

**DECLARATION OF MARIA DE LOURDES GONZALEZ**

1. I am over eighteen years of age and a legal resident of the United States. My date of birth is September 30, 1957. My mailing address is 124 William Avenue, Watsonville, CA 95076.
2. My family has been farming in Santa Cruz County, CA, since 1964. My father began farming as a sharecropper and worked hard to buy a small farm of his own where he raised strawberries, and, later, raspberries.
3. From roughly 1978 – 1982, my family succeeded in obtaining operating loans from FSA. We fell behind on our payments because of low yields caused by bad weather, and tough marketing conditions. We asked FSA to restructure our loans so that we could keep up with the payments, as FSA routinely did for Anglo farmers. The plan FSA presented to us was unworkable from the start because the payments were too high. There was no way we could make it work, but we had no choice. As a result of this, by 1983, we had fallen too deeply into debt and had to resort to a write-down. FSA told us then that once we received the write-down, we were out of the FSA system and could never again apply for financing from FSA. We were given no alternative except to lose our farm.
4. We ran into financial difficulties with the family farm again in 1993, because of damage to our raspberry crop from a freeze. I called Vivian Soffa, the Executive Director at FSA in Salinas, CA, to inquire about assistance for disaster losses. (The Salinas office serviced Monterey County, Santa Cruz County, and San Moreno County). At that time, I had no understanding of how the FSA system worked. FSA responded that the application process would be extensive and difficult, that funds were extremely limited, and that there was no guarantee my family would ever qualify for disaster benefits. FSA made the process seem so overwhelming and impossible that we did not file an application for benefits.
5. Crop year 1994 brought more bad weather. Crop year 1995 was the worst ever. Crop losses were devastating. Many Hispanic farmers, like the other farmers in the area, were in serious trouble. FSA responded with a high volume of denials of applications submitted by Hispanics for loans and farm benefit programs, while approving loans and benefits for Anglos.
6. In 1995, my brothers – Rodolfo, Heriberto, Jorge and Manuel Gonzalez – applied for an emergency loan at FSA and were denied. FSA denied the emergency loan for the reason that my brothers qualified to recover disaster losses through the NAP program. My brothers waited almost two years to receive the NAP payment. FSA later reversed the approval for the NAP payment and demanded that my brothers pay the NAP money back to FSA. We disputed the FSA reversal, and the dispute has yet to be completely resolved.

7. For losses from the same disaster in 1995, an Anglo who farmed across the road from our family farm applied at FSA to recover disaster losses through the same NAP program. The Anglo farmer applied for a NAP payment at about the same time my brothers did. The Anglo farmer received his NAP payment in early 1996, while my brothers had to wait until the end of 1996 for their NAP payment.

8. In 1995, a number of Hispanic farmers and I formed the California Latino Agriculture Association ("CLAA") in an effort to pull together to confront the problems we had with FSA. We discovered that our individual experiences with FSA reflected a pattern of widespread exclusion of Hispanic farmers from FSA farm loans and benefit programs. We were systematically discouraged from seeking and denied access to financing for our farms. No one who worked with farm programs at FSA spoke Spanish. We never had adequate information regarding FSA benefit programs designed to permit farmers to recover from disaster losses. Our requests for assistance from USDA were brushed off. Hispanic farmers who inquired about disaster assistance at FSA were sent next door to the Conservation office, only to be referred back to the FSA office by Conservation and never ending up with any assistance from USDA. Hispanic growers were laughed out of the FSA office when they carried their farm documents in shoe boxes.

9. In my position as a leader of CLAA, I made an effort to learn all I could about USDA loan and benefit programs. I read the applicable USDA regulations and guidelines for applying for loans and farm benefit programs, and personally assisted about 300 Hispanic growers with their applications. I observed first hand that the discriminatory treatment toward Hispanic by FSA continued. A number of growers were approved for disaster benefits, only to be told later by FSA employees that they had to pay back all the disaster money to USDA. This discouraged many of the Hispanic farmers from applying for benefit programs because they feared that they would not be able to repay the money. We later learned that there was no requirement to repay money received as part of a benefit program.

