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News Releases

JUNE 28, 2011 DETROIT, MI

Michigan dairy farmers plead guilty to employing illegal aliens, fined \$2.7 million

DETROIT - A Michigan dairy farm and its two owners pleaded guilty on Tuesday to charges of employing illegal aliens, following an investigation by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) Homeland Security Investigations (HSI).

Johannes Martinus Verhaar and Anthonia Marjanne Verhaar own Aquila Farms LLC., a dairy operation based in Bad Axe, Mich. Court records revealed that from about 2000 through 2007, the dairy employed 78 different illegal aliens, which constituted almost 75 percent of its workforce over that time period. Aquila Farms failed to conduct the necessary inquiries to determine the employment eligibility of its work force, as required by federal immigration laws.

"Criminal charges and fines are among the government's most effective tools to ensure employers maintain a legal workforce," said Brian M. Moskowitz, special agent in charge of ICE HSI in Detroit. "The charges and significant fines here represent HSI's firm commitment to holding employers accountable."

According to the investigation, of the 78 illegal aliens hired by the Verhaars, some were hired on multiple occasions using different names or social security numbers despite the Verhaars' being notified by both the Social Security Administration and ICE that its employees were not authorized to work in the United States. The defendants encouraged or induced the illegal aliens to reside in the United States by providing them with employment and free housing on the farm, away from scrutiny by ICE and the surrounding community.

As part of the agreement reached with the government, the Verhaars pleaded guilty to hiring illegal aliens, a charge that carries a term of imprisonment of up to six months and a \$3,000 fine per hire. Aquila Farms pleaded guilty to harboring illegal aliens, a felony which carries a statutory maximum penalty of five years imprisonment and additional fines. The Verhaars and Aquila Farms agreed to pay fines and a payment in lieu of forfeiture totaling \$2,734,000.

The case was initiated based on a lead by the Michigan State Police and investigated by ICE HSI special agents. The Huron County Sheriff's Office assisted with the investigation. Assistant U.S. Attorney Janet Parker, Eastern District of Michigan Northern Division, is prosecuting this case.

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