

U.S. lease of Waterloo fairgrounds raises questions

By William Petroski
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Federal officials have imposed a news blackout at the National Cattle Congress fairgrounds in Waterloo, where they have leased almost the entire property through May 25.

Tim Counts, a Midwest spokesman for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, known as ICE, declined to say Monday whether an immigration raid is pending that would use the fairgrounds as a detention center.

'ICE never talks about our investigative activity or possible future enforcement actions,' Counts said. 'Regarding the exercise in Waterloo, there is currently no publicly releasable information about that, so we aren't releasing any.'

He declined to say whether the 'exercise' involves training or an immigration enforcement operation.

'We expect that at some point there will be additional information available, but I can't speculate at what point that might be,' Counts said.

In December 2006, ICE conducted an immigration raid at the Swift & Co. meatpacking plant in Marshalltown. Many workers were transported to Camp Dodge in Johnston, where military barracks were used as temporary detention facilities. A total of 1,282 Swift workers were arrested in Iowa and five other states in the biggest crackdown in history on immigration violations at one company.

The Waterloo Courier on Sunday reported that contractors have installed generators adjacent to many buildings at the fairgrounds.

In addition, windows on many buildings have been covered up, blocking views inside. A number of mobile-home-size trailers have been transported to the privately owned grounds.

Doug Miller, general manager of the Cattle Congress, declined Monday to release a copy of his group's rental contract with U.S. General Services Administration. He also indicated he was in the dark about what's happening inside the fairgrounds.

'I have no idea. They are conducting whatever exercise they are conducting without telling me all the details of it. I don't have any information to share with you, really,' Miller said.

Representatives of Gov. Chet Culver and U.S. Sens. Tom Harkin and Charles Grassley said they had no information about what was happening at the Cattle Congress fairgrounds.

At Grassley's request, his staff called ICE officials on Monday.

'During the call, the ICE officials would neither confirm nor deny anything to Senator Grassley's staff,' said Beth Pellett Levine, a Grassley aide.

Armando Villareal, administrator of the Iowa Division of Latino Affairs, said he hadn't heard any reports about impending immigration raids. But he added that many Latinos in Iowa are feeling tension and fear.

'Folks have resigned themselves that something terrible is going to happen between now and the election. It is more like a resignation that something is going to happen,' Villareal said.