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Hispanic farmers deserve justice **Express-News Editorial Board -**

More than a decade ago, the U.S. Department of Agriculture settled a class-action lawsuit brought by black farmers who had been denied loans because of their race. In addition to establishing a multi-billion settlement fund, the department acknowledged “indifference and blatant discrimination” against blacks in the department's lending programs over the course of decades.

It wasn't only black farmers who were the victims of discrimination, however. The USDA's Farm Service Agency administered the loan and credit programs through regional and local offices across the country. Who ran those offices — and how well farmers knew them — played a large role in determining whether applicants received government loans, how large they were and when they got them.

In parts of the South and other areas of the country, FSA offices that diligently served the interests of white farmers routinely showed indifference to the needs of black farmers. In Texas and elsewhere, as Express-News staff writer Elaine Ayala reported, they also showed indifference to the needs of Mexican American farmers.

A group of 110 Hispanic farmers is suing the Agriculture Department for the same pattern of discrimination that resulted in a historic settlement with black farmers. However, unlike the black farmers, the Mexican American farmers have not been granted a class-action designation. That means the plaintiffs must file individual lawsuits.

The U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia is reviewing one of those cases, *Garcia vs. Vilsack*. The court could finally grant the plaintiffs class-action status. It should.

However, a settlement doesn't need to wait on legal proceedings. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack says he is committed to eradicating the department's discriminatory practices of the past, which he described as “a conspiracy to force minority and socially disadvantaged farmers off their land.”

If so, he could work with members of Congress to create a settlement with Mexican American farmers that models the settlement with black farmers. Thus far, Congress has shown little interest in the issue. It cries out for leadership from members of the Texas delegation.

Had private lending institutions engaged in the USDA's discriminatory practices, the Justice Department and Congress would have sought a swift resolution. The fact that it

was the U.S. government that did so is cause for even greater outrage — and greater need for its representatives to settle with Mexican American farmers who suffered economic harm.