

Seismic firm to pay in case of visa fraud

WesternGeco filed applications for Gulf workers, government says

By LYNN J. COOK

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A Houston-based unit of Schlumberger, the world's largest oil-field-services company, will pay close to \$20 million in penalties for submitting fraudulent visa applications for foreign workers assigned to vessels operating in the Gulf of Mexico.

WesternGeco, as part of an agreement with the government, will pay an \$18 million fine for the violations and another \$1.6 million to reimburse the U.S. government for costs involved with its investigation.

The seismic imaging company said it accepts responsibility for employees who told foreign workers to misrepresent the nature and location of their jobs to the federal government.

A Justice Department investigation uncovered 421 instances of visa fraud perpetrated by WesternGeco between January 2000 and the end of 2004, the U.S. Attorney's Office in Houston said in a written statement on Friday.

The company filed fraudulent applications for U.S. visas and made false statements to U.S. consular officers, according to the statement.

Many foreign workers trying to get jobs as crewmen on vessels operating on the Outer Continental Shelf were told by WesternGeco that their destination vessel would be different from the one specified for their visa, the agreement said.

When people complained about having to lie to the government, "WesternGeco employees told the foreign employees this was the only way the employees could get on the vessels for WesternGeco to perform work," the agreement also said.

A Houston-based employee raised the visa issue with WesternGeco management in 2002, and senior management believed the problem was taken care of in a matter of weeks, the agreement noted.

In December 2004, a federal grand jury issued a subpoena, and WesternGeco immediately began to correct its practices, the company said. The company set up a new broad compliance program for all immigration activities relating to business travel, work on the Outer Continental Shelf and employment of foreign nationals in the U.S.

The U.S. Attorney's Office has acknowledged Western- Geco's turnaround and has agreed not to prosecute the company on the matters related to the investigation, provided it complies with the terms of the agreement for a year.

"Today's agreement holds WesternGeco accountable for its past conduct and obligates it to continue its demonstrated commitment to follow the law or face criminal prosecution," U.S. Attorney Don DeGabrielle said in the statement.

WesternGeco President Dalton Boutte said in a written statement that he took the government investigation very seriously and pledged full cooperation throughout the process.

"The new visa and immigration compliance program that we have implemented will not only serve to prevent any recurrence of unlawful visa practices, it will also serve as the standard against which all other compliance programs in our seismic industry are now measured," Boutte said.

[*ljcook@chron.com*](mailto:ljcook@chron.com)