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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
CIVIL RIGHTS LISTENING FORUM

SATURDAY, JANUARY 11, 1997

FORT BROWN HOTEL
BROWNSVILLE, TEXAS



1 MR. BURT: Good morning, everyone. If
2 you could take your seats, please, get started. To
3 give us a welcome this morning, I'd like to have
4 Judge Gilberto Hinojosa to come and give the
5 introduction.

6 JUDGE HINOJOSA: Thank you very much.
7 It's Gilberto Hinojosa. I'm your Cameron County
8 Judge here, and I do want to welcome each and every
9 one of you-all here who have come to this most
10 important forum. I want to also welcome Deputy
11 Secretary Rominger and your staff for coming here,
12 and thank you very much for giving us the
13 opportunity to talk to you about some of the very
14 important issues that are facing South Texas,
15 Cameron County, Hidalgo County and all of the
16 neighboring counties in our area. The work that
17 you do, the efforts that you engage in affect us in
18 a very big way, in a myriad of ways, and we -- we
19 think it's most important that you give us an
20 opportunity to talk to you about many of these
21 important issues.

22 I also want to thank Congressman Kika De
23 La Garza who is here today for all the fine work
24 that he did while he was a Chairman of the -- the
25 Agricultural Committee, and also while he served in

1 the many years in Congress, and thank you very for
2 being here in your home. Again, welcome to Cameron
3 County and hope you have a beautiful day here in
4 Cameron County.

5 MR. BURT: Thank you very much. Good
6 morning, everyone. I'm John Burt, State
7 Conservationist for the Natural Resources
8 Conservation Service here in Texas. This listening
9 session is being hosted by the USDA Food and
10 Agriculture Council in Texas. This year I'm Chair,
11 so that makes me the moderator of this session.

12 And welcome to Brownsville, Texas, the
13 Civil Rights customer listening session. We would
14 like to thank you for taking the time to come here
15 and be with us today and voice your concerns and
16 comments to Deputy Secretary of Agriculture Richard
17 Rominger and the Secretary of Civil Rights Team.
18 Just as you are here today committed to letting us
19 know what changes need to happen, I am pleased to
20 see the commitment of the Deputy Secretary and the
21 Civil Rights Action Team to make these changes a
22 reality.

23 We have several panel members here today
24 to initiate dialogue with you and your community,
25 and I would like to introduce Dan Kropp, Program

1 Coordinator with the Farm Services Agency; Steve
2 Carricker, the Executive Director of the Rural
3 Development in Texas. And there are other members
4 also of the State Food and Agriculture council.
5 I'd like to take this time to ask the table on the
6 right to just introduce themselves for the audience
7 please. Starting --

8 MR. HODGE: Horace Hodge, USDA Liaison
9 Officer of NRCS, Texas.

10 MR. BENAVIDES: Guillermo Benavides,
11 President of the State Association of Soil and
12 Water Conservation District.

13 MS. JACKSON: I'm Ruthie Jackson,
14 Regional Administrator for Food and Customer
15 Service, Southwest Region Dallas, Texas.

16 MS. CANALES: I'm Judith Canales, Deputy
17 State Director for the Department of Agriculture
18 Rural Development.

19 MR. DOMINGUEZ: I'm Tomas Dominguez,
20 Deputy State Conservationist for Natural Resources
21 Conservation Service.

22 MR. BURT: Before we get further into the
23 session, I would like to remind you that we do have
24 head sets here for translations assistance for any
25 of those in the audience who would like to have

1 one. I would like to first to introduce Pearlie
2 Reed, Civil Rights Action Team Leader for the Civil
3 Rights Team.

4 MR. REED: Thank you, John. Good
5 morning. It's good to be here in Brownsville
6 today. First, I'd like to introduce the members of
7 the staff who are with us today from the Secretary
8 Civil Rights Action Team. First, here we have
9 Randy Weber. Randy, would you please raise your
10 hand or stand? John Bottum, Rebecca de la Torre
11 and Gerry Gonzalez. The next person I'd like to
12 present to you is Denise Blanchard, the District
13 Director for Congressman Ortiz. Ms. Blanchard.

14 MS. BLANCHARD: I just say good morning
15 and buenavidos (sic) to South Texas. On behalf of
16 the Congressman, we are so happy that you are here
17 this morning because we know that this is an issue
18 that is important to you, but most of all we want
19 to thank the Secretary -- the Deputy Secretary for
20 making an effort to select South Texas decide to
21 hold the Civil Actions Listening Session. It
22 really is important to all of us. Unfortunate, the
23 Congressman could not be here this morning. He had
24 a conflict in schedule, but I would like to just
25 issue a few remarks on his behalf.

1 Secretary Rominger, I, along with those
2 gathered in the audience today, are delighted to
3 give you and your panel a warm welcome to South
4 Texas. Thank you for designating Brownsville,
5 Texas as one of the thirteen sites to hold your
6 listening sessions. We greatly appreciate the
7 effort you have put forth to communicate with the
8 farmers and others who depend and benefit from
9 USDA's services in this area.

10 I applaud Secretary Glickman for his
11 initiative to actively listen to the concerns of
12 the people and his encouragement toward the
13 stimulation of ideas. The policies made and
14 implemented by the Department of Agriculture
15 greatly affect the economy and the farming
16 community of this area. It is my hope that our
17 dialogue bring insight and understanding to issues
18 communicated here today.

19 I have heard many positive comments
20 directed to the Department of Agriculture employees
21 in my congressional district, and I congratulate
22 them for the great work they do in South Texas. I
23 look forward to working with them in the future
24 should we discover any concerns during this
25 listening session. Secretary Rominger, thank you

1 once again for coming to our community. I look
2 forward to a successful meeting.

3 And I would also like to take this
4 opportunity to thank the City of Brownsville, the
5 Brownsville Convention of Visitors Bureau for
6 hosting the hospitality hour before this meeting
7 had started. I think we have Commissioner John
8 Wood in the audience and Jackie Lawkin is in the
9 back here. And the Commissioner Jackie Lawkin has
10 made it this morning to here to listen as well.
11 And again, I want to just, on behalf of the
12 Congressman, thank you for welcoming this group to
13 Brownsville.

14 MR. REED: Thank you very much. And
15 again, thanks to all of you for your hospitality.
16 Without further ado, I will simply suggest that we
17 get on to business, and please join me in welcoming
18 the Honorable Richard Rominger, Deputy Secretary of
19 Agriculture.

20 MR. ROMINGER: Thank you. First thing I
21 want to do here is, again, welcome Kika De La
22 Garza, a long time member of Congress, former
23 Chairman of the House Ag Committee, and a good
24 friend to agriculture and to all of us and
25 certainly a great representative for South Texas

1 here. Kika, I'd like to ask you if you'd like to
2 make a few comments here before we get started.

3 MR. DE LA GARZA: Thank you very much,
4 Mr. Secretary. Let me add my welcome to the judges
5 welcome and those that will welcome you throughout
6 the day. Appreciate you being here, Mr. Secretary,
7 and I want to echo Congressman Ortiz's words
8 through Denise that we're very happy that you would
9 select South Texas to come.

10 I don't know how much of a problem we
11 have in relation to the issue of Civil Rights, but
12 it's always well that you would come and offer to
13 listen to anyone and everything that might be of
14 interest in your area.

15 I had the pleasure of meeting with
16 several of our black brethren who are in Washington
17 that eventually led to the Secretary listening to
18 their plea and to look into situations which they
19 had presented to him, and we had a -- I had a good
20 listening session and we went through all of the
21 work that -- that I had done with the 1890
22 colleges, with the minority farmers legislation
23 that we passed through our committee since
24 Secretary Espy. So I'm glad that you're here.

25 I want to commend the Secretary through

1 you and you for the work that -- that you have done
2 and the availability of the expertise and some of
3 the financial support through USDA for our area.
4 And we have many minority farmers. We have many
5 farmers that are not well to do. We have a few
6 that prosper. But as all of us know, having to
7 deal with -- with the Lord and the weather is -- is
8 very difficult in deed to begin with. So we
9 appreciate that you would come and -- and listen.

10 When President Lincoln initiated
11 the -- first established the Department of
12 Agriculture, he said he wanted that department to
13 be the people's department and deal directly with
14 the people. And I think that President Lincoln
15 would be happy to know that you're here looking
16 after the needs of the people, and I thank you for
17 coming.

18 MR. ROMINGER: Thank you. I certainly
19 know what you mean about mother nature because our
20 family farm in California is pretty soggy these
21 days, as farms are in other parts in the state.
22 Well, today in USDA Civil Rights compliance has
23 really shifted into overdrive. And I think there's
24 nothing more important than assuring that we treat
25 all people with dignity and with civility.

1 We want to see the Department dedicated
2 to creating an environment in which every customer
3 who comes to a USDA office is treated fairly and
4 effectively and efficiently. And we also want to
5 ensure that we provide the same sort of treatment
6 to our own employees. So with the new year, we
7 intend to focus on how all of USDA manages Civil
8 Rights issues. And toward accomplishing this goal,
9 the Secretary did establish this Civil Rights
10 Action Team. And the first action that this team
11 took was to set up this series of listening
12 sessions.

13 The Secretary also put into effect a
14 moratorium on any foreclosures that were about to
15 take place or were taking place until they could be
16 investigated to see if there was any discrimination
17 in any of those cases. So this team that the
18 Secretary appointed consist of representatives of
19 each of the USDA mission areas. Now, we're doing
20 this series all around the Country and so the team
21 members have divided up some of the meetings, so
22 not all of them are able to make every session, but
23 you have members of the team here today.

24 And this team is going to take a close
25 look at how things are working at all the

1 organizational levels and then recommend ways to
2 solve the problems. So during the January and, in
3 fact, just in two-and-a-half week period, the team
4 will be holding thirteen Civil Rights listening
5 forum on the delivery of USDA programs. And this
6 is the sixth in that series. And the Secretary has
7 attended three of them, and this is my third one.
8 So we're dividing up the responsibility. And
9 either the Secretary or I or both of us will be at
10 all of these listening sessions.

11 All of USDA farm program agencies,
12 including extension, at the headquarters level,
13 state and county levels are going to be involved in
14 this discussion and this examination. So these
15 forums will really serve as a national dialogue on
16 USDA service to minority communities, and provide
17 an opportunity for a minority, socially
18 disadvantaged farmers to discuss their concerns
19 about USDA program delivery.

20 We will also seek to identify some new
21 ways in which we can build partnerships and improve
22 the Department's outreach and service. Three of
23 the listening sessions, three of those thirteen
24 listening sessions are going to be devoted to
25 listening to the concerns of USDA's own employees.

