La. among 8 states to miss drinking age deadline

By The Associated Press

Mississippi college students chartered buses Tuesday for a final bar bash, but eight other states faced the loss of millions of dollars in federal highway money for refusing to raise the drinking age to 21 by Oct. 1.

The District of Columbia Council last week passed 90-day emergency legislation to comply with the National Minimum Drinking Age law, signed by President Reagan in 1984. Certification of compliance was expected sometime Tuesday, according to the U.S. Department of Transportation.

Forty-two states are in compliance with the federal law. The others are: Colorado, which, based on fiscal 1986 figures stands to lose $0.1 million in federal highway aid; Idaho, $4.5 million; Louisiana, $15.6 million; Montana, $5.5 million; Ohio, $16 million; South Dakota, $4.1 million; Wyoming, $4.5 million; and Tennessee, $9.2 million.

Although the deadline to avoid losing highway money is 12:01 a.m. Wednesday, Congress has yet to pass a federal budget. When it does and highway funds are approved, states not in compliance with the law will receive 5 percent less than the allocation. A year from now, states face double the penalty. States that eventually comply will get the back money.

Many states lowered the drinking age in the late 1960s and ’70s when young people argued that if teen-agers could be drafted, they should be able to order a draft. Concern has since shifted to traffic deaths, and states began moving to keep drivers under 21 from drinking.

Some state officials, however, object to being forced to change laws to keep federal highway funds. South Dakota filed suit arguing that Congress exceeded its authority. After losing in lower courts, the state expects to hear from the U.S. Supreme Court by Nov. 1 whether it will hear the case.

“People like myself happen to be in favor of 21-year-old drinking. . . . But I’m violently opposed to the federal government thinking it’s their responsibility and their duty and their obligation to impose it on the American people,” Gov. Bill Janklow said Monday on NBC’s “Today” show.

“If you really want to have a dangerous highway situation, bankrupt the states in their ability to build and fix highways and make for lousy and dangerous highways, and then you’re really going to have a highway safety problem,” he said.

But even the holdouts are wawering. Idaho, Louisiana, Wyoming and Tennessee likely will consider changing their laws this year or early next year. A drinking age bill is pending with an Ohio legislative committee; Louisiana lawmakers narrowly defeated such a bill this year.