



## ECONOMY/AP

# Ag Secretary Vilsack hears discrimination concerns from Hispanic farmers during NM visit

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**Associated Press**  
**10/01/09 11:10 AM EDT**

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. — After years of watching white farmers receive timely loans and service, Virginia Garcia and her husband lost their Las Cruces farm 20 years ago due to what they claim were discriminatory practices by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Farm Service Agency.

So Virginia Garcia, one of the original plaintiffs in a discrimination lawsuit against the USDA, and her son, Gilbert, were more than ready to voice their concerns when they and 10 other producers were invited to meet Wednesday with U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack.

Vilsack was in Las Cruces to hear about the concerns of southern New Mexico agricultural producers and to share information on President Barack Obama's plan to rebuild and create rural infrastructure. Vilsack's tour also included Oklahoma, Iowa, Wisconsin and California.

The Garcias said Vilsack told them he's aware of the plight of Hispanic farmers, but his hands were tied by the judicial system.

"He talked about instituting an investigative program to calculate everything as far as the complaint, but he said the call to reopen the complaints would have to come from the president himself," Gilbert Garcia said.

Vilsack declined to comment on the private meeting.

The court has scheduled an Oct. 13 meeting to determine whether progress has been made in settling the lawsuit, said plaintiff's attorney Stephen Hill. The suit, filed in 2000, seeks to end what Hispanic farmers claim is rampant discrimination in the administration of USDA loan programs.

Hill said the USDA and the Department of Justice have "stonewalled" and expressed no interest in resolving the case.

"They have refused to engage in a negotiation to resolve the case. Instead, they insist the cases should be transferred back to local districts and tried," Hill said. "That's a prescription for increasing the cost of litigation as well as further frustrating farmers."

Hill cited a recently settled class action lawsuit by black farmers alleging discrimination by the USDA in which 15,000 farmers were awarded \$1 billion in damages.

Farmers from around the Southwest showed support for Hispanic farmers involved in the lawsuit during Vilsack's visit, with some wearing white T-shirts showing a slash through the letters "USDA" and the words "Stop Discrimination."

Virginia Garcia said she saw signs of hope when Vilsack took office and announced all discrimination would cease, but she said some agency employees still aren't listening.

"I told him the farm loan offices are conducting business as usual, and they aren't listening to you," she said.

"There are no changes as far as the bad seeds on the farm loan side of USDA. These bad seeds give the department a black eye, but yet they continue to be employed," Her son Gilbert said. "This affected our family in the 1980s, but it goes as far back as the 1960s."

Vilsack also took questions from the crowd of farmers, producers and dairymen.

David Cantu, a farmer from San Juan, Texas, asked Vilsack to call on the Department of Justice and Obama to resolve the lawsuit.

Cantu, who lost a crop because of delays in receiving an FSA loan five years ago, said he was there "to put a face to the case."

"Each farmer out there had the same story about discrimination," Cantu said. "I commend the secretary and we know he is not the cause of these problems. But fortunately, it has fallen on his administration to make it right."