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Immigration issues stop Wal-Mart construction again

By CORY MATTESON
Star-Tribune staff writer Saturday, May 20, 2006

A Casper police officer on Tuesday arrested two undocumented employees of the cement company pouring the foundation on the westside Wal-Mart site.

The incident temporarily shut down construction of the Wal-Mart Supercenter, located off of CY Avenue and Wyoming Boulevard. This was the second time that immigration concerns have halted construction this year.

Martin Riveria, 21, and Jose Angel Sierra-Reyes, 26, both gave false names to an officer who pulled over a Heggem Construction pickup truck they were riding in Tuesday afternoon, according to incident reports. When the officer asked for identification, Riveria gave him a Social Security card with the name Alfredo Patlan on the front. On the back of the card, it read, "Not A Government Document," according to the report.

Carl Rusnok, a spokesman for U.S. Immigrations and Customs Enforcement, said Wednesday that ICE had placed detainees on the two workers, and an investigation will take place thereafter.

The two were charged locally with interfering with an investigation, because they gave the officer false names, according to Natrona County District Attorney Mike Blonigen.

After conducting a search of the vehicle, police located another Social Security card with the same message on the back and another fake name -- Carlos Freelong -- on the front. Ink on a Colorado ID card issued to Carlos Freelong was smeared, and the card was believed to be a fake, according to the report.

They were arrested on suspicion of possessing fraudulent documents, but Blonigen said it is often difficult to prove if someone had the intent to defraud. He also said bringing in an expert witness to testify about false documents is a challenge.

As for what, if anything, happens to the company that employed the illegal workers, Blonigen said "It's pretty much a federal government issue."

Rusnok said there is no current investigation of Heggem Construction related to the Casper incident, and he would be unable to comment if one opens.

Heggem Construction, out of Scottsbluff, Neb., released a statement about its hiring practices Wednesday afternoon.

"At Heggem Construction we do not knowingly hire unauthorized workers," it read. "At hire of a new employee we have the new hire fill out an I-9 form, and we complete the employer section of the form within three business days. We are duly aware of the risks of non-compliance and fully comply with the IRCA, Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and Department of Homeland Security (DHS)."

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John Simley, a Wal-Mart representative, said the retail company would only take action after a government investigation has concluded. He said companies risk losing contracts with Wal-Mart if the government finds they've violated immigration laws.

Several workers in hard hats were in the parking lot at the new Wal-Mart site Wednesday afternoon. Construction at the Wal-Mart site stopped for several days in March after concerns arose about the immigration status of some workers. The store is scheduled to open this summer.

Contact reporter Cory Matteson at (307) 266-0589 or cory.matteson@casperstartribune.net.

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