



CNN "AMERICAN MORNING"
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ROBERTS: Welcome back to the most news in the morning. It's an eye-popping charge from farmers who say they were wiped out of business after devastating floods, ruined not just because of the water but charges of racism at the Department of Agriculture. Our Thelma Gutierrez has that story for us this morning.

THELMA GUTIERREZ, CNN CORRESPONDENT (on camera):
John, Kiran, we're talking about hundreds of small family farmers across the country who alleged the USDA has denied them disaster relief, access to government loans, and has treated them unfairly based on their ethnicity and race.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

GUTIERREZ (voice-over): In Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, California, hundreds of Latino farmers say the US Department of Agriculture discriminated against them and forced many families out of business. Like John Carrillo, whose father built a thriving family farm in Salinas, California.

JOHN CARRILLO, LATINO FARMER: That's our logo here. Our American dream was to succeed as a Hispanic farming company.

GUTIERREZ: After the devastating floods of 1995, Carrillo asked for disaster relief.

CARRILLO: I was denied three times.

GUTIERREZ: He wasn't alone.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: We lost our 300-acre ranch that we were leasing in Greenfield, California.

GUTIERREZ: What did you lose?

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: One hundred and fifty-one (ph) acres.

GUTIERREZ: What did you lose?

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: (INAUDIBLE).

GUTIERREZ: Latino farmers allege that over decades the USDA denied them loans and assistance that white farmers were able to get. They filed a complaint known as the Garcia case, charging the government with discrimination. The case is stalled for nearly a decade.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Mr. Hill. How are you?

GUTIERREZ: Attorney Stephen Hill represents the Latino farmers. His Washington, DC law firm took their case pro bono.

STEPHEN HILL, ATTORNEY FOR LATINO FARMERS:

The original defendant in this case, Secretary Glickman, has admitted in testimony before Congress that good people lost their farmland not because of bad weather, not because of crops, but because of the color of their skin.

GUTIERREZ: Latino farmers, Native Americans, women and African- Americans all filed class-action lawsuits against the USDA claiming discrimination. But the government settled only with the black farmers.

HILL: And, to date, the government has paid out nearly a billion dollars to some 15,000 black farmers.

GUTIERREZ: And the allegations that the black farmers made were similar to the Hispanic farmers?

HILL: Not similar - identical.

GUTIERREZ: The only difference between the two cases, according to Hill, the black farmers were certified to fight as a group, whereas the court has not granted Latino farmers class-action status.

TOM VILSACK, USDA SECRETARY: The Garcia case is a little different because it wasn't certified as a class action.

GUTIERREZ: Tom Vilsack, the current agriculture secretary, acknowledged as much in a recent video posted on YouTube. A spokesman for the Justice Department, which represents the USDA, told CNN it could not comment on the case citing pending litigation.

How many of you are still farmers today? None of you? What are you doing now, Joe?

CARRILLO: I'm running (INAUDIBLE) for a company.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: I'm working in Kmart.

GUTIERREZ: A bitter end to an American dream.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

GUTIERREZ: The farmers say if they're forced to fight the government individually, many families will not be able to afford the legal battle, and their cases of discrimination may never be heard -- John, Kiran.

ROBERTS: Thelma Gutierrez for us this morning. Thelma, thanks so much.