

Importing or Disposing of a Foreign Vehicle in Mexico (2026 Update)

For many homeowners in San Carlos, the question of what to do with a U.S.-plated vehicle eventually arises, particularly when selling a property or no longer requiring the vehicle locally.

As of January 1, 2026, the legal landscape has changed. The temporary government program that allowed for simplified legalization (regularización) of older foreign vehicles officially ended on December 31, 2025. This program had provided a relatively accessible path for certain vehicles to be brought into compliance. That option no longer exists, and no new applications are being accepted under that framework.

What This Means in Practical Terms

For older vehicles, permanent importation (importación definitiva) is now considerably more complex, time-consuming, and often costly. Eligibility itself is not guaranteed. Vehicles must meet specific origin requirements, typically having been manufactured in North America, which can be verified through the VIN.

Even where eligibility exists, the process involves customs duties, taxes, documentation, and compliance checks. In practical terms, total costs can reach several thousand U.S. dollars. Based on recent experience, this is often in the range of \$3,000 to \$5,000 USD or more, depending on the vehicle and its valuation.

There are also logistical considerations. The vehicle must be taken to the border for processing, may need to remain there for several days, and then be retrieved once the process is complete. This adds both time and coordination to an already involved procedure.

Important Legal Consideration

It is important to understand that selling or transferring a foreign-plated vehicle within Mexico, without proper importation, is not permitted. This applies regardless of the condition of the vehicle or the intent of the parties involved.

Attempting to do so may expose both the seller and the recipient to fines, seizure of the vehicle, and potential legal complications under customs and import regulations. For this reason, informal or local arrangements are strongly discouraged.

Most Practical Options

Based on current regulations, the most practical approaches are as follows:

1. Return the vehicle to the United States and sell it there. This is typically the cleanest and most straightforward option.

2. Arrange a legal sale in the United States. Ownership can be transferred with proper documentation while physically present in the U.S.

3. Consider donation within the United States. While possible, this should be handled carefully to ensure compliance with applicable rules.

A Realistic Conclusion

While each situation can vary depending on the vehicle, its origin, and its condition, the practical takeaway for most owners is consistent. Returning the vehicle to the United States is typically the most efficient, cost-effective, and risk-free solution.

For those who believe their vehicle may qualify for permanent importation, a detailed review of the VIN, title, and applicable regulations is recommended before proceeding.

This information is provided with the guidance of Lic. Ricardo Vazquez, legal counsel.