1 So this Civil Rights Action Team is charged with
2 preparing a report, including recommendations no
3 later than mid February. So they're on a really
4 tight time schedule. It's a big task. I want to
5 thank all the members of the -- of this Civil
6 Rights Action Team for the work that they're doing,
7 the time that they're putting in and the big
8 responsibility they have.

9 And the Secretary has said that we are
10 going to hold the senior staff in that USDA
11 personally responsible for fully cooperating with
12 the efforts that is taking place. So the bottom
13 line is, that we have an opportunity to make some
14 positive change in the area of Civil Rights
15 enforcement. We can ensure that USDA is a diverse
16 and civil department to its employees and its
17 customers. So the Secretary and I are devoted to
18 solving the Department's Civil Rights problems.
19 We're committed to bringing about the necessary
20 changes. So thanks again for being here this
21 morning. John, let's get on with the program.

22 MR. BURT: Thank you, Mr. Deputy
23 Secretary. This is a listening session being held
24 so this panel and the action team can hear your
25 comments and concerns. I would like to go over a

1 few things and get the ground rules straight so we
2 can have an opportunity for everyone to make
3 comments.

4 It's going to be difficult to stay on
5 track, so what we're proposing is that we have a
6 maximum of five minutes per speaker. We have a
7 timer to keep track and that will keep us on
8 schedule, because we want to give everyone possible
9 an opportunity to make comments.

10 In the way that we have the time system
11 operating, we have a light system here. When you
12 begin making your comments, the beginning of the
13 session, you'll have a green light on. After four
14 minutes have expired, you have one minute left, the
15 yellow light will come on. Then when the red light
16 comes on, your five minutes is over. If you still
17 have more comments that you would like to make, we
18 have ushers in the back of the room who would
19 escort you to a location where they can take the
20 rest of your comments.

21 Also, we have a mike here in the front
22 where we would like for you to come and give your
23 comments, but we also have a roving mike if you
24 would prefer to have a hand mike to give your
25 comments. Also, we'd like to make it clear that if

1 you prefer to give your comments in Spanish, that's
2 perfectly okay. We have interpreters here. We
3 have head sets here for those who would like to
4 have them. And also we have head sets for those
5 who would like to hear the translation from English
6 to Spanish.

7 I would like to also inform you that we
8 are recording the comments at this meeting. A
9 transcript will be provided to the Secretary of
10 Agriculture and the Civil Rights Action Team. For
11 those who do not get a chance to speak who will
12 prefer to provide written comments, we have comment
13 forms available at the desk where you registered
14 and you can use those to submit written comments.

15 If we get through the list of speakers
16 before the end of the session, then we will open
17 the session up for comments from the floor. But
18 we're going to honor the sign-up sheet of speakers
19 first. This is a meeting to listen to you, and we
20 want -- we will not be able to respond or make
21 comments to any questions during the session.

22 MR. ROMINGER: We may ask some questions.

23 MR. BURT: We may ask some questions, as
24 The deputy Secretary says. I would like to also
25 re-introduce Mr. Tomas Dominguez, who is my Deputy

1 State Conservationist, who will be managing the
2 list and calling on the speakers. When you come to
3 the microphone, we will ask the speakers to please
4 give your name, where you are from. If you are
5 representing a group or organization or if you are
6 speaking as an -- as an individual. So let's begin
7 the session with the first speaker.

8 MR. DOMINGUEZ: All right. Ms. Denise
9 Blanchard.

10 MS. BLANCHARD: I've already said my
11 remarks.

12 MR. DOMINGUEZ: Bonnie Gonzalez.

13 MS. GONZALEZ: Good morning. My name is
14 Bonnie Gonzalez. I'm Chief Executive Officer for
15 the Rio Grande Valley Empowerment Zone, one of the
16 three rural empowerment zones in the nation. And
17 I, too, like Denise, Congressman De La Garza and
18 Judge Hinojosa, want to welcome you to South Texas.

19 I understand that you're charged today
20 with listening to our perspective on program
21 delivery and partnerships across a broad spectrum
22 of programs at USDA. Secretary Rominger, we're
23 very excited about what we perceive to be
24 happening. And I'm just going to share a little
25 bit of that. And I see the green light, so I'm

1 going to try and be as brief as possible.

2 From the empowerment zone perspective, we
3 cover four counties. We cover census tracks in
4 Starr, Cameron, Willacy and Hidalgo. Approximately
5 forty-nine percent unemployment is what your
6 constituency, your customers, are about.

7 Forty-nine percent unemployment, ninety-five
8 percent Hispanic, okay? That's the census tracks
9 and communities that we deal with.

10 We partner with many, many USDA programs.
11 We partner with rural business, rural development,
12 community development, rural housing, conservation
13 service, extension service, we partner with all of
14 you across the board. I can tell you that what we
15 have witnessed has been USDA moving from outside
16 the box in the development of new partnerships
17 across the -- the spectrum as we look at partnering
18 and funding between EDA, USDA, EPA, private
19 sources. So for us on the outside looking in, it's
20 been a very positive experience.

21 I want to tell you that your
22 constituents, your customers, are in desperate
23 need of exactly what is taking place here today.
24 Your constituents come to you with many needs:
25 from -- from health to environment to water to

1 housing to infrastructure. And what we have found
2 at the empowerment zone is that you've been very
3 ready and willing to listen. On that note, thank
4 you very much.

5 MR. ROMINGER: Thank you.

6 MR. DOMINGUEZ: Next in line is Ed Vela.

7 MR. VELA: Good morning, gentlemen,
8 ladies. My name is Ed Vela. I'm with the
9 University of Texas-Pan American in Edinburg. And
10 I'm with the center for entrepreneurship and
11 economic development with the University. We
12 primarily deal with the communities, and we target
13 or we have been working very diligently with
14 displaced farm workers and displaced farmers in the
15 colonias.

16 One of the things -- one of the
17 projects that we have done in the past is an
18 entrepreneurial skills training program in the
19 colonias. And we have found many people with
20 basic skills that are marketable, but unfortunately
21 they are not able to pursue a business in their
22 skills because they do not have the information.
23 We have provided these courses in the past. We
24 follow-up with -- with the small business
25 development center, one to one council. And these

1 people prepare -- help them prepare a business plan
2 and a loan application. We work with the banks.
3 The banks have set up a fund for minor loans, and
4 these people have been able to borrow money from
5 these banks.

6 And consequently, we have many success
7 stories in -- in the Cameron Park, Progreso and
8 Las Milpas colonias. My reason for being here is
9 we need to continue this project, this program,
10 because there's a great need for it. And one of
11 the things that we would like to ask the USDA is to
12 get involved with us in this project.

13 Mrs. Raquel Tienda (ph) from Las Milpas
14 is supposed to be here and I don't know if she is
15 or not. I -- we missed connections this morning
16 and she was supposed to speak. She is one of our
17 success stories. But there's a great need in the
18 colonias for this type of project. These people
19 will -- able to go into business and provide for
20 their families, get out of the welfare rut and
21 become productive citizens of our Country. And is
22 there any questions regarding this? If not, thank
23 you very much.

24 MR. BURT: Thank you, sir. Thank you
25 very much.

1 MR. DOMINGUEZ: Jose Dolier.

2 MR. DOLIER: Good morning. My name is
3 Jose Dolier. I come before you as President of
4 the South Texas Association of Soil and Water
5 Conservation Districts, as chairperson for the Rio
6 Bravo Resource Conservation and Development, and as
7 an individual rancher. These two groups which I
8 mentioned to you before and I am here representing,
9 along with members of the State Board of Soil And
10 water Conservation Districts and the National
11 Organization of Hispanic employees of the NRCS got
12 together and had a brainstorming session.

13 We decided to come up with -- with
14 something that Mr. Rominger mentioned just a minute
15 ago, and that was an outreach program. After
16 securing funding from the USDA regional office here
17 in Texas, we decided we would conduct a land user
18 survey. The main question being: What do you need
19 from USDA? What we found out was -- was three
20 things: that there's a need for more technical
21 assistance in South Texas. It seems that we're the
22 last to get the technical assistance down here. It
23 kind of trickles down.

24 As an example, my home county, Zapata
25 County, recently got a range conservationist

1 representing three counties in South Texas, and I
2 believe that was budgeted over a year ago. Why
3 were we last? The information dissemination on
4 USDA programs is sorely lacking in South Texas. As
5 evidence of that, in Zapata County, my home County,
6 there is zero percent of the crop land under any
7 FSA program. Again, there is a shortcoming there.

8 Our third concern was more education on
9 conservation programs. SWCD and RCND, the Rio
10 Bravo RCND, we're working on that. This land user
11 survey put out some additional information. We're
12 at -- we're answering a lot of questions that were
13 raised by this survey. One of the main concerns
14 that -- that I get when I -- when I speak with the
15 farmers and ranchers that I'm representing here
16 today is the LTA's, the long-term agreements,
17 that -- that go from five to ten years -- you can
18 extend them to ten years -- do not fit some of the
19 smaller ranchers and farmers.

20 There are farmers and ranchers that
21 want to conduct a -- a short-term agreement.
22 They want to do it in one or two years. The
23 plots of land are smaller and I think they would
24 be more effectively served by short term.

25 Another -- another concern that we do

1 have from some of the farmers and ranchers is one
2 hundred percent payment that they need to make on
3 cost share programs can really put them in a bind
4 before the -- the cost share is disbursed to them.
5 They usually end up going to banks or getting to
6 some financial straits.

7 Now, one more concern we have down here
8 in South Texas now that we have a range
9 conservationist is the grazing lands initiative.
10 We're totally in the dark about that. I recently
11 got some information in the mail just recently
12 and -- and we're going to start working on that.
13 We -- we feel that -- that -- again, we may have
14 been neglected and maybe it's our fault. I don't
15 know. But the information is not getting into the
16 right hands in South Texas.

17 NRCS needs to expand in South Texas.
18 There's a lot of work to do. RCND -- the Rio Bravo
19 RCND has conducted some projects in Zapata County
20 which has brought water to parts of the county that
21 did not have water. It has also provided a
22 communications system through a phone company out
23 of Kerrville that allows you to have a phone on a
24 ranch at reasonable rates. All these were done
25 through RCND. RCND has been -- has a successful

1 story in South Texas.

