

Capital Press

Audit leads to mass firings

Immigration and Customs Enforcement targets 190 companies around the West

By [DAN WHEAT](#)

A Washington state tree fruit company is among the first of 190 West Coast businesses the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement has targeted for workforce audits.

A total of 33 companies in Washington, 150 in California, four in Idaho and three in Oregon are being audited by the federal agency to determine if they knowingly hired illegal aliens.

The Washington company was forced to dismiss hundreds of employees whose paperwork was not in order. Neither the company nor ICE officials would specify the exact number of terminations, but reports range from a few hundred to 800.

The companies know they are being audited because they are notified by the agency, said Lorie Dankers, ICE spokeswoman in Seattle.

ICE officials announced in November that 1,000 companies would be audited nationwide, Dankers said.

Last week, Gebbers Farms of Brewster, Wash., issued a statement saying it laid off employees in response to the ICE audit. The company said ICE advised it that some of its employees were not authorized to work in the United States based on documentation the employees provided in connection with their I-9 forms.

Those are forms employees fill out when they are hired to verify their employment eligibility.

Gebbers officials in Brewster and the company's Wenatchee attorney declined to comment.

Dankers said she cannot talk about specific companies being audited or say what industries they cover. She said ICE is focusing on employers believed to knowingly employ unlawful workers.

Some of the cases could result in civil fines, criminal charges or the loss of eligibility for federal contracts, she said.

Companies audited were chosen based on leads, public safety or national security, she said.

Doug England, a Chelan County, Wash., commissioner and manager of Manson Fruit Cooperative, said he had been told Gebbers fired 800 people.

"Gebbers is a good company. It is well run. It has spent extra time and effort making sure it does things right," England said. "So the concern in the industry is what does this mean for small growers who don't have those resources."

Around Dec. 23, Gebbers was given a list of people the company had to terminate within 10 days or face fines of \$1,000 per person per day, said a source who requested anonymity. The company has sufficient packing line labor but is down to 40 pruners when it normally has 600 this time of year, the source said.

Dankers would not comment on those allegations, but said ICE identifies discrepancies on I-9 forms and works with companies to rectify them.

Gebbers Farms traces its roots to 1885 and has 5,000 acres of company-owned apple and cherry orchards.

Linda Dezellem, principal of Brewster middle and high school, said people at a Jan. 11 school board meeting said Gebbers issued 100 to 300 termination letters.

Robert Adams, administrative assistant at Okanogan County WorkSource, an office of state Employment Security, said Gebbers had not placed an order for more workers. He said there was a sign on the door of the Gebbers warehouse Monday, Jan. 11, stating that it was not hiring.

Tom Riggan, general manager of Chelan Fresh Marketing, through which Gebbers sells its fruit, said Gebbers' apple packing was "really down" for three or four days and then back up.

"They are not disclosing anything, even to me, even though we're partners," Riggan said of Gebbers. "I know some of the people who work up there. They're great people and all of a sudden out of a job. I always assumed they're citizens."

Kirk Mayer, manager of Washington Growers Clearing House Association in Wenatchee, said businesses can be hurt if they lose significant numbers of workers at critical times.

He said he'd heard that some of the people who were dismissed had left the area. He said some that the audit caught may have been seasonal workers who had already left some time ago.

Mike Gempler, executive director of Washington Growers League in Yakima, said audits seem more likely during the Obama administration.

"It's like a return to the Clinton administration policies of enforcement at the employer level rather than finding individuals here illegally," he said.

The league is an advocate for agricultural employers on labor issues.

Dankers said she does not know what happens to employees who are dismissed.

Mayer and Dankers said mismatches can occur on I-9 forms if people use variations of their names on different places on the form.

I-9 forms require job applicants to pick between several documents for verification of their citizen or immigration status.