

Fund Proposed For Female Farmers In USDA Bias Cases

by Jerry Hagstrom

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In what may be the beginning of a multibillion-dollar congressional effort to settle discrimination suits against the Agriculture Department, two key House members introduced legislation Thursday to establish a \$4.6 billion compensation fund for female farmers who have been denied loans since 1981.

House Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee Chairwoman **Rosa DeLauro**, D-Conn., and Rep. **Anna Eshoo**, D-Calif., said their bill is long overdue.

"Years of discrimination and unnecessary hardship for these women, and all minorities, cannot be allowed to continue," DeLauro said. "It is time to do right by those that have been discriminated against in our past and present, to live up to our founding principles, and to legislate an end to this unfortunate and regrettable era."

Joining DeLauro at a news conference were farmers from Montana, California, Florida and New York who were among thousands of black, Hispanic, Native American and female farmers who were part of four discrimination cases filed by each class against USDA a decade ago, charging that they were denied farm-operating and emergency loans that the agency routinely made to white male farmers.

"This is an issue of fundamental fairness -- all farmers, regardless of their gender or ethnicity, should be judged on the merit of their applications for their loans," DeLauro said.

The Clinton administration settled the black farmers' case, *Pigford v. Glickman*, resulting in eventual payments of more than \$1 billion to farmers. A provision in the 2008 farm bill allows black farmers who did not meet the deadline to file their claims, and President Obama said in his FY09 budget request to Congress that he wanted to set aside \$1.25 billion to settle those cases.

The Hispanic, Native American and women's cases are still pending. DeLauro noted Thursday that Agriculture Secretary Vilsack has made civil rights a priority, and a Vilsack spokesman said in an e-mail that USDA is committed to ending all forms of discrimination and addressing past allegations in a timely and fair manner."

USDA and the Justice Department have not settled any cases since Obama became president, although Joe Sellers, a lawyer for the Native Americans, said Thursday that USDA has recently indicated an interest in entering negotiations on that case.

Members of Congress, including Sen. **Robert Menendez**, D-N.J., have urged Obama to settle the cases, and Colorado Democratic Sens. **Mark Udall** and **Michael Bennet** have written **Senate Majority Leader Reid** that they want to work with him on a solution.

The DeLauro-Eshoo bill would resolve a lawsuit filed in federal court in 2000.