2 Still with the efforts RCND, we feel they
3 brought us into the twentieth century.
4 Unfortunately, we're about to go into the
5 twenty-first century. So it's a bit late. Also, I
6 love being down here. This is a -- this is a
7 beautiful place. Brownsville is a very historical
8 town. But we felt this thing was almost programmed
9 for failure. We were told that Atlanta had over
10 four hundred people. I think we maybe have a
11 fourth of that here. We would've liked to have
12 seen this thing done in the middle of the week in
13 the middle of South Texas. We love being here, and
14 we especially love having you people here. And I
15 will be submitting some additional comments to you
16 in writing. Thank you. Any questions?

17 MR. REED: Would you like for us to come
18 back next week?

19 MR. BURT: Thank you very much.

20 MR. DOMINGUEZ: Jose, you may want to
21 come back. Brasilio Villarreal, Junior, I think
22 you have some comments.

23 MR. DOLIER: Okay. Yes, I'll do that.
24 Let me see if I can find it. Brasilio Villarreal,
25 Jr., from Starr County could not be here today, and

1 he wrote out these comments and wanted me to read
2 them to you. He is one of my constituents in the
3 South Texas area.

4 I am writing this letter because I was
5 unable to attend your conference. First, I believe
6 that if you are serious about hearing concerns of
7 minority farmers, you would either make the
8 conference in a more central location like McAllen
9 or visit the four-county area of Starr, Hidalgo,
10 Cameron and Willacy, thereby allowing you a better
11 understanding of the situation.

12 Second, I do not understand why when
13 counties are declared disaster areas, the
14 government only gives loans to those people who
15 cannot get a loan from the bank. I believe that
16 all farmers who cannot get a loan from the
17 bank -- I believe that all farmers, especially
18 minority, should be allowed to qualify for these
19 loans. If anybody can pay these loans, it is
20 farmers that are solvent and you should not punish
21 people for success.

22 Third, our County has been declared a
23 disaster area two out of the last three years, and
24 yet our federal disaster crop insurance premiums
25 keep getting higher and our insured yield keep

1 getting lower. I believe that the federal crop
2 insurance should give us a moratorium on lowering
3 yields and increasing premiums when our counties
4 are declared disaster areas. In conclusion, I
5 started farming three years ago and when I look
6 around, farmers are becoming an endangered species
7 that may become extinct if measures are not taken.
8 Brasilio Villarreal, Jr. Thank you.

9 MR. BURT: Thank you.

10 MR. DOMINGUEZ: Tutor Yulhorn (ph).

11 MR. YULHORN: Good morning. My name is
12 Tutor Yulhorn, and I'm a partner in and manager of
13 a thirty-five-hundred-acre family farming operation
14 with six locations in Cameron Cannot. Our primary
15 crops are sugar cane, cotton and sorghum. I must
16 honestly tell you that upon learning of this
17 hearing, I quickly rationalized several excuses as
18 to why I would not be able to interrupt my Saturday
19 morning to testify on behalf of the USDA NRCS.

20 However, the longer I thought about my
21 precious Saturday morning, the more guilty my
22 conscience began to feel. How can I not publicly
23 express my support for the NRCS when whenever I had
24 a problem or requested technical or engineering
25 assistance from their office, I have never

1 hesitated to solicit their help. The NRCS staff
2 have always responded to my request for assistance
3 in a prompt and professional manner.

4 I'm the third generation of my family to
5 work closely with the NRCS to improve our farmland.
6 Both my father and grandfather were honored by the
7 Southmost Conservation District for their efforts
8 that improving and conserving farmland in this
9 county. I've also worked closely with the local
10 NRCS over the past fourteen years on projects that
11 include land leveling and irrigation pipelines to
12 improve our efficiency in the use of irrigation
13 water, subsurface tile draining systems to improve
14 the productivity of the land and surface drainage
15 systems whose goals are not only to provide surface
16 drainage, but also to enhance the quality of
17 surface run-off water.

18 When taken individually, every land
19 leveling project, irrigation project or other NRCS
20 project may seem like it has a small impact.
21 However, after decades of steady implementations,
22 these small projects number in the thousands and
23 can have a significant impact on not only the
24 agricultural landscape of an area, but the urban as
25 well.

1 For example, you may be aware that this
2 area of Texas is currently experiencing a severe
3 drought. The reservoirs on the Rio Grande that
4 supply both irrigation and municipal water are at
5 historically low levels. Water for irrigation is
6 severely limited and many municipalities have had
7 to take -- have had to take nontraditional
8 arrangements to meet their loan water needs.

9 I shutter to think how much more severe
10 our water situation would be without decades of
11 land leveling and irrigation pipeline projects
12 designed by the NRCS to conserve irrigation water.
13 The magnitude of this agency's impact on this area
14 of South Texas in the nation is immeasurable. Many
15 may see the NRCS as a regulatory agency. I, and
16 countless other farmers around the country see them
17 as a partner and advocate for maintaining and
18 improving the quality of one of our nation's
19 greatest natural resources, farm land. Thank you
20 very much for the opportunity to speak to you
21 today.

22 MR. BURT: Thank you very much.

23 MR. DOMINGUEZ: Luis Villarreal.

24 MR. VILLARREAL: Good morning. My name
25 is Luis Villarreal from Zapata County. I represent

1 the Highway 16 East Water District. I reside
2 within the Zapata County WCID Highway 16 East Water
3 District. Our situation is unique in that this
4 part of Zapata County has little or no water. The
5 soils rescinding and do not hold water. Thus, no
6 earthen parks, ponds are available. Underground
7 water wells are too deep, too poor, quality and low
8 yield.

9 In March of 1987, several landowners went
10 to the Rio Bravo RCND council with this problem.
11 Alternatives were discussed. The best -- the best
12 solution was to farm a water district and buy water
13 from the County water works. RCND helped identify
14 landowners, ranch locations and secure funding for
15 this -- for the district. A seven hundred and
16 sixty thousand dollar bond issue from the Texas
17 Water Development Board and backed by property
18 taxes was passed to finance the project on a
19 ten-year loan.

20 Initially, the district comprised of
21 forty-five thousand acres as construction began.
22 Others joined -- others joined and with private
23 financing and district -- the district expanded to
24 include a hundred thousand acres and a hundred and
25 fifty customers; ninety percent of which are either

1 Hispanic, women or small landowners. Currently, we
2 are looking at the possibility of including an
3 additional sixty thousand acres.

4 The district began operations in 1991
5 and since then, the district's agriculture
6 operations have greatly improved. Thanks to a
7 great effort between local people, local county
8 government, state government and -- and Rio Bravo
9 RCND. This project came to a successful
10 conclusion benefiting many people along the way. I
11 ask you for -- to consider an adequate funding for
12 the -- for RCND to be able to carry out this
13 nation. Thank you for allowing me a few minutes to
14 present my comment.

15 MR. ROMINGER: Thank you.

16 MR. BURT: Thank you.

17 MR. DOMINGUEZ: Gordon Hill.

18 MR. HILL: My name is Gordon Hill. I
19 represent Bayview Irrigation District from Bayview,
20 Texas. The board of directors of Bayview
21 Irrigation District became aware of a conservation
22 need because of the drought in 1991. The board of
23 directors adopted this plan with two items: first,
24 that we were going to convert our district from
25 opening irrigation to poly-pipe. And the second

1 item was, is to meter all the water that was being
2 sold in the district.

3 These two things took five years and we
4 completed them in January of 1996. As of today, we
5 have converted ninety-eight percent of our
6 irrigation district to poly-pipe and all water that
7 was sold in -- by the acre foot sold in the
8 district. We reduced our usage by forty-three
9 percent last year. We saved eight thousand acre
10 feet of water.

11 Municipales in the Rio Grande Valley own
12 about eleven percent of all the water. The
13 irrigation districts own the rest. That's over a
14 million four hundred thousand acre feet of water.
15 Bayview is eight thousand and twelve acres. We
16 have two hundred and thirty thousand acres under
17 agricultural production in the Rio Grande Valley.
18 It costs us over a hundred thousand dollars. It
19 will take over four million dollars to convert the
20 rest of the Valley to conserve water.

21 By the year 2000, three years from now,
22 the Texas Development Board has anticipated the
23 growth of the Rio Grande Valley to increase by two
24 hundred and fifty-six thousand people. They
25 anticipate the demand of fifty-six thousand acre

1 feet increase. The irrigation at the same time is
2 going to increase its demand by ninety-two thousand
3 acre feet.

4 I guess the question is: Where is the
5 water going to come from? Projections show by the
6 year 2000 that the demand on the entire Rio Grande
7 basin will be one million five hundred thousand
8 acre feet annually. During this drought from 1992
9 to 1996, the end flows were only a million three
10 hundred thousand acre feet annually. We have a two
11 hundred thousand deficit. It clearly shows where
12 the -- there's not going to be sufficient water.

13 If the lower Rio Grande Valley does not
14 take stringent -- I lost my place -- stringent
15 conservation efforts in the Valley, it's going to
16 have a major impact on the population growth, the
17 industrial and agriculture needs of the Valley.
18 Minorities make up ninety percent of all farming
19 and ranching in the Rio Grande Valley. Without the
20 water and conservation, industrial and growth of
21 cities, there will be not any (sic).

22 The -- the USDA needs to help ag -- the
23 ag, the irrigation districts. If you're a
24 municipality, you can go out and get five hundred
25 thousand dollar grants to put in a pipeline to

1 start up a rural area. Irrigation district cannot
2 get these. New rules need to be made up so you can
3 help the agricultural industry, not individual
4 farmers, but irrigation districts to help to
5 conserve and -- and to conserve this water.
6 Because if this is not done, we will shortly run
7 out of water. There will be no farming. All you
8 will have is high unemployment. And I thank you
9 for you-all's time.

10 MR. ROMINGER: Thank you.

11 MR. DOMINGUEZ: John Smith, III.

12 MR. SMITH: Good morning. My name is
13 John Smith, III. I serve as field coordinator for
14 the small farm outreach training tape assistance
15 project here in the State of Texas. We're in
16 partnership with Natural Resource Conservation, our
17 new partner, and the Farm Service Agency of Texas.

18 The program is currently implementing in
19 over sixteen counties. We actually serving in a
20 hundred and sixteen FMHA -- FSA bar in the State of
21 Texas. We have net worth of about six point two
22 million dollars. I'm here today to share -- first
23 of all, I'd like to thank the listening team for
24 making its great voice to come down to South Texas
25 to lend a listening ear to the needs of small

1 farmers here in Texas because at the crux of the
2 program, we are state hold to small farmers and
3 minority farmers here in the State of Texas.

4 I'm here to offer some comments in
5 reference to some success, some opportunities and
6 some recommendations to give back to the listening
7 team to take back for further review. I'd like to
8 start out by just taking a look at some success,
9 some things that have actually taken place within
10 this project that's been implemented here. We've
11 taken situations where there have been several
12 complaints that have actually been called and
13 filed within our office, which actually has been
14 handled right there within the local level.

