

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

PENNSYLVANIA COMPANY TO PAY RECORD FINE FOR ILLEGALLY HIRING IMMIGRANTS

Asplundh Tree Expert pleads guilty for employing those who didn't have authorization to work in the U.S.

By Alicia A. Caldwell
September 29, 2017

A Pennsylvania-based tree-trimming company was ordered to pay \$95 million in the largest fine against a company for hiring thousands of immigrants who didn't have permission to work in the U.S., according to federal officials.

Asplundh Tree Expert of Willow Grove, Pa., pleaded guilty in federal court in Philadelphia on Thursday to illegally hiring the immigrants. Some of the immigrants were in the U.S. illegally, none had authorization to work in the country, according to court documents.

A federal judge ordered the family-owned company to pay \$80 million and adhere to an Administrative Compliance Agreement from U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE. The details of the agreement weren't made public.

In a separate civil settlement, ICE said, the company agreed to pay \$15 million related to its violation of immigration law.

ICE said Asplundh decentralized hiring so the company's senior management could "remain willfully blind" as lower-level managers hired and rehired workers they knew weren't allowed to work in the U.S. The agency also said the lower-level managers knowingly accepted false or fake identification documents.

In a statement posted on the company's website on Sept. 19, Chairman and CEO Scott Asplundh said the company, which has more than 30,000 employees in the U.S, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, took "immediate corrective action" after being told of the federal investigation in 2015. The company declined to comment further on Friday.

Policy changes, Mr. Asplundh said in the statement, included reviewing the identity of every employee using a photo ID system based on the face-recognition software used by ICE.

The company's guilty plea and civil settlement were the result of a six-year investigation by ICE's Homeland Security Investigations division.

Since 1986, employers have been required by federal immigration law to verify an employee's legal right to work in the U.S. They also must maintain records of each worker's employment verification and identification documents.

ICE routinely audits a business's employment verification records and has levied tens of millions of dollars in fines since 2007. It is unclear what the largest fine was before this week's against Asplundh.

However, in 2014, the latest figures available from the Department of Homeland Security, the government opened 2,022 workplace-enforcement cases and levied fines totaling more than \$16 million.

Write to Alicia A. Caldwell at alicia.caldwell@wsj.com