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## Tourism Secretary Proposes to Legalize Marijuana in Key Tourist Resorts

by Carlos Navarro

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The debate in Mexico on legalization of marijuana took an unexpected twist when Tourism Secretary Enrique de la Madrid suggested that Mexico should allow recreational use of cannabis at two of the country's most popular destinations for foreign tourists, Los Cabos in Baja California Sur and the Caribbean resort of Cancún. According to the tourism secretary, legalizing pot at the two locations might help combat rising levels of insecurity there.

"It would be very damaging to lose those two destinations because of [violence] related to the drug trade," de la Madrid said. He later clarified the comments with a Twitter message, asserting that the views were his own and did not represent the position of President Enrique Peña Nieto's administration.

"I want to emphasize that this comment on the legalization of marijuana was my own personal opinion, based on careful analysis and study of the issue for many years," he wrote. "I am convinced that this matter should be debated as one option to solve our problems with violence and insecurity in Mexico."

Mexico has eased some restrictions on the cultivation, consumption and possession of marijuana over the past decade. The most recent move was a vote by the Congress to allow the use of marijuana for medical purposes and research activities ([SourceMex, April 27, 2016](#)). The decision was preceded by a ruling in 2015 by a Federal District Court that allowed the parents of an 8-year-old to import a marijuana-based medication to treat her epilepsy.

Another court decision in 2015 upheld the rights of four individuals and their organization, the Sociedad Mexicana de Autoconsumo Responsable y Tolerable (Mexican Society for Responsible and Tolerable Consumption, SMART), to consume and transport marijuana for personal use ([SourceMex, Nov. 11, 2015](#)).

However, the initial step toward easing restrictions on marijuana came in 2009, when Congress approved legislation that decriminalized possession of small amounts of marijuana and other drugs ([SourceMex, Aug. 26, 2009](#)). Despite these decisions, the widespread use of recreational marijuana is not allowed in Mexico.

### *Mixed Reactions*

Reaction to de la Madrid's comments was mixed, even among members of the Peña Nieto government.

"Drugs are illegal because they are harmful to health, they don't stop being harmful to health if they are legal," said Interior Secretary Alfonso Navarrete. "The federal government does not share [de la Madrid's] approach."

Others lauded de la Madrid's willingness to think outside the box, including Renato Sales, who is Mexico's commissioner for public safety, and Miguel Ruiz Cabañas, deputy foreign relations secretary for multilateral affairs. They pointed out that the use of marijuana for recreational purposes is already legal in some US states and could soon have the same status in Canada.

"Of course, the debate over legalization of marijuana should be retaken in Mexico," Sales said in a newspaper interview in mid-January. "A large share of the violence we experience in Mexico has to do with prohibition."

Other politicians also offered diverse views on de la Madrid's proposals, including the governors of Baja California Sur and Jalisco.

"In principle, I'm not in favor of legalization," said Baja California Sur Gov. Carlos Mendoza Davis, a member of the conservative Partido Acción Nacional (PAN). Los Cabos and La Paz, two destinations popular with US tourists, are located in his state.

Mendoza Davis alluded to the legal status of marijuana in California. "I must also say that it seems foolish and illogical that we're fighting here with a strategy that costs lives in Mexico but magically, crossing the border, marijuana becomes legal."

Jalisco Gov. Aristóteles Sandoval expressed full support for the legalization of recreational marijuana.

"We need to start a debate regarding the legalization of marijuana, not just in tourist places, but in the whole country," said Sandoval, a member of the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). "What's killing our young people isn't consumption [of drugs], it's the transportation and trafficking of drugs."

## *A campaign issue*

The issue has also become part of the discourse in the presidential campaign. Ricardo Anaya, the candidate for a PAN-led coalition, said he supports a broad debate on legalization of marijuana for recreational purposes. "We need a serious and informed debate," said Anaya, whose coalition also includes the center-left Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD).

Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who represents Movimiento Regeneración Nacional (Morena), the other major center-left party in the presidential election, declined to offer an opinion on the controversial subject. "No comment about it," he said during a campaign stop in Chiapas.

However, López Obrador had earlier raised a related—and just as controversial—issue, the possibility of providing amnesty to members of drug-trafficking organizations as a means to reduce violence in Mexico.

"There can be dialogue with everyone," he told the daily newspaper Reforma in December 2017. "There needs to be dialogue and there needs to be a push to end the war and guarantee peace. Things can't go on as before."

The PRI candidate, José Antonio Meade, rejected de la Madrid's proposal entirely. "We can't make a different public policy for different regions," he said during a campaign stop in Sonora. However, Meade said he was in favor of holding a "serious debate" on the issue.

## *Legalization gains traction in media*

The media coverage was generally favorable to de la Madrid, particularly in the editorial pages across Mexico.

“There is no reason to preclude the possibility that the production, sale, and consumption of marijuana can be legalized in certain zones without having to extend the policy to the whole country,” commentator Jorge G. Castañeda wrote in the daily business newspaper *El Financiero*.

Castañeda pointed out that many foreign visitors already bring their own pot to resort communities or buy it on location. “Would it not be preferable that these activities occur in the light of day and within the law?” asked Castañeda, who served briefly as foreign relations secretary during the administration of former President Vicente Fox (2000-2006).

“I fully agree with those who believe that a change in the regulation of marijuana is an essential step to reduce the negative social consequences caused by the ‘war’ on drugs,” columnist Armando Ríos Piter wrote in the daily newspaper *Excélsior*.

Ríos Piter acknowledged that limited legalization is not going to be sufficient to end the violence and reduce the power of criminal organizations. “However, I believe that we must have a serious debate and urgently assume the legislative work of developing a new regulatory framework,” said the columnist, who represents the PRD in the Mexican Senate.

Other observers noted that Mexico’s overly strict laws on consumption of marijuana have resulted in prison overcrowding. “We have thousands of people who have been wrongly incarcerated for the simple act of consumption,” columnist Héctor Aguilar Camín wrote in the daily newspaper *Milenio*.

One commentator suggested that legalization of marijuana could help address one of the major problems associated with the drug trade, which is corruption. Columnist Rubén Martín estimated that cartels earn at least US\$50 billion from their drug-trafficking activities in Mexico each year. “A large share of this money—up to 30%—remains with politicians, police, and the military in the form of corrupt payments,” Martín wrote in the daily newspaper *El Informador*.

“In a scenario of legalization, the majority of bribes would not be necessary, and the money could be converted into fiscal earnings for the government,” Martín added. “Beyond what the government can earn from the change in policy, the urgent task is to stop the violence in Mexico, to end the murders and disappearances related to this capitalistic business of the illegal sale of drugs.”

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