15 For example, in West Texas we had a
16 farmer who had a situation to where he was in a
17 situation where he had -- situation where he was
18 foreclosed on his land. With -- at that meeting
19 we brought in several individuals from all facets
20 of USDA, from Soil Conservation Service, the
21 Extension Service and also the, at that time, the
22 Farm Home Administration Service, to sit down to
23 work out a -- a measurable way of dealing with the
24 situation. And as a result of that, that farmer is
25 actually back at his operation and in -- in full

1 operation at this point. And I think that's
2 one -- one example of that.

3 We also had some situations where county
4 officials actually have to be responsible for their
5 actions. For example, we had a -- a supervisor
6 actually take an individual's plan and throw it in
7 the trash can. Upon us identifying that this
8 situation had taken place before it got out about
9 in the world about what had actually happened, we
10 had taken that individual and went back to the
11 office to sit down to discuss this situation in
12 further.

13 Also add situations to where an
14 individual that we actually helped out as well had
15 a situation where a guaranteed loan that was
16 actually being applied -- applied for to Farmers
17 Home Administration at that time, and that
18 individual from the county office actually had
19 taken the situation where we found out later that
20 he was -- he was actually going in and changing the
21 outcome of the loan at the guaranteed end. In
22 other words, influencing the banker to also deny
23 the loan. But however, as a result of the program
24 of the -- the outreach program, we have been able
25 to step in and take part in that effort and try to

1 change a disastrous situation to a good situation.

2 Some recommendations that I would like to
3 offer as far as some success to deal with these
4 things, I think we need to revisit, take another
5 look at accountability of actions of individuals.
6 We need to look at some means of employ -- some
7 means which need to be employed to achieve
8 accountability; look at some expectations on what
9 we expect from those offices and end programs; we
10 need to look at some policies which govern
11 accountability and look at the ethics of
12 accountability as well. Thank you.

13 MR. CARRICKER: Mr. Smith?

14 MR. SMITH: Yes, sir.

15 MR. CARRICKER: Could you tell me, the
16 West Texas farmers pointed out that the session in
17 which you sat down and worked out his problems with
18 NRCS and FMHA at that time, was that done at the
19 auspices of the mediation program at Texas Tech
20 University or outside of that?

21 MR. SMITH: It was outside of it.
22 Initially, what had happened the mediation team had
23 reviewed it. But upon further review and
24 assistance that had taken place, we had taken a
25 farm management marketing specialist and also just

1 the team effort. I recall the time when -- when we
2 had the USDA team building session that was just
3 thirty miles west of here in McAllen, Texas where
4 we had that session there. We were able to shake
5 hands and network and actually sit down and work
6 with the farmer to rework the situation. So -- to
7 answer your question. Now, that --

8 MR. CARRICKER: Very good. Thank you.

9 MR. BURT: Thank you.

10 MR. DOMINGUEZ: Jose Noe Martinez.

11 MR. MARTINEZ: Good morning. My name
12 Jose Noe Martinez. I'm from Duval County, from a
13 little community called Concepcion. We have -- in
14 Concepcion, we have a little post office, two
15 grocery stores and a gas station. And I live in a
16 suburb called Santo Domingo. And I'm the only one
17 there.

18 I like to start off by saying that we are
19 living in the land that our forefathers perceived
20 us land grants -- Spanish land grants. And through
21 the years as the generations grow, we have
22 subdivided this land. Even though at the beginning
23 was a lot of acres, but now we're all small
24 farmers. We live there. And our concern is to
25 conserve our natural resources. But we -- we don't

1 stand a chance in trying to get some practices
2 applied. And even though there is a cost share of
3 fifty percent, where is the other fifty coming
4 from? If we go to the banker, he says, No, we
5 can't lend you because you don't -- you're not big
6 enough. If we go to FMHA, they give us a pamphlet
7 about one-inch thick to fill out that it takes two
8 Philadelphia lawyers to fill it out. And then
9 we're up the creek without a paddles.

10 Okay. If another -- my neighbor, who has
11 ten thousand acres, goes to FMHA, he has no
12 problems. He gets somebody from the office to help
13 him out while I have to go look for somebody to
14 help me fill out my forms when it could be made so
15 easy, like the banker does. A financial statement.
16 How much money I want and how am I going to pay it
17 back? That's all you need to borrow money. You
18 don't need to know how if I drink coffee in the
19 morning and a coke at night and what kind of
20 dresses -- what I wear, where I buy it? All you
21 need is how we make a living.

22 This is -- it is very hard for a
23 small farmer or rancher to acquire monies to
24 conserve -- I mean, to apply some conservation
25 practices. Say that I own two hundred acres.

1 And I -- and I go and apply and I get a fifty acre
2 allotment. And how am I going to get a tractor or
3 a contractor to come out there and do my fifty
4 acres? And, you know, the -- the way they had it
5 set up is so many dollars or fifty percent of the
6 cost not to exceed so many dollars. Well, who in
7 the heck is going to move to -- for fifty acres and
8 give me the same price that my neighbor who has ten
9 thousand acres who's going to do five hundred
10 acres? I -- there's no way to compete.

11 We have tried to band together to where
12 the people that give us to the ACP program, you
13 know, group them, fifty here, twenty-five there,
14 but within the same area. But it hasn't worked out
15 because it is on a first-come first-serve basis.
16 So I feel like when the programs that you-all have
17 are good. And when they leave Washington in the
18 big golden train, they come down full of money,
19 full of hope for us. But once they get to the
20 Nueces River, all we get is the engine that tells
21 us what their program is, and the caboose says
22 we're out of money. Thank you very much.

23 MR. BURT: Thank you, sir.

24 MR. DOMINGUEZ: Okay. Victor Vera.

25 MR. VERA: Good morning, ladies and

1 gentlemen. My name is Victor Vera, and I am the
2 chairman for the FHA in Duval. I'm a neighbor of
3 Mr. Martinez, and I'm going to inform you that the
4 community is without any cards. Both of us left,
5 and we are the major and assistant.

6 Anyway, my comments are very similar to
7 Mr. Martinez. First, I would have a question for
8 the Deputies, see if you can answer it for me so I
9 can start with my comments. Give me the definition
10 that comes from Washington for minorities.

11 MR. BURT: Sir, we're not being -- we
12 don't have time to go into questions --

13 MR. VERA: It was just a short comment.

14 MR. BURT: We don't have time for that.

15 MR. VERA: Okay. See, the majority of
16 the farmers in our area, including me, or the
17 question of minority is ethnic group, which it has
18 always been. But that's talking about ethnic
19 group. Talking about farmers and ranchers, the
20 minority is the people with a thousand, ten
21 thousand, twenty thousand acres. Because in our
22 area, there is maybe ninety to one of the majority
23 will be the people with small farms or -- or
24 ranchers.

25 So even though when it comes from

1 Washington, the rule is or the -- to try to help
2 the minorities. So we believe that by helping
3 minorities, we're going to help little farmers and
4 it is not. Because when it gets there, for us to
5 help a little farmer, he got to qualify to the rule
6 that come down from Washington that says you got to
7 have so many acres before you qualify. So I think
8 that rule, my opinion would be that it should
9 change to where it if we're going to help the small
10 farmer, then we should help the small farmer
11 without any rules that would, quote, for you to get
12 the help, you got to have this, got so much land
13 and have so much money.

14 So I hope somebody listens to that
15 because in our area, like I said, ninety percent of
16 the small farmers or the minority of the ethic
17 group, but are the majority of the farmers and the
18 same thing with ranchers. That's why I asked that
19 question.

20 The other thing I wanted to bring about
21 is very much Mr. Martinez already took it off my
22 hands, is that there -- there should be a way to
23 facilitate the monies to the little farmer that
24 cannot afford to come up with the money when he
25 makes a conservation practice, because when he goes

1 to the bank he won't be able to get the money. And
2 if he goes the other route, he is going to spend
3 more money just to get the forms. So I hope
4 you-all listen upstairs and -- and make a change on
5 that. And, I guess, I yield the rest of my time.
6 Thank you very much.

7 MR. BURT: Thank you, sir. Thank you
8 very much.

9 MR. ROMINGER: I would just say that we
10 are here to listen to anyone who thinks they have
11 been treated unfairly, whether -- even if you are
12 the majority in the area here. If you think you
13 haven't been treated right by USDA, we want to hear
14 about it.

15 MR. BURT: Thank you, sir.

16 MR. DOMINGUEZ: Dionicio Valdez.

17 MR. VALDEZ: Good morning. These
18 comments I want to make are kind of echoing the
19 fact the two speakers before me. You just
20 mentioned, Deputy Secretary, of being treated
21 unfairly down here. Down here you've been told the
22 Hispanics present ninety-five percent of the
23 population.

24 We haven't been treated unfairly in most
25 instances. We've been treated fairly most

1 instances. What has happened down here is what you
2 have been told already, the small family farmer is
3 becoming an endangered species. We have had a
4 number of disasters in this area since 1991 that
5 affected a small group of people. But to that
6 small group, it is a major disaster. You get the
7 disasters that are affecting like California right
8 now major -- they're affecting a large number of
9 people, get national attention. A small disaster,
10 say the big army worm outbreak in 1995, white fly
11 outbreak 1991, affect the Rio Grande Valley, affect
12 the small number of cotton farmers, doesn't get
13 much attention.

14 These farmers, myself included, are still
15 trying to farm, make a living, repay money that we
16 borrowed. We're not asking for grants. We are not
17 asking for freebies. We are asking for a way
18 through the U.S. Government, through FHA, FSA,
19 anyone who is willing to work with the farmer who's
20 gone through these disasters, started in debt,
21 still in debt, still wants to farm, can show
22 methods of repayment, can show he's willing to
23 work, shows he knows how to farm and still is able
24 to fight and live through these disasters.

25 Down here in the Valley it's kind of

1 funny. We need one good year and we all up back to
2 level. We haven't had that good year. Because you
3 get in debt, you go to the banker, well, he can't
4 lend you any money because you're in debt from 1995
5 or you're in debt from 1991. You go to the Farmers
6 Home Administration, they treat you the same way.
7 They want to know how much you owe. Well, we can't
8 lend you very much money. You have a packet that's
9 very thick, takes a long time to fill out. They
10 all looking at the fact that you had a disaster,
11 you're in debt, we can't lend you any more.

