



## **Hispanic farmers allege discrimination by USDA**

**by GARY REAVES / WFAA-TV**

**Posted on February 4, 2010 at 12:33 AM**

### **Justice for Hispanic Farmers and Ranchers Web site**

LAS CRUCES, N.M. — Along the Texas border with New Mexico, in the valley his family settled 400 years ago, Lupe Garcia grows pecans and raises a few cows on 60 acres. "We were farming in this valley before the pilgrims came to the east coast of the United States," he said. "I've been farming with my dad since we were kids." From the 60 acres he owns, he looks out on 1,000 acres he lost — and he blames it on racial discrimination by the federal government. "The last 10 years — between 1990 and 2000 — they starved us to death, shut off all our credit," he said. "They cut our wrists and let us bleed out. That's how cruel they was."

Without timely loans, farmers can't buy fuel for their tractors; or the seed and fertilizer they need to plant each spring. Many minorities, like Bobby Ortega, say that when they did obtain loans, it was way past planting time. "I heard some people take a week, two weeks, a month. For me, it took from four months to six months to receive my loans," Ortega said.

Ortega and Garcia are now part of a major lawsuit against their own government, claiming that it made loans easy to get for white farmers, while systematically denying them to minorities. The U.S. doesn't dispute the claims. In fact, it admits that when minorities complained, they were ignored. "In the early days of the Reagan administration, the USDA secretly dismantled its civil rights office and fired all of its investigators," said Stephen Hill, an attorney representing the minority farmers. Garcia didn't know the fix was in, but apparently his white neighbor did. "He said, 'That farm is going to be mine in 10 years.'" And now, it is.

In 1999, black farmers sued, and the courts lumped all their lawsuits together in a class action. Congress passed a special law and funded a billion dollar settlement. But when Hispanic farmers filed a virtually identical suit, the courts refused to handle their case as a class, leaving them to fight the government one case at a time. "The only reason the government is doing that is to hopes that some of these farmers will give up and go away — and those that don't give up and go away will die," Hill said.

Garcia hoped the situation would change with the election of Barack Obama. "Under the Bush administration, they were ignoring us," Garcia said. "So now we got the change, yet they are still doing the same thing." The Hispanic farmers took their case all the way to the Supreme Court, but with Obama's Justice Department arguing against them, the high court turned them away. The Justice Department blames Congress. "Congress did not create a special statute and a special fund for class-wide resolution of these claims," said agency spokesman Charles Miller in a statement. That leaves Garcia, Ortega, and thousands more fighting one on one against their own government. "We need justice for all," Garcia said. "Treat us all alike. It's not right when they try to segregate us, divide us."

There is no firm count on how many of the nation's 82,000 Hispanic farmers are affected, but it's estimated more of them live in Texas than any other state.

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