10. I observed that FSA processed the loan applications of Hispanic farmers very slowly. FSA claimed that it was taking more time with the applications from Hispanic farmers because it wanted to get everything right. Actually, FSA was taking more time, searching for reasons to deny the applications.

11. There were no Hispanics on the County Committee. The Committee appeared to be ignorant of the problems faced by Hispanic growers who were trying to farm without essential financing, something which few, if any, Anglos ever had to do. In my experience, it appears that the County Committee approved applications for themselves and for their friends, and manipulated guidelines to exclude Hispanics.

12. I worked with hundreds of Hispanic farmers from 1995 to 1999, assisting them with FSA applications. Over and over and over again, I observed the same discriminatory pattern of qualified Hispanic farmers being denied loans and benefits, while less qualified Anglo farmers were approved for the same loans and benefits.

13. In 1995, I submitted about 80 applications, with extensive supporting documentation, for disaster assistance and emergency loans for Hispanic farmers. FSA delayed processing of the applications for about two years. I asked for copies of the files I had submitted, and FSA said "NO," because the files were all government property now.

14. While I worked with CLAA, it organized several meetings with the local FSA office to discuss the problems of Hispanic farmers who were excluded from FSA loans and benefit programs while Anglo farmers received appropriate service. My opinion is that our complaints were not taken seriously; nothing happened in response to them.

15. In September 1996, CLAA organized a town meeting in Watsonville, CA, at the Notre Dame school gymnasium. USDA sent representatives from Washington, DC, and USDA personnel from the State and County offices attended. About 400 Hispanic farmers traveled from several surrounding counties (including Monterey County, Santa Cruz County, and Santa Maria County) to voice their complaints at the meeting. Hispanic farmers complained that the Salinas FSA office did not provide adequate service for them and that they did not receive assistance from FSA in completing their applications. They complained that because FSA information was provided only in English, many Hispanic farmers had difficulty in understanding the complicated programs, thus making it all the more important to have assistance provided by FSA employees. They also complained that their applications were delayed in processing while their financial hardships were immediate and severe; and they were ignored at the FSA office while Anglos were served first. In sum, the Hispanic farmers had a clear-cut message for USDA: "Your system doesn't work for us. It works for Anglos. Reform it."

16. Twice Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman met with Hispanic farmers in Salinas and heard the same complaints of disparity between the service FSA provided for Anglo and Hispanic farmers.

17. On behalf of the Hispanic farmers and CLAA, I repeatedly complained – weekly, sometimes daily – to FSA, and to the USDA Office of Civil Rights, about USDA's discriminatory practices: that Hispanic farmers' applications were not processed in the same manner as were the Anglo farmers' applications, that Hispanic farmers' applications were delayed in processing while Anglos' applications sailed through, that FSA habitually lost key information from Hispanic farmers' applications thereby slowing the process even more; and that the standards by which Hispanic farmers' applications were measured were tougher than those applied to Anglos.

18. FSA heard me out, in hopes of wearing me out and shutting me up, but they conducted no meaningful investigation of our discrimination complaints, and made no changes at FSA to address the Hispanic farmers' complaints.

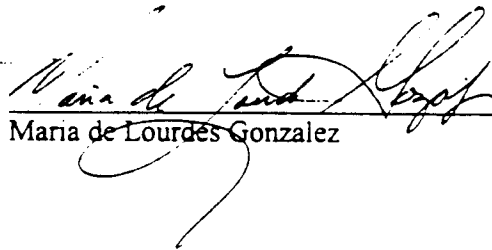
19. CLAA folded in 1999 because of lack of funding. We had worked very hard for two years with no pay in an attempt to provide the services for Hispanic farmers that FSA was supposed to provide. We could not keep it up.

20. I have seen first hand the devastating consequences of FSA discrimination against Hispanic growers. They can't get ahead. Some have lost their homes and land.

21. Like my own family, the Hispanic farmers I worked with started from scratch. They knew what it meant to work, and they worked hard. They just needed the same tools and assistance that FSA provided for Anglo farmers. That's all they asked for.

I declare under penalty of perjury that the foregoing is true and correct to the best of my personal knowledge.

Executed on: 3/26/02

  
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Maria de Lourdes Gonzalez