12 They all want you -- they all want to get
13 repaid within two, three years. No one is looking
14 at someone who wants to buy some land, wants to do
15 something over long period of time, think about the
16 long term of the future and stay in the farming
17 business. At one point a few years ago I qualified
18 for an SBA loan. It took me about a week. I
19 qualified under Federal Disaster Declaration,
20 everything went through. They were getting ready
21 to cut me a check. This was poured out over seven
22 years, it's going to be repaid. I stressed the
23 repayment. All flowed. They found out my major
24 business was crop production. I did not qualify.
25 Because I'm a producer of crops, I was

1 discriminated against. They told me go to Farmers
2 Home. I did. They wanted to take over my whole
3 operation. I don't want that. I was very fine
4 with my banker. Everything was good. I had a
5 disaster. We spent a lot of money. We didn't make
6 any money.. I qualified under SBA rules, but SBA
7 will not lend money to crop to a producing farmer.

8 I wish there will be a program that
9 would help a farmer that produces crops on a
10 longer term. Down here in the Valley you want
11 someone to pay you back in two years. Well, if you
12 have back to back disasters, you can't pay back in
13 two years. You can't show repayment with no cash
14 flow, so nobody wants to help you. We are trying
15 very hard to work through these disasters, and the
16 farmers here in the Valley are very good group. We
17 like to repay our loans. We're not asking for
18 handies -- for giveouts, for freebies. We just
19 asking for someone to work with us, that will make
20 thinks us cash flow for us so we can start living
21 so we won't become an endangered species.

22 And if you-all cannot do anything on
23 what's been told to you by myself and two other
24 speakers and the kind of the financing part of
25 farming in our disasters, please forward it to

1 someone who can and let them come down here and
2 help, not only the minority farmers, the Hispanic
3 farmers or anyone in minority, but everyone.
4 Because when a disaster hits, it don't care about
5 race, color, creed or anything. It hits everyone.
6 Thank you for your time.

7 MR. BURT: Thank you, sir. Thank you
8 very much. Tomas.

9 MR. DOMINGUEZ: John Meyers.

10 MR. MEYERS: Mr. Secretary, thank you for
11 the opportunity. Thank you for putting together
12 the council of people that can hear the concerns
13 that those of us in the Rio Grande Valley might
14 have that the USDA might make some difference in.
15 And thanks to all of you, ladies and gentlemen, for
16 the opportunity to be heard.

17 I'm the president of a nonprofit
18 organization that is newly formed in the Rio Grande
19 Valley. And our sole purpose will be three fold.
20 I should not call it so, but we're trying to
21 combine them altogether. There is a way that the
22 farmer can be relieved of some of his burden by
23 being given a tax benefit for his donation. That
24 product can then be used to lessen the burden of
25 government and to relieve poverty, not only in the

1 Rio Grande Valley, but in the great State of Texas
2 and possibly in to other parts of the Country.

3 Our projected first year
4 production -- what we intend to do is put together
5 state prison harvesters and county harvesters,
6 possibly we would like to talk to you about the
7 gleaning project of the USDA and to the Secretary,
8 utilizing free labor to harvest product, give the
9 farmer a tax benefit, process the product at a
10 local canner, canning in other words, shelf stable,
11 ready to eat and distribute it to food banks and
12 prison systems. Thereby relieving poverty and
13 lessening the burden of government.

14 The plan sounds very simply. It is not.
15 Our first year projected budget is over two million
16 dollars. This process will cost, and certainly we
17 feel that the cost will make it worth while when we
18 are able to relieve poverty and lessen the burden
19 of government. As an organization president, I am
20 quite leery of the future. We are not sure of what
21 we will need, what we will accomplish, but our
22 goals are honest and that we attempt to help those
23 who can't help themselves, to lessen the burden of
24 government and to tie this altogether to benefiting
25 the farmer with a tax benefit. That, by the way,

1 is five years holdable.

2 Farmer has terrible a year disaster like
3 we've just heard explained, if he has consumable
4 crop and donates that crop, then for five years he
5 can hold his tax benefit. Say, in five years he
6 has a boom year, making a lot of money. What he
7 can do instead of paying taxes is turn that tax
8 benefit in. And his good year becomes an even
9 better year. So there are some programs hopefully
10 like this that we can put together, not only in our
11 part of the United States, but in other parts of
12 the Country in high production areas.

13 We're very lucky in the Valley that we
14 have two growing seasons. And we're one of the few
15 parts of the United States that have two production
16 seasons. But the huge vast amount of waste to
17 quote Mr. Bill Weaks, the president of the Texas
18 Produce Association in endorsing this program, he
19 says there is a huge amount of waste. And that
20 waste to me, while we all stand around scratch our
21 heads about welfare dollars, just doesn't seem
22 sensible to me. There's got to be some way that we
23 can put together this vast excess waste salvageable
24 product, consumable product and help ourselves as
25 taxpayers by lessening the burden of government.

1 In closing, I'd like to introduce the two
2 other board members of the organization to clarify
3 for everyone that minority concerns are a concern
4 for us as well, and just to introduce them. First,
5 let me introduce Harold Good. He is our first vice
6 president. And Terry Robinson is the second vice
7 president of this organization. So our goal in
8 coming here today was to interest any of you on
9 this panel in trying to assist us, not only in the
10 way of funding, but in the way of development and
11 coordination for this effort.

12 I appreciate very much your time. Let me
13 close by saying we do not intend to stay in this
14 production area along with this project. We hope
15 to grow to other areas of the country and redeem
16 ourselves of this terrible crime of wastefulness.
17 Thanks for your time.

18 MR. BURT: Thank you.

19 MR. ROMINGER: Thank you. I want to
20 compliment you for the work you're doing, and I
21 know if Secretary Glickman was here that he would
22 want to do that as well because he has made this
23 one of his priority areas, to the gleaning project,
24 getting some of this food that would otherwise go
25 to waste to people that can use it. And one of the

1 things that gave this a little boost this past year
2 was the fact that USDA supported a push to get
3 Congress to pass and the President to sign a Good
4 Samaritan Law which relieves liability on farmers
5 who allow people to come onto their farm to harvest
6 some of these crops.

7 MR. MEYERS: May I please add, farmers
8 listen real close to that because the liability
9 question is a real question for our organization.
10 But this Good Samaritan Acts means if you allow
11 someone onto your property as a volunteer of a
12 nonprofit organization, you are protected by law
13 from any injuries on that property. I really
14 appreciate that comment because it is a comment
15 we -- we try to make to the farmers, and
16 it's -- it's good to hear it made from the top.
17 Thank you for your time.

18 MR. ROMINGER: Thank you.

19 MR. BURT: Thank you, sir.

20 MR. DOMINGUEZ: Adolfo Villanueva.

21 MR. VILLANUEVA: Mr. Committee Members,
22 thank you for coming down to the Rio Grande Valley.
23 I represent myself. My name is Adolfo Villanueva.
24 I have been entailed in farming for the last ten
25 years. I'm a crop insurance agent. I'm very

1 familiar with the foot work you have heard. A few
2 comments about the crop insurance end of farm
3 industry of it.

4 It is a program that I have seen that has
5 been affectively working in our farming general
6 communities. Unfortunately, as you have heard the
7 comments, we have been running through disastrous
8 conditions from the years of '89 through '96. The
9 crop insurance program is a good program.
10 Unfortunately, the way it is designed, we are being
11 penalized for conditions that are out of the
12 control of the farming community; rates are
13 increásingly higher; guarantees are shrinking.
14 Everybody that is here that is in farming industry
15 probably has had some association with crop
16 insurance and can verify to what I'm saying here
17 and stating.

18 I would like to remind you if you
19 are listening, some of these programs are being
20 implemented, they're being directed, they're
21 being addressed and I appreciate and I thank you
22 for -- for at least listening on that end of it.
23 But because we live in the Rio Grande Valley, many
24 times programs are approved but they're targeted
25 for the Midwest area where the farming industry

1 starts planting dates in March -- late March and
2 early April. Our plant date start on February 1st.

3 To give you an example, we have a very
4 good policy called a CRC policy. It has been
5 implemented. It has been approved and the
6 Midwest states have been running for a year. The
7 sales closing date for that policy is January the
8 15th. It is still not approved to be running even
9 though -- technically, it is approved, but we're in
10 litigation on exactly how it's going to run.

11 As an insurance agent, I'm supposed to
12 promote and allow the farmers the opportunity to
13 look at this product, which is a very good product
14 which will help the financing of the farming
15 industry, there is more guaranteed source which is
16 an option to regular MPCCI, which has been the only
17 option that had up to date. But by the time they
18 approve it it be too late for them to decide
19 whether they would like to use that product
20 compared to the MPCCI.

21 The limited resources that we have
22 is -- are very limited. If you look at the MPCCI
23 product, it is not a product that guarantees a
24 farmer he will make any money. All it is doing is
25 directing, basically, the revenue back to them that

1 they have already invested. The farming industry
2 down here is shrinking very fast. I am a witness
3 to several entities that are going through
4 bankruptcy proceedings as of today, carry overs
5 from losses that have transpired over the '91 white
6 fly, the boweavel (ph) eradication program, the
7 drought conditions. The yields I have on my
8 records, and I have documentation to prove this.
9 From the years of '81 through '89, we had
10 substantial beneficiary years, which have been very
11 good. In dry land conditions. Good farming
12 records. From the years of '89 through '96, you
13 just see how, through these data bases, the yield
14 averages have just shrunk, not because of farmers
15 are bad farmers, not because they are not paying
16 attention to what they're doing. There are
17 conditions that are out of their control. Even if
18 you're farming in an irrigated practice, the
19 conditions that are affecting the soil conditions.

20 We have many members here from the water
21 districts that can verify the conditions of water
22 availabilities. Yet today the farmers -- I have
23 spent the last five days working twelve-hours a day
24 trying to address the situations on one-to-one
25 basis to the farmers. I am at the bottom of the

1 totem pole. I know what the bottom line figures
2 are for a lot of these gentlemen that are trying to
3 stay in this farming community. And I would like
4 just to remind you that if we do not take action on
5 a timely basis, that you could help us in the Rio
6 Grande Valley. We do produce over three hundred
7 thousand acres of cotton down here. We do produce
8 the first cotton that comes off in the United
9 States.

10 But many times when these programs are
11 implemented or approved or they're deciding what to
12 do, it is too late for us. The USDA benefits, by
13 the time they can recognize what can work or what
14 cannot work, whether it be through FHA, many times
15 it is well into the growing season. And so after
16 February 1st, we've already started planting. Yet
17 programs are not approved until mid part of the
18 season, which are directed for the Midwest parts of
19 the country. I just want to thank you for allowing
20 me to speak. I thank you for coming here. If you
21 do have any other questions as far as crop
22 insurance, how they work, I make myself available.
23 Thank you.

