

# Feds indict three in immigration sting

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By Bryan Denson

Federal agents swept through a major fruit and vegetable processor in North Portland this morning as part of a criminal investigation of a national employment agency's alleged scheme to hire and employ undocumented workers.

Agents searched Fresh Del Monte Produce and two offices of American Staffing Resources, the target of the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement probe, after an investigation that began last December.

Three suspects in the case were indicted for their roles in the hiring scheme and are accused of immigration crimes, document fraud and identity theft, according to federal prosecutors. Their names were not released, pending the unsealing of those indictments.

On a given day, about 300 production workers labor at the Del Monte plant in two shifts, cutting, cleaning and packaging fruits and vegetables for food stores and other retailers in the region. Those workers are employed by American Staffing Resources, which is owned by a North Carolina company called Staffco Management Group Inc.

Nine out of 10 of the American Staffing Resources workers who labored at Fresh Del Monte used Social Security Numbers that were fictitious or belonged to other people, according to an affidavit filed by Immigrations and Customs Enforcement to obtain search warrants for today's raid.

Federal agents checked government records and found that only 48 of the 596 employees had valid Social Security Numbers. Another 463 were using someone else's number; 85 used invalid numbers; and four used numbers of someone previously deported.

Some of the workers using fake Social Security numbers have criminal records, face deportation warrants or have been deported previously, the Department of Justice said.

Karin Immergut, the U.S. Attorney for Oregon, said federal prosecutors do not get involved in cases in which undocumented foreigners are living illegally in the United States. Immergut's office got involved in this case because of the allegations of felony document fraud and identity theft, she said.

"We have enough to do going after people with felony convictions," she said.

Federal prosecutors made more than 200 cases in Oregon last year against illegal immigrants with prior felony convictions, according to Kent Robinson, who is Immergut's chief criminal assistant. They made no cases against people simply for being illegal immigrants, Robinson said.

The criminal case began shortly after last Christmas, when Immigrations and Customs Enforcement agents directed an informant to go apply for work at Fresh Del Monte's production plant at 9243 North Rivergate Boulevard.

The informant told a production manager identified as Carlos Bustamantes that he was born in Mexico and had no legal documentation to work in the United States.

Bustamantes, according to the ICE search warrant affidavit, directed the informant to fill out his application, but leave the parts blank that listed a Social Security Number or a permanent resident alien number.

The American Staffing Resources workers helped him complete the forms using a fake Social Security Number, according to the affidavit.