



## Hispanic farmers rally for stronger case against USDA

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SAN JUAN — Pedro Garcia says he can remember witnessing the discrimination his father endured when approaching the United States Department of Agriculture for loans in the 1980s.

"They told us that we were too late," he said. "They said that all the money the government had set aside for loans was gone."

As a Hispanic farmer, his father raised cotton, grain, okra, squash and corn just outside of Brownsville. He was one of thousands of farmers whom the USDA may have misled or discouraged to apply

for federal aid.

Garcia, 50, of Brownsville, was among more than 40 locals who gathered Saturday at the Basilica of Our Lady in San Juan to learn more about how they may be entitled to join a lawsuit against the USDA.

The government has offered \$1.33 billion to settle claims of discrimination toward Hispanic and women farmers who applied for emergency loans and were discriminated against.

Valley farmers were outraged because the USDA compensated black farmers, in a similar lawsuit, with \$2.15 billion, attorney Stephen Hill said.

Hill, who is representing Valley Hispanic farmers in the lawsuit, said Hispanic farmers would be getting a much smaller payout than black farmers individually because there are twice as many Hispanics farming in the United States.

"One of the tasks that I have is to identify the victims of discrimination," he said. "However, there are so many Hispanic farmers that many will be missed unless we get the word out to them."

Garcia filled out paperwork with Hill to join the lawsuit. He said he hopes his claim will add fuel to the fire and help bring justice to local Hispanic farmers. And although his father is no longer alive to see how the lawsuit plays out, he feels his father is still being insulted by the initial offer the government has given Hispanic farmers.

"It's a slap in the face to us," Garcia said. "I'm going to join up with these attorneys and make sure we're doing everything we can."

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