24 MR. BURT: Thank you, sir.

25 MR. ROMINGER: Thank you. We do realize

1 that we need to continue improving crop insurance
2 program. It has been a good program, but it does
3 need continual updating. We think it's even more
4 important now since Congress has changed the farm
5 program, and we don't have the price support
6 programs that we used to have. Crop insurance is
7 going to be even more important.

8 So we're working hard to improve that
9 program. We know we have problems with different
10 parts of the Country where the growing seasons are
11 different and the dates don't always fit right, so
12 we're trying to look at those. We also have to
13 operate the program under the -- under the
14 constraints that Congress puts in the law, and one
15 of those is that we can only have a certain level
16 of loss ratio. In other words, the premiums have
17 to pay for the program and we look at the program
18 nation wide. So we do have some constraints to
19 work within, but we're doing our best to improve
20 that crop insurance program.

21 MR. BURT: Thank you, sir. Next speaker.

22 MR. DOMINGUEZ: Ray Pruett.

23 MR. PRUETT: Good morning, Mr. Secretary,
24 ladies and gentlemen. I'm Ray Pruett, executive
25 vice president of Texas Citrus Mutual, Citrus

1 Grower organization and also the Texas Vegetable
2 Association. I would like to make some very brief
3 comments in three areas. One, something about the
4 transition that labor intensive agriculture is
5 going through in this area. Secondly, something
6 about training. And -- and thirdly, something
7 about agriculture as opposed to employment for this
8 area.

9 As far as transition goes, previous
10 speakers have referred to this, but I'm speaking on
11 behalf of citrus and vegetables. This past year
12 and in some previous years, the vegetable industry
13 in the Rio Grande Valley has gone through some very
14 significant downsizing. Part of it due to the
15 water situation, some of that may be temporary, but
16 some of it appears to be long term.

17 Citrus has not gone through that
18 downsizing at this point, but it looks like it
19 could well be on the arising. Mexico is a factor
20 in all of this, but certainly not the only factor.
21 And with or without NAFTA, some of these trends
22 would have happened.

23 Secondly, in the area of training, and
24 I'm not an expert in training, but I was among
25 those who testified during a lot of those NAFTA

1 hearings that we should be planning ahead for the
2 transition that we were going to be going through,
3 that we would be seeing some downsizing and labor
4 intensive agriculture. Again, partly due to NAFTA,
5 partly due to other factors.

6 We just had an announcement here in the
7 last few months that two of the three major Haggar
8 plants are closing here in the Rio Grande Valley.
9 We still, I don't think, have a comprehensive
10 approach to how our farm workers and others
11 involved in agriculture are going through
12 transition from where they are to where they may
13 need to be a few years down the road.

14 Finally, in the area of employment, just
15 like to point out that -- that is, of course, an
16 absolute necessity. Outreach programs and various
17 Civil Rights programs are very important and we
18 support those. But without jobs, those programs
19 may not be worst very much. And so we need to keep
20 the employment picture in mind. And we do have
21 minority farmers in the two organizations that I
22 represent, but we certainly have a lot of farm
23 workers that are Mexican-Americans.

24 And if we don't maintain the citrus
25 industry and the vegetable industry, we're going to

1 have an even bigger problem of where folks are
2 going to find a job. And sometimes it's easier and
3 more effective to maintain what we have and to talk
4 about that new smoke stack or that new industry
5 that might be nice for the area.

6 And in conclusion, I just like to mention
7 three programs that are very important to the
8 maintaining of -- of both citrus and the vegetable
9 industries here in this area. One is -- is
10 research, and I know the Congress to be writing a
11 new research title for the farm bill this next
12 year, and certainly we need to keep in mind the
13 importance of research. We have to look at
14 agriculture on a long-term basis and research may
15 not have pay off this year or next year, but is
16 absolutely essential to this area like it is to
17 other areas.

18 Crop insurance has been mentioned. I
19 have a very specific brief proposal in regard to
20 crop insurance that maybe Congress will have to
21 change. I realize that FCIC and USDA hands are
22 tied to some extent. I spoke to Mr. Ackerman about
23 that just a few weeks ago. But in regard to sales
24 closing down dates down here. The Crop Insurance
25 Reform Act did tie FCIC's hands as to the sales

1 closing date for this and other areas. It said
2 arbitrarily that we have to move back the sales
3 closing date as a way of to save some money and how
4 to the OMB stored the bill, just arbitrarily move
5 everything back thirty days earlier.

6 In this area we always had a closing date
7 of February 15. The law mandated it be moved back
8 to January 15th. And, ladies and gentlemen, with
9 the holidays that we have and not getting the
10 actuarial stuff out, we used -- used to have to be
11 out September 30th. Now, it doesn't come out 'til
12 November 30. There's always lag time. It's almost
13 Christmas by the time we have the actuarial stuff.
14 And we have 'til January 15th to educate the
15 farmers on the new crop revenue program and so
16 forth? That is just not enough time. Mr. Ackerman
17 says it can't be fixed by an administrative
18 decision. If that's the case, the law needs to be
19 changed.

20 Finally, I just like to point out the
21 importance of conservation programs, and especially
22 water with the water situation we have. Water is
23 the number one problem that agriculture faces in
24 the Rio Grande Valley at the present time. Thank
25 you.

1 MR. BURT: Thank you, sir. Next speaker.

2 MR. DOMINGUEZ: David Aguirre.

3 MR. AGUIRRE: Good morning. I'm David
4 Aguirre. I'm from the Willacy County Empowerment
5 zone. I'd like to begin by thanking the United
6 States Department of Agriculture for helping us out
7 in the empowerment zone. I was thinking, What
8 could I say to -- to talk about agriculture because
9 we have different things that we work with in the
10 empowerment zone, which is the housing, the -- the
11 medical facilities and other things. But in our
12 area, Willacy County, we had a problem with
13 drainage.

14 And what we did is we work in partnership
15 with the IWBC and the Willacy County Drainage
16 District and the County Commissioners and work
17 together to build a flood gate to alleviate some of
18 the problems in our own community. And what this
19 did recently was when we had some rain in our area,
20 we usually had -- we just had six inches of rain.
21 That would -- that would make us a flood community.
22 And putting in this flood gate has alleviated all
23 those problems and -- and that goes into -- into
24 helping the people in our community.

25 I also like to thank you for -- for

1 listening to the people, and being part of the
2 empowerment zone is being part of the grass roots
3 committee and the grass roots are the people. The
4 people that are talking and the people that are
5 talk from their heart, discussing the things that
6 they need in their community. So in all essence, I
7 thank you.

8 MR. BURT: Thank you.

9 MR. ROMINGER: Thank you.

10 MR. BURT: Thank you. Next speaker.

11 MR. DOMINGUEZ: Wayne Halbert.

12 MR. HALBERT: I'll get there. I was
13 writing notes and I realized I don't have to write
14 my name down. First of all, I just want to thank
15 each one of you-all on the panel for -- for being
16 here and coming to South Texas to listen to our
17 concerns and our needs, and hopefully some of our
18 praises. And I have noticed in taking some notes
19 this morning that we have had some praises for USDA
20 systems, and -- and that's -- that's always good to
21 hear.

22 My name is Wayne Halbert. I serve as a
23 director for the local Southmost Soil and Water
24 Conservation District. I also for the last year or
25 so have had the pleasure to serve as a director for

1 the State Association as well as represent Texas on
2 the National Association of Conservation District's
3 Board. The major topic and primary purpose for
4 this hearing is one of utmost importance to us in
5 this part of the nation.

6 You being administrators of our programs
7 at Washington and at the state level must hear from
8 the folks in the -- in the trenches. And I think
9 you're hearing from some of those folks in the
10 trenches this morning, and we appreciate you being
11 here just to do that. We believe that we have a
12 strong and solid program in the State of Texas that
13 is essential to meet the needs and address the
14 concerns of minorities in our industry.

15 However, there are other factors besides
16 just having the programs available. Minorities,
17 wherever they may be, often have other concerns
18 that make it more difficult for them to take
19 advantage of the programs offered. Financial and
20 education deficiencies and cultural differences
21 often require agencies to spend more individual
22 time and to make greater efforts to ensure each and
23 every one has the opportunity to receive the
24 maximum benefits from the USDA programs.

25 We believe that our people have made a

1 real effort to accomplish this goal. However,
2 budget restraints over the past few years continues
3 to cuts into our personnel pool, taking away those
4 man hours needed to develop our programs on an
5 individual basis. Unfortunately, the minorities,
6 as well as the financial stressed customers, are
7 the first to feel the frustrations of programs just
8 out of their reach.

9 Over the years the old SCS and the new
10 NRCS has built strong partnerships with local
11 districts, Soil Water Conservation Districts to
12 help fill the gaps in personnel losses. It is time
13 for the leadership in Washington to recognize the
14 tremendous delivery system available to them in
15 Soil and Water Conservation Districts across the
16 nation. If the disenfranchised, the minorities,
17 the financially less fortunate farmers and ranchers
18 are to have an opportunity to remain, are to become
19 a viable resource for this nation, it will be under
20 the guidance and direction of local -- local
21 leadership.

22 Even today our local delivery systems are
23 in great risk of deterioration by -- by decisions
24 being made in Washington. If I could make a plea
25 heard in Austin, Temple, Washington, D.C., it would

1 be to get the resources in the hands of the local
2 individuals and don't kill our programs by drying
3 up our technical support. If we strengthen our
4 local districts and our local field offices to
5 deliver our programs when they are -- where they
6 are really needed, the minority concerns will be
7 met and every farmer and rancher can be proud of
8 his contribution to the strength of our great
9 nation.

10 Thank you for the opportunity to be here.
11 I also have a letter that was given to me yesterday
12 by one of our fellow directors, Rick Guerrero,
13 because he was not going to be able to be here and
14 I want to leave that here, too. Who do I give this
15 to?

16 MR. WEBER: We'll take it.

17 MR. BURT: Thank you very much. I think
18 this -- I want to say thank you to all the speakers
19 we've had this morning. We've all been sitting
20 here for about an hour and a half. We'd probably
21 would like to have a little stretch break, so we're
22 going to have a ten-minute break and then we'll
23 start back probably at about twenty 'til 12:00.
24 Thank you. Ten minutes.

25

1 (WHEREUPON, a recess was taken.)

