

Mexico's Fox Urges Fairness for Immigrants

Touring the West, Mexican Leader Opposes Fence

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SALT LAKE CITY, May 24 -- Adding a voice from south of the border to the national debate on immigration, Mexican President Vicente Fox is barnstorming the western United States this week, arguing against fencing off the U.S.-Mexico border and asking Americans for "decent treatment of our people."

Reminding his audiences that he once worked for a "a little small U.S. business you may have heard of: Coca-Cola," Fox is visiting the states of Utah, Washington and California in a four-day trip that includes speeches in English to business and political leaders and Spanish-language rallies with Mexicans working in this country, legally or otherwise.

The U.S. tour is designed partly to enhance cross-border trade and investment. But Fox has also taken pains to present the Mexican view of the raging U.S. debate over immigration -- or, as he calls it, "the migration phenomenon."

Addressing the Utah legislature Wednesday in accented but clear English, Fox insisted that Mexican immigrants have been a boon to this country. "Mexico is proud, very proud, of its people here, whose working spirit and moral values contribute every day to the economy and society of this great nation," he said.

And he spoke out repeatedly here against proposals to build fences along the border. The U.S. House has passed legislation calling for a 700-mile fence to cut the flow of immigrants, and the Senate last week voted to build a three-tiered fence stretching 370 miles.

"We don't put up walls," Fox told a predominantly Latino crowd in Spanish at a lively rally Tuesday in a Salt Lake suburb. "That's not the way you're going to fix the problem. Walls that pretend to solve the problem only provoke distance between two peoples."

Expanding on this theme, Fox told the legislature: "Enforcement-only measures will not solve the challenges posed by the migration phenomenon. . . . Among friends, neighbors and partners, bilateral dialogue and cooperation is key component."

The president's whirlwind, 24-hour stop in Utah took him from a breakfast of refried beans and cheese salsa at a Mexican food warehouse to a dinner of mushroom-crust rainbow trout hosted by Utah Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr. (R). The rest of his Western tour will follow a similar pattern. After stops in Yakima and Seattle, Wash., he heads to California, where he is to address immigrant groups and then meet with Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger (R) and Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa.

As a foreign head of state campaigning in this country on matters of U.S. law, Fox got a hostile response on some talk radio shows here and from local members of the Minutemen, a citizens group that wants to restrict Mexican immigration. A few dozen protesters chanted outside each of his Utah stops. "Our immigration law is for us to

decide, not some Mexican," said a Minuteman member from Salt Lake City who identified himself only as Clay.

But the more common response here seemed favorable, even from political leaders who have been identified with the anti-immigration position.

As part of a crackdown, last year, the Utah legislature passed a law denying a state identification card or a driver's license to any applicant who cannot prove legal residence. (Instead, the state issues immigrants a "driving privilege card," which declares in bold letters that it is not a legal form of identification.)

But the author of that law, Republican state Sen. Curtis Bramble, said his views on immigration have been altered somewhat because of his discussions with Fox and other Mexican officials during this week's visit. "I have a better understanding now of the position of the Mexican government," Bramble said. "Before this trip, the perception was that they were unconcerned about the immigration problem. But now I see they want to work together with us. And I agree -- there is room for dialogue."

Nonetheless, Bramble said he still believes that fences and tougher enforcement would be "an appropriate policy on some sections of the border."

Fox also seemed to score points with business leaders in Salt Lake City, telling an audience of 500 that Mexico is eager to increase trade across the border. At every stop, he pointed out that Mexico is the United States' second-largest trading partner (after Canada), and buys more U.S. goods and services than Germany, Italy, France and Britain combined.

The president also offered thanks to the state of Utah. Despite the tough legislation passed last year, Utah permits the children of undocumented residents to take advantage of in-state tuition rates at state colleges, and provides emergency medical care to all who need it.

These policies, Fox said, make the state "a real example of what can be done with respect to dignity and humanity."

But the Mexican leader's most rapturous reception in Utah came in meetings with immigrants from Mexico and other Latin countries. Each time he met with groups of his countrymen, Fox told them that their long-term ties to Mexico will continue while they live and work in the United States.

"Even though you are far from Mexico, you are an integral part of Mexico," Fox said at the rally here on Tuesday. "Over there, we wait for you with open arms."