



## Hispanic farmers deserve justice, too

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Commentary By Raul Reyes

Lupe Garcia is a third-generation farmer. Along with his father and brother, he owned two farms in [New Mexico](#). Like many farmers, the Garcias needed seasonal government loans and credit to help them with expenses in advance of their yearly harvest.

Despite having a positive cash flow and collateral, their requests for assistance were repeatedly turned down by an agency of the [U.S. Department of Agriculture](#) (USDA). After the agency denied the Garcias disaster relief for flooding on the grounds that "(they) were bad farmers," the family lost their farms to foreclosure in 1999.

That same year, 2,000 African-American farmers who had accused the USDA of disregarding their numerous civil rights complaints won a \$1 billion settlement. This year, President Obama pledged another \$1.25 billion to their settlement fund. But despite having a case that is virtually identical to the black farmers, Hispanics have run into roadblocks on their path toward justice.

Since 2000, Garcia – the president of the Hispanic Farmers and Ranchers Association – has been the named plaintiff in a lawsuit against the USDA. He is among a group of Hispanic farmers seeking redress for discrimination in farm credit and loan programs, disaster relief and other benefit programs. Agriculture Secretary [Tom Vilsack](#) admits the programs have been administered unfairly and has called for a new civil rights era at the department.

But the Latino farmers have not been granted class-action designation because a district court ruled that they had not established "a significant showing" of common discrimination. Most of these farmers, however, do not have the time or resources to fight the government on their own. The court ruling also might exclude other Latino farmers who suffered discrimination but are not part of the Garcia case. According to the Census Bureau, the USA has roughly 80,000 Hispanic farmers, but only 110 have joined in the Garcia case. Garcia's attorney has filed a petition for the Supreme Court to review the issue of class certification.

Vilsack's admission of past failures is laudable, but the words will ring hollow to farmers like the Garcias unless the Agriculture Department works with Congress to establish a settlement for Hispanic farmers. Only when the past wrongs are addressed can a new era truly begin.

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