2

3 MR. BURT: If everyone would please take
4 their seats. Everybody, please take your seats and
5 we'll get started. As you're progressing to your
6 seats, I'd like to call your attention that you
7 will see a form there in your seats. This form
8 offers you the opportunity to submit written
9 comments. You can give these comments to the
10 registration table as you go out. Or if you wish,
11 you can mail these comments in. So we provide you
12 the opportunity if you want to submit written
13 comments. Now, we have a few more of those in the
14 back, come on in so we can get started so we can
15 give people the appropriate time they need. Okay.
16 Let's start with the next speaker.

17 MR. DOMINGUEZ: David Garza.

18 MR. GARZA: Thank you distinguished panel
19 for allowing us the opportunity to be here today.
20 My first -- my name is David Garza. I'm a resident
21 of San Benito, Texas. I come from a
22 farming/ranching family in Starr County. I'm proud
23 to be from that area. I'm proud to be from San
24 Benito now. I want to share with you personally
25 what I have gone through with the offices locally.

1 What started out as a home site buy for
2 me has ended up in a long project that has gone on
3 for three years now. Utilizing the services of the
4 local offices, I went to see charts of flood zones
5 and soils. That led to me being educated by the
6 local people here who are wonderful to work with on
7 programs that were available for us, things that
8 could be done, consideration for top soil erosion,
9 consideration for water conservation.

10 As a result of all their technical
11 assistance, I developed a five-year program on
12 the place that I bought that has, I think, made a
13 significant environmental impact in that area.
14 And I thank them publicly for their assistance.
15 Their assistance has not stopped. There was a
16 delay in one of the projects. They were most
17 cordial in working with me in going through
18 the delay. The -- I think I need to preface that
19 I -- my primary source of income is not farming and
20 ranching now. One of the members of the local
21 committee says that when I applied for the
22 particular program, he says, You will probably
23 qualify and you will probably do the project
24 because you're not a farmer, you can afford it.
25 You know, and I think that needs to be prefaced

1 because that was a comment that was made. That is
2 something that is being brought up over and over
3 here this morning.

4 My primary business is a pharmacy
5 business. And having been born and raised on a
6 farm, I would like to get back a little into that
7 industry. So I want to make sure and let you know
8 that the office here in spite of being short
9 staffed, has great technical assistance, have
10 good plans and have helped tremendously in doing
11 what I did in regard to the particular
12 conservation programs I'm involved with. It has
13 been a pleasure from the application process
14 through the fruition of fulfillment of the whole
15 project to work with them.

16 And to this day, they are still
17 following up on me and visiting me occasionally as
18 we proceed with the second phase of what we're
19 doing. So I want to make sure that that is
20 understood and -- and that some of us really
21 appreciate that. As a son of an eighty-three year
22 old father in Starr County that is not totally
23 proficient in English and doing things, I would
24 like to comment that the office over there, to him,
25 has been most helpful in any kind of assistance,

1 technical or otherwise, that he has utilized, okay?
2 So that needs to be said, too.

3 I have a few more comments to make. I am
4 also the president of the San Benito Independent
5 School District Board. I know that one of the
6 mandates that the NRCS has is education. I think
7 that it is very critical that we educate,
8 especially those nonfarming students in our
9 communities, about environmental impacts, about
10 water conservation, about all those things that
11 directly impact our economy and our lives in South
12 Texas and across our Country.

13 The mandate for education is great to
14 this new agency. The programs that I have seen and
15 what I have visited are excellent. There is only
16 one problem. The local office has been paired down
17 in staffing over the years. And it appears that
18 their -- that their responsibilities have gotten
19 greater. And it is much more difficult for them to
20 be in touch with what's occurring. In the school
21 system there are some excellent programs that your
22 agency provides for.

23 Unfortunately, a staff of three at a
24 local office with eleven school districts in the
25 county probably will find it impossible to

1 implement many of them. We ask if you truly
2 believe that that is one of the items that must be
3 a high priority item for the agency and for our
4 children and for our future, that you truly devote
5 possibly consider making individuals available on a
6 more full-time basis to those districts that
7 require the assistance that would like to implement
8 those programs full blown. Not just in rhetoric,
9 but actually in action. I thank you for the time,
10 and I wish that you take into consideration these
11 comments.

12 MR. BURT: Thank you, sir. Tomas, next
13 speaker.

14 MR. DOMINGUEZ: Arnolde Cantu.

15 MR. CANTU: Good morning. My name is
16 Arnolde Cantu. I'm from an area called San Juan,
17 Texas, Hidalgo County, and I represent myself. I
18 grew in San Juan. From what the last gentleman
19 said, my father was also one of those that was
20 farming with a pair of mules, and I had the honor
21 to learn how to follow that horse right after
22 school, a place where was highly discriminated day
23 in and day out. That's history.

24 Today I'm worried about the farmers out
25 in my area for Hispanics that are not getting the

1 help that we deserve. It's true that we are under
2 the weather, which you people cannot do anything
3 about it. We're under dry spell, which you people
4 cannot do anything except try to bring that
5 Mississippi water down here or go to west United
6 States and bring some of the flood area into the
7 Colorado River, which you're not able to do. But
8 we do need help.

9 Cattle prices, nine and thirteen cents a
10 pound for lean steers. Cattle eating raw cactus
11 because the farmers cannot afford to buy butane.
12 Those are things that bother me. And I have so
13 much to say, but, Mr. Secretary, I would like to
14 address one point that you made in -- when you
15 started talking to us. Foreclosures. At the
16 present time in December, I met a handicapped
17 Hispanic farmer who had been sent a letter, a
18 certified letter from a bank, that they were
19 picking up his land. He had paid six hundred
20 thousand dollars on that land, and the balance was
21 two hundred and fifty thousand and he was given
22 thirty days to come up with two hundred and
23 twenty -- two hundred and odd dollars. Unable to
24 do so. He's a good farmer. He's been there for
25 many years. He's a hard working man. He's a clean

1 man, but no resources are available.

2 And I'm so happy to hear these people
3 say, Go to the bank and borrow money. I challenge
4 anybody here to go to the bank and say, I need
5 money to farm or I want to buy some cattle. I
6 mean, that's foolish. They will not open the door
7 and they will not open the heart to you. And it's
8 true, you need collateral. I don't have any
9 collateral to borrow money. And the rest of the
10 Hispanic farmers are in the same boat.

11 I'm glad to say that I served my Country
12 twenty years. I went in as a private and an
13 officer of Lieutenant Colonel from the Air Force
14 twenty years later. I'm proud because that what my
15 father, who was not able to speak English language,
16 installed on me that we should serve our Country.
17 But, you know, we see things every day that kind of
18 hurts.

19 Our kids in school are being
20 discriminated in many, many ways. And I wish that
21 I would get more information to pass to the fellow
22 farmers on Civil Rights. I'm not going to ask you
23 what minority is and be answered that we don't have
24 the time to answer minorities. All you have to say
25 is all of those people who are not white. And that

1 answers your question. And I want to commend the
2 people in the USDA for hiring bilingual people.
3 They're doing an excellent job in meeting the needs
4 of those that go there, because they understand the
5 Spanish language.

6 And I want to thank you for being here.
7 And if you ever want to come and see the people,
8 come over to Hidalgo County, come over to Starr
9 County and some of those areas where the farmers
10 don't know where the bread is coming the next day.
11 And we are in an area that continues to be
12 discriminated. Day before yesterday, six hundred
13 people became American citizens. The newspaper had
14 in two-inch, More welfare recipients. They forget
15 that some of those people who became American
16 citizens are the pride parents of soldiers that
17 died serving the Country. Thank you very much for
18 your help.

19 MR. BURT: Thank you, sir. Next speaker.

20 MR. DOMINGUEZ: Jose Maldonado.

21 MR. MALDONADO: Okay. Buenos dias. My
22 name's Jose Maldonado. I also come from a farming
23 and ranching background, but I'm here today to
24 speak on behalf of my mother. She's eighty-one
25 years old and we live here in the outskirts of

1 Brownsville. At some point last year, I went to
2 request assistance from the -- from the Farmers
3 Home Administration in San Benito for a grant that
4 I found out was available for elderly, for
5 sixty-two years of age or on. So I wanted the
6 money so that once we got it, we could refurbish my
7 mother's house.

8 Well, when I went there and I met with
9 Mrs. Gomez, I believe is the lady, at San Benito
10 office, she showed me a map who has some yellow
11 lines drawn through it and says, Well, we are
12 limited up to here. You live over here. We're
13 limited to here. And I said, Well, who gave you
14 the map? And she said, Well, we receive it from
15 the regional office or higher up in the state, or
16 whatever. I said, Well, then who determines the
17 limitation to that? I never got a response to that
18 particular question. So I left. I left without
19 filing any documents or making an application or
20 following through with that. I also did leave with
21 any written information as to the law that applies
22 or the rules that applies in terms of the
23 limitations that existed.

24 Then this past week, I red where Cameron
25 Park, who is very, very close to Brownsville, was

1 awarded a grant, a certain family. And I applaud
2 that. That's what the money is for. You know, I
3 really would hate for any agency to return
4 twenty-two million dollars every year back to the
5 government that they couldn't apply. They've done
6 it before. I remember Senator Bentsen telling us
7 that.

8 But my point is, Cameron Park exclusive
9 Brownsville. There's a house being built,
10 forty-three thousand dollar loan allotted to a
11 particular family. And it's tremendous. It's
12 good. I'm not against that. My mother also lives
13 close to Brownsville. Now, it's very vague. I was
14 never given a distance, a measurement. What do
15 they mean by that? Or is it simply because we
16 happen to be living where we live forever. My
17 mom's been there for about fifty-something years, I
18 guess. I grew up there. We were never designated,
19 quote, a colonia. And I guess because of that
20 designation they felt that, Well, we can just
21 ignore that and we only will deal with the, quote,
22 colonia issue.

23 And the point is that I feel that the
24 actions taken or inaction taken, whichever way you
25 want to view it, is really selected discrimination

1 on the elderly that just happens to live, quote,
2 close to the city. And I was advised to contact
3 the -- the Development Council in Brownsville,
4 which I had done before. I did again, just to
5 follow through with it. And, of course, the
6 response, the expected response is, your rural. We
7 can't help you. We're only building the homes and
8 helping people within the city limits. Another
9 barrier, another limit. That's fine. I understand
10 that.

11 But the point is I think that -- that
12 county office, the one that's there to assist the
13 rural area is coming -- either coming up with this
14 limitation or following a structure that you have
15 set up in terms of these limitations and really
16 denying assistance to elderly; in this case,
17 eighty-one year old, for refurbishing of the home.
18 You know, we weren't asking for a new house to be
19 built. We were just saying, Give us the money,
20 which it says in this book I've got and I sent
21 for -- and that brings up another point.

