



Hispanic farmers vow to keep fighting after claims of USDA discrimination

by ANGELA KOCHERGA / KVUE

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The Obama Administration has reached a settlement to pay an additional billion dollars to African-American farmers who filed a class action lawsuit. The money will go to farmers left out because they missed a deadline.

Hispanic farmers have filed a similar lawsuit alleging discrimination, but they¹ve been turned away. Family farmers have worked the land in the Mesilla Valley in New Mexico for centuries.

It's a hard life, but Lupe Garcia says rather than help, the federal government has hurt Hispanic farmers. ³We were here before the pilgrims, said Garcia. ³They starved us to death. They cut our wrists and let us bleed out, and we fought, and we fought. We're still fighting.²

He's the lead plaintiff in a class action lawsuit filed by Hispanic farmers nationwide. The claim: Discrimination. The farmers allege the USDA denied or delayed loans and other aid they needed.

³A lot of Hispanic farmers lost their farms,² said Bobby Ortega, farmer.

³They lost ranch; they lost their livelihood. And now they're saying we don't think that you were all hurt.²

The justice department argued against Hispanic farmers when their lawsuit made its way to the Supreme Court. The Obama Administration settled a similar lawsuit with African-American farmers.

³Treat us as equal Americans. Treat us all alike. It's not right when they try to segregate us,² Garcia said.

Garcia vows to continue fighting for equal treatment, even as he watches his family farm slip away. Most of the land he works is rented. He once owned 1,000 acres. Now it's only six.

Women and Native-American farmers have also filed lawsuits alleging the USDA discriminated against them.

FRESNO BEE/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Black farmers could get \$1.25 billion deal Settlement would end years-long legal battle over allegations of Ag Department discrimination.

Posted at 10:10 PM on Thursday, Feb. 18, 2010 By Ben Evans / Associated Press

The Obama administration on Thursday announced a \$1.25 billion deal with black farmers that could end a years-long stalemate over alleged racial discrimination by the Agriculture Department.

If approved by Congress, it would be the second round of damages stemming from a class-action lawsuit the government originally settled in 1999. The new money is intended for people who were denied earlier payments because they missed deadlines for filing.

The amount of money each would get depends on how many claims are successfully filed. President Barack Obama initially called for the \$1.25 billion in his budget last year, but the request stalled in Congress as disagreements persisted over the amount of funding and the structure of the settlement. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said Thursday's agreement should pave the way for congressional approval and get money flowing soon.

In a statement, Obama said the deal would bring "these long-ignored claims of African-American farmers to a rightful conclusion."

One farmer who received money from the first settlement welcomed the opportunity for other farmers to submit their claims.

"This is a good thing for those people who missed the deadline," said Will Scott, a vegetable farmer in Fresno County. "But it is unfortunate that it took this long. Some people ended up losing their property."

Scott knows of several farmers in the Fresno County area who will likely apply for the settlement funds.

Vilsack said the deal should close a "sordid chapter" in USDA history in which blacks often lost land or went deeply into debt after being denied loans and other aid that routinely went to their white counterparts.

Still unresolved is a similar claim made by Hispanic farmers who have said they too were denied loans, mistreated or ignored. About 12,000 Hispanic farmers are involved in their claims against the government.

In the cases involving black farmers, estimates on the number of potential claims vary widely, but some expect totals of about 65,000 -- which would set average payments at roughly \$20,000.