

Hispanic group highlights discrimination suit against USDA

BY BOBBY MAGILL • BobbyMagill @coloradoan.com • August 28, 2010

Discrimination wasn't the primary topic of conversation at Friday's workshop about livestock industry competition, but several Hispanic farmers from Colorado said they attended the event at CSU to raise their voices about being disenfranchised by the federal government.

Standing at the entrance of Lory Student Center at Colorado State University on Friday afternoon, Anthony Hurtado of Castle Rock said all the Caucasian farmers and ranchers at the workshop, which was sponsored by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and U.S. Department of Justice, were most likely unaware of the plight of Hispanic farmers.

The workshop included appearances by U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack, who oversees the USDA.

Hurtado and a group of other Hispanic farmers from Colorado and around the country say the USDA has systematically discriminated against them for decades, and they're looking for a settlement similar to one the USDA reached with African-American farmers for \$1.25 billion.

In 1997, then-Agriculture Secretary Dan Glickman admitted that the agency had a lengthy history of discrimination in its loan program.

The Hispanic farmers, whose case is pending in federal district court in Washington, D.C., are still fighting for what they say is an adequate settlement because they say the USDA has discriminated against them in the same way as it did black farmers.

Hurtado and two other farmers who attended Friday's workshop, Gary Sandoval of Antonito and Richard Gomez of Alamosa, said getting federal officials to hear their voices has been challenging.

Hurtado, whose family has ranched in northern New Mexico for more than 200 years, said he grew up on a ranch east of Denver, where he never experienced

discrimination. But that changed in 1994, when he bought a ranch of his own in east Texas to run a cow-calf operation.

After initially getting a loan from the former Farmers Home Administration, which had a diverse staff that included a "very nice African-American loan manager," Hurtado said that, when USDA reorganized the office the following year, it installed an all-white staff.

That's when his problems began, he said.

A white insurance officer in the agency, he said, misled him into purchasing inadequate insurance, which didn't pay when he lost his cattle in a drought that hit east Texas in 1996. After a long battle to have his insurance claim paid, he said, the USDA office accused him of fraud, forcing him to lose his entire ranching operation, including about \$3 million.

His grievances against the USDA remain unsettled, he said.

"I refuse to go bankrupt," he said.

Gomez worked for the Farmers Home Administration and the USDA's Rural Development Administration in Alamosa for 30 years, serving for a time as the agency's district director. He said he witnessed within the agency routine and systematic discrimination against Hispanic farmers.

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"I observed that Hispanic farmers were not being given loans because they allegedly didn't have sufficient experience or because they had other nonfarming jobs," Gomez said in a court document.

After siding with Hispanic farmers unable to obtain loans from the agency, he said he was stripped of his duties, which, he claims, the agency preferred to be handled by "non-Hispanics."

He said that, of the 30 government farm loans issued in the heavily Hispanic San Luis Valley in 1986, two were made to Hispanic farmers.

Sandoval said he was one of the San Luis Valley Hispanic farmers denied a farm loan in 1986. He said he applied four times between 1981 and 1992 and was denied each time.

"I believe I was qualified for the loans I applied for, and the agency discriminated against me because of my Hispanic ethnicity," he said in a court document.



From left, attorney Collette Harrell of Howrey Law Firm in Washington, D.C., Richard Gomez, Gary Sandoval and Anthon Hurtado are part of a discrimination lawsuit vs. the USDA claiming decades of discrimination against Hispanic farmers.

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