Agriprocessors escapes big fines for violations

INJURIES: Hurt workers common; company failed to give protective gear

PENALTIES: State safety regulators regularly reduced fines by 25% to 75%

Wilson Junec, 26, of Postville lost his hand in a workplace accident at Agriprocessors Inc. in August 2005. He was among three workers at the Postville meat-processing plant who lost parts of their hands in machinery during a five-week period in 2005.

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Carlos Torrez was in the middle of a 60-hour workweek at the Agriprocessors Inc. meat-processing plant in Postville when the mechanical saw he was using to separate chicken parts severed one of his fingers.

It was July 2005, and Torrez had been working in the plant for three years. He was 26 years old, had four children at home and had logged 67 hours the week before the accident happened. His take-home pay, even with double-digit hours of overtime, totaled $509.

Torrez staggered to “the laundry room” — an area where workers went for first-aid. A co-worker retrieved the severed finger from the floor.

Five weeks later, the state investigated the accident. By then, however, two more workers had lost parts of their hands in Agriprocessors’ machinery.

Raid in Postville

The Des Moines Register is presenting a series of reports on the aftermath of the arrests of 389 workers at the Agriprocessors meat-processing plant in Postville. It was the largest single-site workplace raid in U.S. history.

FRIDAY: Two supervisors at Agriprocessors Inc. in Postville were arrested on allegations that they helped illegal immigrant workers hide behind bogus Social Security and resident alien cards.

SATURDAY: The cost to taxpayers to jail 304 arrested workers in Iowa instead of deporting them is about $90,000 a month.

TODAY: State records indicate that health and safety violations at Agriprocessors rarely result in large fines, although injuries are commonplace.
SAFETY

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in state inspections made the plant without finding fault. Further, in 1999, one of the plant's inspectors had been cited for a workplace safety violation. And in 2000, the plant was closed for a month due to a problem with a machine that was causing injuries.

The plant was reopened after the company promised to make changes. However, the changes were not implemented, and the plant was closed again in 2001.

The company's failure to implement safety improvements raised concerns about the plant's ability to maintain a safe working environment. The company's decision to reopen the plant without addressing the safety issues was seen as a poor choice.

In conclusion, the plant's history of safety violations and the company's failure to implement changes raises concerns about the safety of the workers and the public.