



Hispanic farmers watching USDA disputes

By [Lindsay Machak](#)

2010-12-04 23:13:26



SAN JUAN — David Cantu claims his family has lost thousands of dollars due to racial discrimination against them by the United States Department of Agriculture.

Cantu is not alone — he is among thousand of racial and ethnic minority and female farmers from throughout the nation who have filed discrimination lawsuits against the USDA.

"This lawsuit is bigger than just me," he said. "It's not about only me. It's about those thousands of families who have lost everything because of discrimination."

The multitude of farmers nationwide who have filed the suits contend the USDA has slighted them when they've applied for loans. Tuesday, the U.S. House of Representatives settled with both Native- and African-American farmers in their class-action lawsuits.

Attorney Stephen Hill, who is representing Valley farmers in the lawsuits, said local farmers are waiting for the same kind of settlement agreement that was given to black farmers without taking it to the floor.

"We don't need and don't want legislative action," Hill said. "The Justice Department and USDA can settle this case tomorrow if it wants to do it on fair and just terms. And it won't require a single act of any sort by Congress."

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said Tuesday, during a conference call with the media, that he hopes the USDA can come to some sort of agreement with Hispanic and female farmers.

"So what we hope to be able to do at some point in time, in the not-too-distant future, is to take a look at how we might be able to set up a process in which those claimants could at least be given the option of resolving their dispute with the government on a case-by-case individual basis, and we are hopeful that we will get that done very quickly," he said.

But justice can't come fast enough, Cantu said. His father, Cantu contends, was also a victim of the USDA's discrimination. He died in April while still awaiting some form of settlement.

"One of the last things he told me was keep fighting for him," Cantu said.

USDA officials couldn't give an exact date of when a decision might come for women and Hispanic farmers, but pointed out that while all of the cases are similar, they are ultimately different.

Hill said treating different groups differently is what led to the claims of discrimination in the first place and stressed that he is fighting for the equal treatment of all farmers, despite race, sex or ethnic background.

"It's not complicated, it's not rocket science," Hill said. "Give us the same process that they have given African American and Native American farmers."

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