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## Government asks for employers' help

Program seeks papers to weed out illegal workers

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WASHINGTON — Over the past seven months, Bush administration officials have quietly toured the country, trying to persuade businesses that rely heavily on immigrant labor to join a little-known program that would spare them from embarrassing federal raids if they voluntarily handed over their workers' documents so the government can scan them for fraudulent information.

Officials at the Department of Homeland Security have asked companies to join the ICE Mutual Agreement Between Government and Employers program, known as IMAGE, operated by the department's Immigrations and Customs Enforcement division. It calls on businesses to submit all I-9 employee eligibility verification forms to ICE for an audit and to "ensure the accuracy of their wage reporting" by verifying workers' Social Security numbers, according to a description of the program.

An ICE spokesman said IMAGE is another step in the administration's drive to tighten work site enforcement as more than a million immigrants illegally cross the Mexican border each year in a quest for jobs.

"The upside for those who ... participate is that they're better equipped to know whether their work force is legal, and ICE is less likely to be on their doorstep unexpectedly, interfering with their business," said Matthew Allen, acting deputy assistant director for infrastructure and fraud in the agency's investigations division. "It's an investment in making sure that their work force is secure."

### Broader, deeper

The government's efforts under IMAGE are much broader and deeper than those under another program, Basic Pilot, in which businesses voluntarily enroll. Companies that take part in Basic Pilot can check the Social Security numbers that job applicants provide against a national database of Social Security and immigration records.

In contrast, IMAGE covers all members of a company's work force and does a more extensive scrub of records to determine if a worker is in the country illegally or is using fraudulent documents.

Allen would not disclose the names of companies recruited into IMAGE, saying only that dozens have taken the steps toward enrollment.

### A participant since June

Smithfield Packing Co., which runs the world's largest hog slaughterhouse, in Tar Heel, N.C., has participated since June. Twenty-one workers there were arrested last week.

ICE alerted Smithfield by e-mail of discrepancies in employees' records. A company spokesman said 541 workers in the plant's work force of 5,000 are facing termination because of job application discrepancies.

"This is terrible for everyone, us, the employees, their families," company spokesman Dennis Pittman said. "It's heart-wrenching. These are our better people. These are folks who have been with us seven, eight, nine years."

Pittman called Smithfield's agreement with ICE "a business decision" resulting from an implied threat.

"We knew raids could be a possibility," he said. "We felt going this way, there would be less of an effect."