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Car registrations, titles included in ICE investigation

By JEFF REINITZ, Courier Staff Writer

POSTVILLE - Vehicles with license plates from Des Moines County have caught the eye of federal postal and state transportation authorities.

In fact, two of the things immigration agents sought to seize when they raided Agriprocessors on Monday were titles and registration for vehicles with Des Moines County license plates.

Postville is located in Allamakee County, while Des Moines County is situated on the southeastern tip of Iowa, about 200 highway miles away, where Burlington is the seat.

In September 2005, officials with the Iowa Department of Transportation began investigating why so many vehicles registered to Burlington residents were renewing their registration in Allamakee County, according to court records.

Undocumented workers sometimes title vehicles in false identities and fake addresses to avoid detection by police or immigration officials, immigration officials said in court records.

An alert DOT investigator noticed a number of the suspiciously titled vehicles could be found in the Agriprocessors parking lot, records state.

Records allege officials uncovered a connection between the vehicles, a supervisor at Agriprocessors and a Cedar Rapids automobile dealership.

Dealership managers told DOT officials they were good friends with the supervisor, who is referred to in court records only as "C," and had sold a large number of cars to people in Postville through him.

Part of this arrangement allegedly breached Iowa law, which requires all vehicle dealers to be licensed, court records allege.

Dealership managers told DOT investigators that "C" would call them for a specific type of vehicle, which they would buy at auction. "C" would then pick up the vehicle.

The cars were then sold to people in Postville but titled in Chickasaw, Des Moines and other counties.

When questioned, one person who applied to register vehicles for Postville residents told DOT officials he was mailed vehicle information and money to do the transactions.

He then went to the Des Moines County Treasurer's Office to register on behalf of the new owner but used addresses of friends in the Burlington and West Burlington area, records state.

He then arranged to pick up registrations and titles mailed to his friends and sent them in bulk to Postville.

Investigators also talked with an illegal worker at the plant in 2006 who said a supervisor had approached him about buying a vehicle from him. When the worker declined, the supervisor refused to transfer him to a more favorable job at the plant, records state.

In court records used to obtain a search warrant of the plant, ICE officials allege the supervisor's conduct amounted to aiding in harboring illegal aliens.