

Hiring of illegals props poultry 'culture'

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Body

Last week's immigrant smuggling indictment in Chattanooga cast a public spotlight on a reality that usually is acknowledged only in private: **Poultry** plants in the Southeast have come to rely heavily on immigrant workers, including thousands of **illegals**.

The 36-count federal indictment against Tyson Foods, the nation's largest **poultry** processor, says six Tyson executives and managers placed smuggling orders for illegal workers at 15 plants in nine states, not including Georgia.

The indictment says Tyson "did cultivate a corporate **culture** in which the **hiring** of illegal aliens . . . was condoned." Tyson denies that, saying the managers acted on their own.

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There is substantial evidence, however, that illegal immigrants play a large role in the **poultry** business, which in Georgia accounts for \$13 billion a year.

"The industry is very dependent on these individuals," said Grace Comontofski, a board member of the Georgia **Poultry** Alliance, a nonprofit Gainesville group that promotes the rights of **poultry** workers.

Latino leaders in Georgia say thousands of **poultry** workers are illegal immigrants attracted by low-skill jobs that require little English and pay better than jobs back home.

Agriculture Commissioner Tommy Irvin hesitated when asked about illegal immigrants in **poultry** plants. But he noted he has long urged Congress to make it easier for immigrants to come to Georgia for jobs in **poultry** and other industries.

Irvin said Georgia's **poultry** industry, by far the state's largest agricultural commodity, would collapse without Hispanics.

"It would have to close down. You'd see **poultry** prices for the consumer shoot out the sky," he said. "The Hispanics saved the day for the industry."

Latino surge since '80s

Latinos began to work in Georgia **poultry** plants in large numbers in the mid-'80s. The industry was growing to keep up with a change in Americans' taste, away from beef and toward chicken, said Abit Massey, executive director of the Georgia **Poultry** Federation, a trade organization. He cited federal statistics that show annual consumption of chicken rose from about 30 pounds per person in 1960 to 80 pounds in 2000.

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Increased demand for workers coincided with 300 percent growth in Georgia's Latino population in the 1990s. Many Latinos sent news of openings to back home. Their word-of-mouth network was so effective, Massey says, Hispanics now make up half the 35,000 workers in Georgia plants.

He defends the industry's record on illegals. "I think the plants have been very careful to hire legal employees."

In a 1991 letter to the Immigration and Naturalization Service in Atlanta, Massey said the poultry industry wanted an electronic system to verify applicants were eligible to work.

Five years later, the INS unveiled its Employment Eligibility Verification Pilot, designed to verify the identities of applicants at meatpacking plants in Georgia and six other states. Poultry companies, using software furnished by the INS, could electronically compare an applicant's Social Security number with government databases to see whether it was valid.

Several companies have cited the program as proof they hired only legal employees.

But Tyson sometimes circumvented the system by hiring from temporary agencies that lacked access to the computer system, said John MacCoon, an assistant U.S. attorney in Chattanooga.

"That is a way of appearing a responsible corporate citizen. . . . Then you hire them through the back door," he said.

Poultry plants in Georgia increasingly draw employees from temp agencies, Comontofski said.

Despite corporate claims to hire only legal immigrants, there is evidence that some supervisors are aware of illegal immigrants in their plants.

A March 21 complaint to the National Labor Relations Board, filed during a unionizing effort at an Ellijay poultry plant, said, "Management is threatening all Latino workers with INS coming with two buses to get all illegals [who] are for the union." An immigrant at a plant in Douglas said in an affidavit that a manager warned him that the company "would call Immigration on" pro-union workers.

Thousands of illegal immigrants work in meatpacking plants, hotels and restaurants and on farms and construction crews, said Mark Krikorian, executive director of the Center for Immigration Studies, a Washington think tank that favors restricted immigration.

He said businesses' use of illegal immigrant labor keeps wages down and increases the costs of providing government services such as education. He said illegal immigrants earn relatively little and so pay relatively little in taxes to cover the increased costs.

Not much enforcement

Federal law requires the INS to fine employers who hire illegal immigrants, but enforcement is lax, Krikorian said.

With a white-hot economy that required more workers, the number of INS investigations into businesses hiring illegal immigrants declined from 7,587 in 1998 to 1,966 last year. The number of workplace raids fell from 290 in 1999 to 110 last year.

The trend was clear in Georgia in 1998.

INS agents detained 21 illegal immigrants at the peak of the harvest of the \$70 million Vidalia onion crop. Fear of more raids sent many workers running. Farmers worried the crop would rot. Georgia legislators, including Sen. Paul Coverdell and Rep. Jack Kingston, both Republicans, complained to Attorney General Janet Reno about INS "bullying tactics" and a "lack of regard for farmers."

The INS suspended the raids after farmers pledged to hire legal workers.

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Later in 1998, the INS tried to take a less confrontational approach in an investigation into illegal immigrants in Nebraska meatpacking plants. Agents reviewed 24,000 employee records and summoned 4,700 workers for interviews. About 3,000, presumably illegal immigrants, fled.

Like Georgia's onion farmers, the meatpacking companies faced a labor shortage.

And politicians complained.

"The INS got the hint," Krikorian said, "that they were simply not to enforce the law."

Graphic

Photo:

Six executives and managers of Tyson Foods, based in Springdale, Ark., have been accused of conspiring to smuggle in illegal immigrants to work in **poultry** processing plants./ APRIL L. BROWN / Associated Press

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