Feds Investigate Sparboe Egg Farm

AMY FORLITI,Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Dozens of federal homeland security agents searched Sparboe Farms in Litchfield on Tuesday as part of what authorities called a "larger criminal investigation," but details about the nature of the operation were not disclosed.

No criminal arrests were made, but 10 people were picked up on an administrative charge that U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement often uses to detain possible illegal immigrants. ICE spokesman Shawn Neudauer said he could not provide details because the investigation is ongoing.

Neudauer said that as of midday Tuesday, two of those arrested had been released, but the rest were still in custody and their cases were being reviewed in light of the wider investigation.

Sparboe Farms spokesman Chuck Sanger said in a statement that the company complies with immigration laws and takes them seriously. He said Sparboe verifies employee documentation and provides ongoing training to those involved in hiring.

Sanger said ICE had executed search warrants at its Litchfield location Tuesday morning, but he did not have details about the warrants or about those who were detained. He said the company is not aware of anything other than immigration-related issues that would be of concern.

"There have been no food safety or quality concerns raised, and no Sparboe Farms eggs are at any risk," he said.

Neudauer said agents with ICE's Homeland Security Investigations were involved in the operation and a Department of Homeland Security helicopter was on the scene. Minnesota state police were also there to help secure the area.

When asked if criminal charges were expected, U.S. Attorney's Office spokeswoman Jeanne Cooney said prosecutors will have to wait to see how the investigation unfolds, but added if authorities determine that any of those arrested have prior records they could be prosecuted. She also said she could not release the nature of the investigation.

Sparboe describes itself as one of the largest egg producers and marketers in the United States, and sells to retail, wholesale and food service customers. It's a family-owned company based in Litchfield, about 65 miles west of Minneapolis.

Sparboe has been in the news before: In 2011, McDonald's and Target dropped Sparboe as their egg supplier after an animal rights group released undercover video that showed cases of animal cruelty at five of Sparboe's facilities in Iowa, Minnesota and Colorado. The video shot by Mercy for Animals showed a worker

swinging a bird by its feet, hens packed into cramped cages, male chicks being tossed into plastic bags to suffocate and workers cutting off the tips of chicks' beaks.

At the time, Beth Sparboe Schnell, Sparboe Farms' president and owner, said the company was "shocked and deeply disturbed" by the video and that four employees involved in the activity were fired after an internal investigation.

Sparboe was also warned that it violated federal regulations meant to prevent salmonella. Sparboe Companies LLC said at the time that it made management changes, took corrective actions sought by the Food and Drug Administration, and was creating a task force to review the company's food safety and animal care.

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