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## House hearing highlights USDA steps to end discrimination

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Coinciding with a House Agriculture subcommittee hearing on civil rights issues at USDA, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said Wednesday that “One of the most important issues to President Obama and to me is civil rights and we have taken a number of actions to ensure that all Americans have access to USDA services and that the employees here at USDA and across the country and across the globe are treated equally and fairly.”

In the Subcommittee on Department Operations, Oversight, Nutrition, and Forestry hearing, the new USDA Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights (ASCR), Dr. Joe Leonard Jr., told members that in his 23 days as ASCR, “I have met several times with Secretary Vilsack and other senior leadership, OASCR employees, and begun my initial assessment of civil rights in the Department. After several sessions with the Secretary, I can assure you he is committed and is the driving force to turn around civil rights at USDA.” Leonard said Vilsack is committed to “forever close the chapter of USDA as the last plantation”

Subcommittee Chair Joe Baca (D-CA) made it clear that a great deal of work needs to be done to correct “decades of failed attempts.” He noted that both in hiring and in administering USDA programs, “For too long the reputation of USDA has been marred by discrimination.” In particular he pointed out that “of the 14,000 complaints that have been filed since 2000 with the ASCR, only four were actively being investigated” by the previous administration. He called for ending “the abuse suffered by African Americans, Hispanic, Native American and other minority farmers.”

The subcommittee’s Ranking Member, Jeff Fortenberry (R-NE), agreed. He said that “All farmers deserve equal access to USDA programs regardless of race, ethnicity or gender. This committee feels strongly about ensuring that USDA is administering all of its programs in an equitable and just manner. The outcomes of today’s hearing will help us continue proper oversight responsibilities.”

Speaking “As one who grew up on a black farm in rural South Carolina, one who comes from a long line of black farmers,” Rep. David Scott (D-GA) said that “in the short

period of time that he's been in office, Secretary Vilsack has done a tremendous job, especially in his outreach to the minority farmer community and understanding and having a full grasp of the dimensions of the past vestiges of prejudice and discrimination that has applied to black farmers. So I want to commend Secretary Vilsack for his aggressive efforts to reverse course at the United States Department of Agriculture and correct its shameful civil rights legacy."

Testifying in the hearing along with Dr. Leonard was Lisa Shames, Director of the Natural Resources and Environment Division of the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO). She wrote the 22-page GAO report that was highlighted at the hearing. The report includes a series of GAO's recommendations on what USDA needs to do to correct USDA's civil rights problems. Shames said it is a positive sign that under Dr. Leonard, "USDA is beginning to take steps on all of our recommendations" and that "All bodes well looking forward." Still, she warned, "for underperforming organizations, it takes time to turn them around" and in this case "could take as long as five years, possibly seven years." She recommended an oversight board and a civil rights ombudsman at USDA to make sure that planned improvements are delivered as promised.

In response to members' questions, Leonard said that with only 23 days on the job, it's too soon for him to be sure about ending discrimination at USDA but that "I do believe the culture can change." Answering questions from Rep. Fortenberry, Dr. Leonard noted that 97 percent of discrimination complaints come from just 14 states. He pointed out one problem in handling these complaints has been that "since 1983 USDA has not had any investigators" to follow up on civil rights complaints. He said USDA is now considering hiring investigators once again.

Both GAO's 22-page report on USDA, "Recommendations and Options Available to the New Administration and Congress to Address Long-Standing Civil Rights Issues," and Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights Dr. Joe Leonard's statement are available at: <http://agriculture.house.gov/hearings/statements.html>