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ICE fines San Diego-area companies for hiring unlawful employees Worksite enforcement strategy holds employers accountable for violations

SAN DIEGO – As part its enforcement strategy to reduce illegal employment and protect job opportunities for the nation's lawful workforce, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) announced Tuesday that 10 employers in San Diego and Imperial counties were fined by ICE during fiscal year 2012 for various employment-related violations.

Collectively, the fines totaled more than \$173,800, with the largest fine, \$50,000, being lodged against a San Diego-area medical transportation service. The fines were imposed after ICE Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) found the businesses had failed to comply with laws prohibiting the hiring of unauthorized workers.

One of the ways HSI identifies potential hiring violations is by auditing employers' Form I-9s, the document businesses use to verify an employee's eligibility to work. Employers are required to complete and retain a Form I-9 for each individual they hire. In fiscal year 2012, HSI conducted 151 worksite audits in San Diego and Imperial counties, compared to 86 audits the previous year and 63 audits in fiscal year 2010.

"Employers who build their business model upon an illegal workforce will be held accountable," said Derek Benner, special agent in charge for HSI San Diego. "We encourage employers to take the employee verification process seriously. Employers must understand that the integrity of their employment records is just as important to the federal government as the integrity of their tax files or banking records."

Below, in alphabetical order, is a list of the businesses in San Diego and Imperial counties that received final fine notices from ICE in fiscal year 2012:

- Aquarius Yacht Services – \$13,744 fine
- Balboa Ambulance Incorporated – \$50,000 fine
- El Sol Meat Market – \$24,050 fine
- Harmony Egg Ranch – \$9,000 fine
- International Consolidated Cargo – \$7,480 fine
- Mexicali Chicken and Salad – \$21,500 fine
- Old Town Buffet – \$15,000 fine
- Rocha Trucking & Parking Inc. – \$8,000 fine
- Stanford Sign and Awning Inc. – \$9,600 fine
- TDG Aerospace – \$15,427.50 fine

The \$173,800 in civil fines lodged against area San Diego-area companies in fiscal year 2012 represents an 18 percent increase over fiscal year 2011, when HSI imposed \$146,577 in civil fines locally against 11 employers.

While HSI continues to pursue criminal cases against unscrupulous employers, it now places increased emphasis on gaining employers' compliance and outreach to the business community. As part of this effort, HSI utilizes all available civil and administrative tools, including Form I-9 inspections, civil fines and debarment. HSI also actively promotes the ICE Mutual Agreement between Government and Employers (IMAGE) outreach program. IMAGE is a voluntary partnership between the government and the private sector where employers receive invaluable training and are provided with additional tools to strengthen the integrity of their workforce and curtail the employment of unauthorized workers. There are currently 11 San Diego-area companies that are certified members of the IMAGE program.

Nationwide, HSI conducted more than 3,000 worksite audits in fiscal year 2012 as compared to 2,496 the previous year. In fiscal year 2012, the worksite audits and related investigations resulted in the issuance of 495 final fine notices totaling more than \$12.4 million. That compares to 385 civil fines assessed in fiscal year 2011 totaling \$16.3 million.

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U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) is the largest investigative arm of the Department of Homeland Security.

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