

Capital Press

Tree fruit company fires workers after ICE audit

By [DAN WHEAT](#)

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A north central Washington tree fruit company, Gebbers Farms, says it has laid off workers in response to a federal immigration audit.

The company issued a statement saying U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement 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 when they were hired.

Gebbers officials and the company's Wenatchee attorney declined comment. ICE officials could not be reached for comment.

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

"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."

About Dec. 23, Gebbers was given a list of people whom 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.

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

Kirk Mayer, manager of Washington Growers Clearing House Association in Wenatchee, said he suspects ICE has audited a "number of different businesses in different industries in the state."

Businesses can be negatively impacted if they lose significant numbers of workers, Mayer said.

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

"That an employer is notified doesn't mean the worker is illegal; it could be a clerical error," he said.

I-9 forms require job applicants to pick which documents to use for verification of their identity and citizen or immigration status. Employers cannot specify which documents applicants submit and have to accept the documents on face value, Mayer said. Employers can't reject applicants on mere suspicions of being illegal or they can run afoul of federal anti-discrimination laws, he said.