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These poultry plants used E-Verify. They still hired hundreds of undocumented workers.

Tracy Jan and Hannah Denham

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Despite a state law requiring employers to use a federal system to check whether workers are legally eligible to work in the United States, five companies operating poultry plants in Mississippi that were raided by federal immigration authorities last week have for years managed to hire unauthorized immigrants, investigators say.

The raids, which ensnared 680 workers, exposed a weakness in the government's online E-Verify tool that President Trump promoted during his campaign, but which his own businesses did not broadly use until this year, after revelations that Trump's golf clubs have long employed undocumented immigrants.

The federal employment verification system checks the personal information new hires submit against existing government records and flags any mismatches. But it doesn't detect when the new hire is using someone else's identification to elude the check — a significant weakness, say critics of the program.

“As soon as E-Verify went into effect, people realized they could still get a job by taking or borrowing other people's identities,” said Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration policy analyst at the Cato Institute. “E-Verify is easy to fool because it approves the document, not the worker.”

Employers often turn a blind eye, he said, by knowingly hiring immigrants who borrowed relatives' Social Security numbers or stole the identities of the deceased.

Nor do employers always use the E-Verify system — even when it's required by state law.

Only about half of new hires in Mississippi were screened through E-Verify in 2017, according to separate analyses by Cato and Pew.

“E-Verify has been sold as a silver-bullet fix to illegal immigration, but it has never been able to deliver,” Nowrasteh said. “E-Verify is barely used half of the time in states where it's mandated, and punishments are rarely meted out to businesses who fail to comply. If conservative states like Mississippi won't enforce E-Verify, what hope is there in the rest of the country?”

In Mississippi, the companies — Koch Foods, Peco Foods, PH Food, A&B and Pearl River Foods — intentionally hired Guatemalan and Mexican immigrants who are not authorized to work in the United States “for the purpose of commercial advantage or private financial gain,” according to search-warrant affidavits unsealed in federal court after the Aug. 7 raids.

Investigators allege that numerous employees at Pearl River Foods had submitted stolen names and Social Security numbers, including those belonging to the deceased.

At times, companies did not even appear to bother checking certain workers' information in the online E-Verify system, according to the affidavits.

Pearl River Foods employed 337 workers at its Carthage plant, but immigration authorities found only 306 employees in the E-Verify search records, according to the affidavit. Pearl River Foods did not respond to requests for comment.

Immigration officials also allegedly found that the names of 25 PH Food employees had not been processed using E-Verify despite the company having run 1,000 other names through the system.

Investigators found that PH Food in Morton and A&B in Pelahatchie, both owned by Huo You "Victor" Liang, "do not verify the authenticity of their documents," according to the affidavit. Neither does the Louisiana payroll company they use to verify employment records, PMI Resource, the affidavit said.

A woman who answered the phone at PMI Resource on Friday declined to comment.

At Peco Foods, a former employee acting as an informant recorded a conversation with a human resources employee at the Bay Springs plant that revealed that multiple employees were hired on two separate occasions under different identities, the affidavit said.

Peco Foods issued a statement on Aug. 7 when its plants in Bay Springs, Sebastopol and Canton were raided that the company was cooperating with federal authorities.

"We adhere strongly to all local, state and federal laws, including utilizing the government-based E-Verify program, which screens new hires through the Social Security Administration as well as the Department of Homeland Security for compliance," the statement said.

The company did not respond to requests for comment for this story.

At the Koch Foods plant in Morton that was raided last week, a Guatemalan woman told investigators that she first worked at the plant illegally, under a different identity, in 2017. A year later, when the Department of Homeland Security granted her permission to work, she asked a co-worker if she should talk to human resources about changing her employment documents to reflect her real name. Instead, she took her co-worker's advice to quit and reapply. She was hired the same day at a different Koch plant, with no questions about her identity.

Koch Foods spokesman Jim Gilliland told The Washington Post that the company never knowingly employed people who presented false documentation.

"Forms of identification can look completely authentic and jibe with the person who is sitting in front of us," Gilliland said. "So you take what you're given, and you enter that into the E-Verify system."

Nationally, 10 percent of U.S. employers are enrolled in E-Verify, which started more than 20 years ago. Eight states require nearly all employers to use the system: Alabama, Arizona, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee and Utah.

"E-Verify is popular among politicians because it doesn't work but it makes the politician look like a tough immigration enforcer," Nowrasteh said. "Thus many will get the political benefits without forcing their districts to pay a heavy economic cost."

A 2012 audit commissioned by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services division of the Department of Homeland Security, which maintains E-Verify, found that the system had erroneously cleared nearly half of unauthorized workers because of document fraud.

USCIS officials acknowledge the system's shortcomings and have begun linking to photos from state driver's license databases in an effort to make it easier for employers to spot fraud.

If E-Verify were effective in weeding out unauthorized workers, Nowrasteh said, workplace raids wouldn't be necessary. The only effective long-term solution to illegal employment would be to allow more migrants to work legally in the United States, he said.

"Illegal immigrants are working in the United States because American employers and consumers demand the goods and services they supply," Nowrasteh said.

Mississippi House Minority Leader David Baria (D) said he and other legislators wanted to put "some teeth" in the state's 2008 E-Verify law so that employers would be held accountable for hiring unauthorized workers who slip through. But that never passed.

"In a vacuum, this sounds like a good idea to verify the immigration status of employees," Baria told The Post. "The law is not what it should be in terms of a deterrent effect for employers, nor is there accountability for employers who violate immigration laws."

Baria said Republicans who control the Mississippi legislature are "not inclined to go after big business because big business supports them financially."

Baria, Mississippi's 2018 Democratic nominee for the U.S. Senate, lost the general election to Sen. Cindy Hyde-Smith. Hyde-Smith's campaign was a top recipient of donations from the National Chicken Council's political action committee, according to Federal Election Commission reports. Both Koch Foods and Peco Foods executives donate to the National Chicken Council's PAC.

As a presidential candidate, Trump had suggested mandating E-Verify nationwide as a solution to illegal immigration, claiming falsely that he used E-Verify across his properties. Last week, he promoted a different solution.

The ICE raids in Mississippi, he said, served as a "very good deterrent."

"I want people to know that if they come into the United States illegally, they're getting out," Trump said. "They're going to be brought out."