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Columbia Farms indicted in illegal workers immigration case

*By Eric Connor
and David Dykes*

The Columbia Farms subsidiary of the House of Raeford was indicted by a federal grand jury on charges that it knowingly employed illegal immigrants at its Greenville chicken processing plant.

The company was indicted on 29 counts and accused of knowingly hiring illegal workers beginning in 2000.

Two company managers — human resources manager Elaine Crump and plant complex manager Barry Cronin — were previously named in the indictment and accused of encouraging employees to use falsified immigration verification documents, according to the indictment.

Both managers have pleaded not guilty.

House of Raeford, the North Carolina-based parent company of Columbia Farms, said Columbia Farms has followed all federal laws.

Columbia Farms “has cooperated and will continue to cooperate with the federal government in every step of their investigation,” said David S. Witter, House of Raeford's manager of corporate sustainability and communications.

Columbia Farms, Witter said, “has followed all state and federal employment laws and looks forward to vindicating the company's position in a court of law.”

An attorney for Columbia Farms couldn't be reached to comment.

U.S. Attorney Walt Wilkins told *The Greenville News* that the indictment against Columbia Farms is the last of the grand jury's work expected in relation to the case.

Last October, federal agents raided the Columbia Farms plant on Rutherford Road and detained more than 300 suspected illegal workers in the largest workplace raid ever in the Carolinas.

The raid followed Crump's indictment earlier in the summer as well as federal charges against several plant supervisors, who have since been sentenced with orders to deport them once their time is served.

A court hearing on the case is scheduled in Greenville on July 30.

Last year, the director of the South Carolina Workers' Compensation Commission said the agency was reviewing the poultry company's practices, including its reporting of workers' injuries at its Greenville plant.

Gary R. Thibault, who was executive director of the state commission at the time, declined to discuss greenvilleonline.com/apps/.../articl...

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specifics.

Gary Cannon, who was appointed the agency's executive director in March, couldn't be reached for comment Thursday.

House of Raeford officials have said it is company policy that injury records are kept "in accordance with OSHA guidelines and legal requirements for recording medical incidents and attention given to employees."

They were referring to the U.S. Department of Labor's Occupational Safety and Health Administration, whose role is to promote the safety and health of America's workers by setting and enforcing workplace standards.
