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It's time to make amends to Hispanic farmers

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Ten years after 15,000 African-American farmers reached a landmark \$1 billion class-action settlement with the federal government, Hispanic farmers, many of them in South Texas, still wonder whether they'll ever receive justice.

Federal officials readily admit that the Agriculture Department's Farm Service Agency discriminated against Hispanic and African-American farmers for decades, delaying and denying their loan applications while granting assistance to white farmers. But ag officials and the [Justice Department](#) now seem more committed to outlasting the farmers than righting injustices.

The latest holdup began in the 1990s, after a federal judge gave African-American farmers the go-ahead to pursue a class-action lawsuit. Another judge, who heard essentially the same allegations of discrimination, denied class-action status to the Hispanic farmers.

The federal government settled with the African-American farmers soon after President [Bill Clinton](#) asked federal lawyers to do so. But armed with the second court ruling, agriculture and justice officials have insisted on negotiating individual settlements with as many as 82,000 Hispanic farmers. Not surprisingly, those cases have gone nowhere.

The history of this case warrants aggressive corrective action. In the early 1980s, the [Reagan](#) administration quietly shut the USDA's civil rights division, leaving discrimination complaints uninvestigated for years. Eventually, the misbehavior became public, but not before thousands of Hispanics lost farms and livelihoods.

Yet those farmers continue to get the runaround, while – adding insult to injury – the [Obama](#) administration has asked for an additional \$1.25 billion to cover new claims from African-American farmers who were left out of the original class-action case.

A lawyer for the Hispanic farmers has asked the Supreme Court to review the court decision to deny class-action status. Native American and female farmers also remain in legal purgatory with the government over essentially the same points.

Attorney General Eric Holder could quickly put to rest this ugly chapter of American farm history. Because the justness of the claims isn't in dispute, the only obstacle to a group settlement is the federal government's willingness to step up and pursue it.

The history of this discrimination is despicable, and so is the current delay.