government workers their Christmas bonus in advance ([SourceMex, Nov. 20, 2013](#)).

"The only additional promotion that we are launching [for El Buen Fin] is an effort, in conjunction with producers of digital televisions and retailers, to support all the families, especially those of middle income [who are not eligible for the free sets that are being distributed]," said Guajardo.

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