

Discrimination issue addressed

Udall sponsors mediation bill

By **NELDA CURTISS**

ALAMOSA — On Wednesday, Senator Mark Udall said, "Hispanic farmers and ranchers deserve a timely resolution to their lawsuit. I urge President Obama and the USDA to do everything they can to ensure that farmers who were discriminated against are made whole and given a chance to rebuild their businesses and their lives."

Udall and seven other United States Senators signed a June 20 letter to President Barack Obama urging his administration to work to resolve the lawsuit brought by Hispanic farmers and ranchers in Colorado, New Mexico, and other states against the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

In their lawsuit *Garcia v. Vilsack*, filed in 2000, more than 100 Hispanic farmers charged USDA with systematic discrimination in the review and awarding of operating and disaster loans between 1981 and 2000, depriving them of critical farm

aid. Farmers and ranchers in Colorado's San Luis Valley are among those who want a timely resolution of the lawsuit.

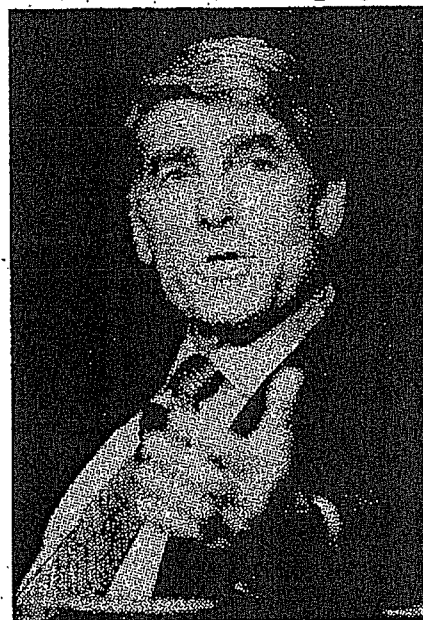
Similarly in 2005, U.S. Representative John Salazar wrote the attorney general of the United States regarding a related case: *Garcia v. Veneman* filed Oct. 13, 2000. In his letter, Representative Salazar stated: "Because my constituents have been and continue to be direct victims of the same discrimination that African American farmers have experienced, I urge you to facilitate discussions between your department, as counsel for USDA, and the attorneys representing the putative class of Hispanic farmers and ranchers in the above-referenced matter."

In their June 20 letter to President Obama, the senators applauded the administration for its commitment to appropriating money to settle a different discrimination lawsuit brought by African-American farmers. In that lawsuit, *Pigford v. Glickman*, black farmers alleged they were discriminated against in the allocation of farm loans and assistance between 1983

and 1997. The government settled the lawsuit, agreeing to compensate black farmers who faced delays and/or denials as a result of their race when applying for USDA loans or assistance.

Senators Michael Bennet, D-CO; Tom Udall, D-N.M.; Robert Menendez, D-N.J.; Barbara Boxer, D-CA; Arlen Specter, D-PA; Patty Murray, D-WA; and Maria Cantwell, D-WA, reminded the president in their letter that thousands of Hispanic

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**US Senator Mark Udall
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farmers and ranchers suffered similar discrimination but have not seen any recourse, and urged him to work with them to resolve their concerns.

Additionally, in hopes of preventing problems that led to Garcia and Pigford, Senator Udall last week co-sponsored the reauthorization of USDA's State Mediation Program. The State Mediation Program, which expires next year, has helped farmers resolve civil rights complaints against the USDA in a confidential and non-adversarial process before reaching the court system. The Farm Service Agency (FSA) and USDA Outreach Staff administer that program.

"But our ultimate goal ought to be to restore faith that the USDA serves all Americans equally," Senator Udall said. "I hope that by strengthening the State Mediation Program, we can make a stronger effort to do that. Providing this neutral forum to farmers gives them another opportunity to en-

sure that their concerns are heard so that a fair resolution to any dispute is the eventual outcome."

In 2005, Salazar was also concerned with fairness when he urged the then U.S. Attorney General to "be instrumental in ending the well-documented discrimination and providing sorely needed accountability and transparency to the administration of USDA's farm credit and non-credit benefit programs."

Salazar ended his 2005 letter by urging the USAG to "instruct" the USDA attorneys "to meet with counsel for the putative class in a sincere and good faith effort to resolve this matter in a manner that will benefit not only Hispanic farmers and ranchers, but all producers who seek equitable treatment from USDA in the administration of its farm programs."

Looking back, his further comment rings even louder this Fourth of July as he wrote: "The American people are entitled to expect that we, as public servants, will do our best to resolve once and for all this long-standing, well-documented and taxpayer-funded discrimination and they deserve nothing less."
