

More check on worker status

- **Enrollment** in federal program has tripled statewide
- **System discussed** as key point in immigration reform

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The number of companies enrolled in a federal program that checks employees' immigration status has more than tripled in New York in recent years, echoing a national trend as businesses seek to avoid problems with undocumented workers.

But the nearly 7,000 New York companies that have signed up for E-Verify, a federal employee-verification program, still represent a tiny fraction of the state's 1.8 million businesses.

Immigration records show that more than 1,300 companies in Nassau and Suffolk have signed up for the free and voluntary U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services program — a 256 percent increase since 2008.

Launched as a pilot program in 1997, E-Verify has expanded and is being discussed as a key element of future immigration reforms. The program was started to give employers a simple way

to ensure they are complying with federal immigration laws.

Access Staffing of Melville joined the program several weeks ago. Clients who depend on the company for their hiring needs requested it.

"We just see E-Verify as an additional piece of verification to what we already do to check employee eligibility," said John Magloire, Access Staffing's chief operating officer. "Fortunately, everyone we've checked has been clean so far, so we haven't had to deal with any negative results."

The government has been investing more resources in E-Verify, recently adding photos from immigration and passport databases to help curtail document fraud. Driver's license databases will be added this year.

"Clearly, we see this [program] as something that is going to help us in the future," said Andrea Quarantillo, the agency's district director for New York City, Long Island and seven upstate counties.

E-Verify use

NATIONWIDE
Participating employers:

244,135

Growth since 2008: **156%**

NEW YORK STATE

Participating employers:

6,976

Growth since 2008: **201%**

LONG ISLAND

Participating employers:

1,362

Growth since 2008: **256%**

SOURCE: U.S. IMMIGRATION AND CUSTOMS ENFORCEMENT; U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY

After undergoing training, participating companies can use a web interface to input Social Security data for instant status checks. The program is restricted to new hires with firms that have signed up for verification.

If there's an information mismatch, E-Verify issues a "tentative non-confirmation," giving employees eight days to confirm their identity. If the problem

isn't resolved, a company using the system must fire the worker.

Of those checked throughout the United States, only 1.4 percent have been found ineligible to work and were fired, say immigration officials. Another 0.3 percent ran into database errors.

"It's a smart business practice to do whatever you can to make sure you are on the right side of the law," Quarantillo said. "It's free, it's quick and it's simple for employers."

Some companies, especially small firms without human resources departments, aren't eager to take on more work.

"I vaguely remember signing up for it, but we haven't used it," said Richard Roll, vice president of Elwood International, a Copiague company that sells pre-packed condiments. "We are a small company with 15 to 20 employees where we know everyone who works here."

The Long Island Association, representing more than 5,000 businesses in the region, welcomes help for companies trying to comply with the law — as long as business owners don't have to end up helping the government pursue individuals, said president Kevin Law.

A Feb. 10 congressional hearing signaled that the program could become central to future reform efforts.

Some who favor enforcement want the employee checks to become mandatory, while immigration advocates say E-Verify could become an ineffective mandate that will mostly inconvenience legal workers.

"If this system is expanded, that doesn't mean people are going to leave. It means they will go to an underground economy," said Michele Waslin, a senior policy analyst with the Immigration Policy Center, a research group in Washington, D.C., that favors immigrant-friendly policies.

Other experts think the government is making progress in perfecting a system that would keep more unauthorized workers from getting jobs.

"E-Verify is here to stay," said Steven Camarota, research director with the Washington, D.C.-based Center for Immigration Studies, which favors stricter enforcement. "There's a lot of employers who want to use it because they sense it's the wave of the future, and you might as well start now."

LI scientist: Genes fortify brown tide

BY JENNIFER SMITH
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Brown tide, a recurring algae that nearly decimated Long Island's bay scallop population, owes much of its staying power to genes that help it thrive in shallow, polluted estuaries like those along the South Shore, according to new findings from a Stony Brook University scientist.

That genetic edge gives brown tide an advantage over rival microscopic organisms that are less able to cope with cloudy waters or nutrient-laden septic waste and runoff, said lead researcher Chris Gobler.

The results bolster theories that link human degradation of coastal waters to a global uptick in algae blooms that damage fisheries and impair waterways, Gobler said.

"These harmful algae are built to take advantage of these modified coastal ecosystems," said Gobler, an associate professor at the university. The research is due to be published in this week's online edition of the



A genetic edge helps brown tide better nourish and defend itself, a Stony Brook scientist found.

Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

First detected here in 1985, brown tide is not harmful to humans. But in large concentrations it can produce toxins that starve shellfish by hindering their ability to filter-feed. It blooms in summer months, tinting waters brown and shading out light that eelgrass and other marine plants

need for photosynthesis.

The federal Department of Energy sequenced the genome for brown tide in 2007 at Gobler's behest, using a culture from Long Island waters. After the results were released, Gobler formed a research team of 33 scientists to comb the 12,000 genes for clues.

The team compared the

brown tide genome with those of six other local phytoplankton species. They found brown tide — known scientifically as *Aureococcus anophagefferens* — had many more genes that helped it find sustenance and energy in polluted waters.

Shallow estuaries with high nutrient levels, such as the Great South Bay, tend to be tur-

bid and cloudy, making it harder for plants to harness the sun's energy through photosynthesis. But brown tide has an easier time. It has 62 genes that help harvest light, while its rivals have on average only a couple dozen, the research showed.

"You could almost look at it as a solar panel — it's got double the number of solar panels as everybody else," Gobler said.

Brown tide was also better able to make productive use of pollutants, the team found. It has more genes to turn organic nitrogen and decaying plant matter into energy than its competitors. The algae also uses metals in the water to create enzymes Gobler said "function almost like antioxidants" to help cells cope with stresses.

He said brown tide blooms will persist in local waters unless action is taken to improve water quality in impaired South Shore bays.

"It's probably been around forever; it was just waiting for the right conditions to crop up," Gobler said.