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Agriculture Secretary Vilsack Announces Updated and Improved Process to Resolve Discrimination Claims of Hispanic and Women Farmers

Obama Administration's Efforts Will Bring Finality to Longstanding Claims of Discrimination in USDA Program Delivery

WASHINGTON, Jan. 25, 2012 – As part of continued efforts to close the chapter on allegations that discrimination occurred at USDA in past decades, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack today announced improvements to a process announced last February to resolve the claims of Hispanic and women farmers and ranchers who assert that they were discriminated against when seeking USDA farm loans.

"The Obama Administration has made it a priority to resolve all claims of past discrimination at USDA, and we are committed to closing this sad chapter in USDA's history," said Vilsack. "Hispanic and women farmers and ranchers who allege past discrimination are encouraged to participate in an improved claims process in which they have the opportunity to recover up to \$250,000 in damages."

The updated claims process being announced today increases the maximum cash recovery to \$250,000, instead of \$50,000. The process offers a streamlined alternative to litigation for each Hispanic or woman farmer and rancher who can prove that USDA denied their loan or loan servicing for discriminatory reasons for certain time periods between 1981 and 2000. As announced in February 2011, the voluntary claims process will make available at least \$1.33 billion for cash awards and tax relief payments, plus up to \$160 million in farm debt relief, to eligible Hispanic and women farmers and ranchers. There are no filing fees or other costs to claimants to participate in the program. Participation is voluntary, and the program does not preclude individuals who opt not to participate from pursuing their cases in court.

This updated process comes as part of USDA's efforts to ensure that all its customers have equal access to its programs, and follows the Obama Administration's settlement of longstanding litigation brought by African American farmers and Native American farmers. Over the past months, USDA has worked to reach out to potential Hispanic and female claimants through a call center for farmers and ranchers, a website, public service announcements, and in-person meetings around the country. Individuals interested in participating in the claims process may register to receive a claims package, or may obtain more information, by visiting www.farmerclaims.gov. Individuals can also register to receive a claims package by calling the Farmer and Rancher Call Center at 1-888-508-4429. USDA cannot provide legal advice to potential claimants. Persons seeking legal advice may contact a lawyer or other legal services provider.

An independent party or parties will administer the claims process and adjudicate the claims. USDA will contract with an entity that can perform the services required by the updated approach. After this selection is made and USDA announces the opening date of the Claims Period, claimants will have 180 days in which to file a completed Claims Package.

Under Secretary Vilsack's leadership, USDA has instituted a comprehensive plan to strengthen the Department as a model service provider and to ensure that every farmer and rancher is treated equally and fairly as part of "a new era of civil rights" at USDA. He and President Obama have made it a priority to resolve all of the past civil rights cases facing the Department, and today's announcement is another major step towards achieving that goal. In February 2010, the Secretary announced the Pigford II settlement with

African American farmers, and in October 2010, he announced the Keepseagle settlement with Native American farmers. Both of those settlements have since received court approval. Meanwhile, Secretary Vilsack continues to advocate for resolution of all remaining claims of past discrimination against USDA.

Audio and video public service announcements in English and Spanish from Secretary Vilsack and downloadable print and web banner ads on the Hispanic and women farmer claims process are available at: http://www.usda.gov/PSAs_Print_and_WebBanner_Ads.xml.

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