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From the Los Angeles Times

Mexican president foresees friendlier U.S.

In a wide-ranging interview, Felipe Calderon sees a better chance for immigrants to gain legal status in the next administration.

By Héctor Tobar

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MEXICO CITY — President Felipe Calderon said Wednesday that a shifting political climate in the U.S. could improve the chances that a new administration in Washington will help bring a comprehensive reform law that would legalize the status of Mexican immigrants.

In a wide-ranging conversation with The Times, Calderon, scheduled to visit California next week, also addressed the decline of the government-owned oil fields and the war against drug traffickers that has claimed thousands of lives.

"My hope is that whoever the next president is, and whoever is in the new [U.S.] Congress, will have a broader and more comprehensive view" of the immigration problem, Calderon said. Speaking at the presidential residence Los Pinos on the morning after the Super Tuesday presidential primaries in the U.S., Calderon said he took heart from the results, though he did not mention specific candidates.

"It seems to me that the most radical and anti-immigrant candidates have been left behind and have been put in their place by their own electorate," Calderon said.

He arrives in Sacramento on Feb. 13 on the final leg of a five-day U.S. trip that will also take him to Chicago, Boston and New York to visit local officials and representatives of Mexican immigrant communities.

In Sacramento, he is scheduled to meet with Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and Latino legislators. In Los Angeles the following day, he is to meet Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa and migrant groups' representatives assembled by the nine Mexican consulates in California.

He will tell fellow Mexican citizens "that we are actively working to defend their human rights," Calderon said. "No matter their immigration status, they are human beings with dignity and rights that should be respected. We are working, with the full effort of the government, to bring a halt to the campaigns that harass migrants."

Calderon said one goal of his trip, which will include a talk Monday at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, was to build public support for an immigration reform law that would allow millions of Mexicans to work in the U.S.

He said Americans would recognize "sooner or later" that the health of the U.S. economy is linked to integration with its neighbor and "the increased flow of goods, services, investment" between the two countries "and also greater freedom in labor markets."

Such liberal economic orthodoxy also informs Calderon's beliefs about the policies that can best create jobs in Mexico and slow the annual flight of thousands of his countrymen northward.

Despite criticisms from farmers that the North American Free Trade Agreement is ruining Mexican agriculture and spurring migration to the U.S., Calderon said he remained a firm believer in the power of free markets to improve the lot of Mexico's rural poor.

"The truth is that exports from the Mexican countryside have increased fourfold since NAFTA" was implemented, Calderon said.

Still, the federal government will continue to provide \$20 billion in annual farm subsidies. And to ameliorate the effect of the U.S. economic slowdown on the Mexican economy, Calderon is proposing a massive series of public works projects and other measures.

On Wednesday, Calderon announced the creation of a \$25-billion fund to build highways, bridges and other infrastructure projects so that "we don't have to depend on the external motor of the U.S. economy" to keep Mexico growing.

Calderon also warned that the Mexican people faced difficult decisions related to the declining production of the country's oil fields, the government's main source of foreign revenue.

With reserves in its aging offshore Cantarell field diminishing, the state-owned oil company Pemex needs funds to pay for exploration in the deeper waters of the Gulf of Mexico.

The money, Calderon said, could come only from two sources: reducing government spending for public services or looking to the example of China, Norway and Brazil, where the state-owned oil companies benefit from private investment.

Private investment in Pemex has been a political poison pill in Mexico, where the publicly owned natural resource is considered by many a pillar of national sovereignty.

"This is a problem we should resolve now so as not to place future generations in danger," Calderon said. "I've always worked from the assumption that Pemex will not be privatized. But I am sure there will be a more understanding environment to objectively evaluate what's best for Pemex."

Whereas declining oil revenue is a long-term challenge, the most immediate threat Calderon faces is organized crime. Violence linked to drug trafficking has claimed more than 2,000 lives since Calderon took office in December 2006.

Despite progress, including the arrest of more than 20,000 organized-crime suspects and huge hauls of illicit drugs and cash, much work remains to be done, Calderon said.

Drug traffickers are a dominant presence in several border cities and many rural towns.

"Victory will be achieved when the authorities have complete control over their own territory . . . when the authorities have total command over and complete faith in the police forces," he said.

U.S. legislators are debating a \$550-million proposal by the Bush administration to assist Mexico and Central America in the battle against traffickers.

"This is a battle in which Mexico obviously needs the help of the United States to win," Calderon said.

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