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Not Enough

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LAS CRUCES ‹ Hispanic farmers rallying here Thursday criticized and rejected a recent \$1.3 billion settlement offer from the federal government to resolve two lawsuits alleging widespread discrimination against minority farmers by USDA lending programs. "It's not sufficient," said Animas farmer Alberto Acosta. "It's a joke."

Hispanic plaintiffs, who now number close to 1,000 in a 10-year-old lawsuit named after Doña Ana County farmer Guadalupe Garcia, say they suffered discrimination by USDA lending arms, the Farm Service Agency and its predecessor the Farmers Home Administration, just as black farmers did.

Black farmers, who filed a nearly identical lawsuit in 1997, were granted class-action certification in their case, and the federal government has so far paid out about \$1 billion of \$2.25 billion offered for their claims.

Washington, D.C., attorney Stephen Hill, who represents the Hispanic farmers, said he believes there are many more Hispanic and women farmers, parties in a separate suit, who have suffered discrimination than black farmers.

According to agricultural census figures, there are roughly 30,000 black farmers nationwide, but 55,000 Hispanic farmers and more than 300,000 women farmers. That the Justice Department has offered black farmers more in settlements than it has to Hispanic and women farmers, who are greater in number, "doesn't even pass the laugh test for anything even approaching parity," Hill said.

The Associated Press reported in late May that the federal government offered \$1.33 billion to settle claims from Hispanic and female farmers. The settlement offer would cap awards at \$50,000 per claimant, an amount Hill called "demeaning and insulting" considering the years of financial hardship many families suffered.

At a rally Thursday afternoon on the New Mexico State University campus, three dozen farmers from California, New Mexico, Texas and Colorado said that USDA farm credit officials undercut Hispanics by delaying the release of approved loans

or by simply denying them credit while Anglo farmers in similar circumstances had their loans approved and funds promptly made available.

Victor Estrada of Dallas said his father-in-law lost a ranch valued at more than \$1 million, plus farm equipment, in the mid-1980s after the local director of the Farmers Home Administration declined to provide a previously promised loan.

"We do expect a fair settlement, and \$50,000 is not even close to a fair settlement considering what the USDA did to our family," Estrada said.

This story also ran in the Las Cruces Sun-News