22 Dissemination of information, as far as you're
23 concerned, really is lacking. I do not think that
24 you're really pushing, and I think it needs to be
25 addressed, in terms of reaching the community.

1 Because the need out there expands to beyond just
2 farming, okay, because you have people that were
3 farmers that are now not farmers. They're sons are
4 now in a different profession, but yet there are
5 still people within the community, Spanish
6 dominant, who will not hear of this unless we tell
7 them, those of us that can understand the English
8 language. You're not disseminating information to
9 the Spanish channels. I just learned that a minute
10 ago in reference to this meeting, for example,
11 which you should have done or it should've been
12 done.

13 If I hadn't walked into Congressman
14 Ortiz's office Friday, I would not have learned of
15 this. Now, you can say, Well, you could've heard
16 the news, or whatever. That may be true and
17 there's no -- I'm not excusing myself because I
18 didn't hear. I just really didn't know until his
19 assistant, this lady right there, advised me of it,
20 told me of it and invited me to attend and that's
21 why I'm here. But I think this issue needs to be
22 addressed because if it continues, there is
23 countless of people that are just going to be
24 sidestepped or -- or cast aside and will not
25 receive the benefits and that's why the money is

1 there to assist them, if they meet the criteria
2 that you yourselves said in terms of age, disabled
3 or age or being on SSI or whatever. I think the
4 issue is important. It needs to be addressed and
5 I -- it needs to be changed.

6 You're -- also your people that you have
7 in your local offices, or in my case San Benito,
8 you know, or whichever office you have, you need to
9 maybe know more about who it is that's in charge,
10 have people more of a conscience involved. You
11 know, because sometimes, like everything else, we
12 get into our job and the bureaucracy and all of
13 this and we lose touch exactly why we're there,
14 okay? It's not simply a job or it shouldn't be,
15 you know. So I thank you for your time and thank
16 you again.

17 MR. BURT: Thank you, sir, for your
18 comments. Next speaker.

19 MR. DOMINGUEZ: Trina Rodriguez.

20 MS. RODRIGUEZ: Good evening (sic). And
21 my name is Trina Rodriguez, and I represent Grants
22 Hold Builders. I build houses for the rural
23 development. I do want to thank each one of you
24 for your concern for the minority group. I do want
25 to praise the USDA Rural Development for helping a

1 lot of families have homes.

2 Each one of the families in this Cameron
3 County have a home because of you all. And these
4 families are very proud to see their children
5 living in a very nice home because of your program
6 that makes it possible for them to have it. Other
7 than that, they would've never had the home that
8 they dreamed.

9 I am very happy and I appreciate the
10 work the Cameron County Rural Development has
11 done with all these things. I do appreciate a lot
12 Mrs. Dolores Gomez and Gloria Reyes. They have
13 really worked. They struggle. They work overtime
14 to help and to reach these people out. It's a joy
15 to see the faces of all these families to have a
16 decent home for their children. Every family in
17 this Cameron County is happy because without all of
18 you, they would've never had a -- a decent home.

19 Some of the families live in shacks.
20 They don't have what -- what I have and you all
21 have. And I do praise the Lord for having this
22 Country, for living in this Country, because this
23 Country does help a lot of people. We might have a
24 little complaints, but this Country is the most
25 beautiful Country because they do help. They reach

1 out for the poor.

2 That's one of the commandments of the
3 Lord: Serve the poor, help the less fortunate
4 people. And because of you all, a lot of people
5 have homes, a lot of people have food, a lot of
6 people have clothing. That's why everybody wants
7 to be in this Country. Just look around other
8 countries. They don't care for their people. The
9 rich has everything. But the poor don't have
10 anything. And there might be complaints, but yet I
11 do -- there's more good than -- in this Country
12 than bad. And because of your programs, you can
13 really see the -- the glowing faces to -- to
14 provide a home for the children.

15 Most of my clients are minority people.
16 They cry of joy. The father and the mother that
17 work so hard for minimum wages. To earn two
18 hundred dollars a week. To have a home for six,
19 seven hundred dollars a payment, they could've
20 never had it. But because of your program, they
21 have a home that they can afford. And that pick
22 ups their spirit, their dignity and the children
23 are happy.

24 If you keep up with this program,
25 providing homes for family in this Country, I don't

1 know what to say, but you have done the most
2 beautiful, beautiful work. And I do appreciate
3 each one of you for all your work. Especially
4 Mrs. Gomez and Mrs. Reyes. They work very hard.
5 They need more personnel in that office to reach
6 out for families. To help the families. It's
7 impossible for them to do -- to reach out because
8 it's only two persons that work in the office.

9 But thank you very much, and I do pray
10 and ask God that you always have love for the needy
11 people. For everybody. And if we continue with
12 the way this Country is, I'm sure that the Lord
13 will bless this Country and we will always be on
14 top because the -- of our concern for the needy.
15 Thank you.

16 MR. ROMINGER: Thank you.

17 MR. BURT: Thank you, ma'am. Next
18 speaker.

19 MR. DOMINGUEZ: Leo Garcia.

20 MR. GARCIA: I think it's good afternoon
21 now. My name is Leo Garcia, and I basically like
22 to address the panel on a self initiative more than
23 anything. I thought I was going to be the lonely
24 voice here with a word of praise to USDA, I guess,
25 amongst complaints that you were going to hear from

1 the audience.

2 The -- the word of praise that I have
3 more than anything is to the USDA Rural
4 Development for the work that has done in the past
5 and the work that's beginning to be implemented in
6 Cameron Park, the largest colonia in the Rio Grande
7 Valley. Five thousand plus individuals living in
8 the colonia really do have now an opportunity to
9 engage or -- or be participants of the many
10 benefits that are available to -- to a colonia.

11 For those of you that are not familiar
12 with -- with a colonia, the characteristics are
13 substandard housing, unpaved streets, many problems
14 with health and safety standards as we know it.
15 So the colonia residency, Cameron Park, do have
16 a -- the benefits coming in from the USDA. At this
17 time their -- the upgrading of their quality of
18 life through the Rural Development Home Ownership
19 and Home Improvements Loans and Grants available to
20 low income families in Cameron and Willacy counties
21 are really going to make the difference. So the
22 word of praise, of course, will go not only to the
23 federal and state governments, but also to the
24 local officials doing the work here.

25 The -- just -- when was it? The

1 7th -- 7th of January, we had the inauguration
2 of the first house within the program, the 502
3 program. And the Pechecos, the family there,
4 they're extremely grateful. This -- it would
5 have been impossible for them to obtain a
6 conventional mortgage loan, because of the -- the
7 modest income, you know, that they have, first of
8 all.

9 And Mrs. Pecheco, I mean, she's a
10 wonderful lady. She -- she couldn't believe moving
11 into their new house. I mean, they -- they just
12 left a '75 mobile home that was in not a good
13 shape. And so they're starting the year in a brand
14 new house. It's just to quote here, It's like a
15 dream come true. We had a lot of input into the
16 sign of our house. It turned out to be a
17 beautiful, spacious and just right for our needs.
18 The house will enhance the family's quality of life
19 by featuring brick veneer, central air and heat,
20 enclosed garage, in-house laundry facilities,
21 attractive design, and many other items that became
22 affordable through our -- through the program.

23 As many other families begin taking
24 advantage of the program and start building the
25 colonia, the colonia will improve it's visionomy

1 (sic). To accommodate the large number of persons
2 that are expected to apply, USDA Rural Development
3 will be working with several nonprofit
4 organizations in the area to facilitate the loan
5 application process. These organizations will
6 interview applicants to collect essential
7 information to complete the application documents.
8 And the -- once completed, they will be turned in
9 to USDA Rural Department for review and approval.

10 Rural Development will then discuss with
11 the applicants, if approved, the details of the
12 loan, such as total loan amount, estimated monthly
13 payments, property taxes and insurance, et cetera.
14 The only expense that the applicants will incur
15 for -- will be the cost of the credit report,
16 which is twenty-eight dollars per person and
17 thirty-eight -- thirty-four dollars for a couple.

18 If the loan is approved, the borrower
19 is expected to pay for legal services necessary
20 to guarantee a satisfactory title to the site
21 another incidental loan closing cost. Except
22 for the credit reports, this expense is made
23 included in the loan. So you can see that for
24 many families this will be a great opportunity
25 being that the -- for many of us, you know, wanting

1 to buy a house, it's always a problem to come up
2 with -- with a down payment and the closing costs
3 and so on. This just represents a tremendous
4 opportunity for colonia residents.

5 So thank you all and we definitely want
6 to commend the state office and the local officials
7 for the good work that -- that they're doing and
8 now in conjunction with -- with other nonprofit
9 organizations in the area. Thank you.

10 MR. BURT: Thank you. That concludes the
11 list of people who signed up to speak today. What
12 I would like to do now is open it up to the floor.
13 Are there any speakers from the floor who would
14 like to make a comment? Anyone?

15 POTENTIAL SPEAKER: I will.

16 MR. BURT: The gentleman in the back was
17 first, I believe. Come forward, please. Identify
18 yourself, who you're with and, et cetera.

19 MR. CANTU: My name's Gustavo Cantu, and
20 I'd like to thank everybody for being here. And,
21 especially, on a Saturday. And I know that's time
22 for you-all to be with your families sometimes, but
23 thank you, again, for giving us your time and
24 lending us your ear.

25 I'd like to just say that, you know, when

1 I started -- my parents were in agricultural (sic)
2 my grandparents. And during the agriculture era
3 when we all -- I mean, we all had to raise and live
4 on a farm. We were out there. And then the
5 industrialization came in. They had to come in to
6 town, so the farmer -- and today, I'm the third
7 generation that's trying to get back to the farm.
8 And I started off with one acre. And a lot of
9 times, you know, my first time I went it was kind
10 of hard to get anybody to listen to you with one
11 acre in trying to get some title to do things.

12 But as the time went on and I was kind
13 of -- I kept working trying to get back and trying
14 to teach my children something about how beautiful
15 agriculture is and that's where it all started, you
16 know, from the beginning of time. I've been able
17 to accumulate close to a hundred acres now. And
18 any time I've gone into the office, they have
19 always been very polite, courteous. And I'm not
20 here to tell you anything, but if you go into
21 Mrs. Gomez or into Leo Gonzalez or to Adrian De Los
22 Santos, wherever office at whatever personnel we've
23 talked to, they've always been very polite,
24 courteous, willing to help. And I think that's all
25 I have to say about that end of it.

1 The other thing is, that I challenge
2 each one of you -- I've been on several boards
3 for the Department of Corrections. And I
4 challenge each one of you not just to come here,
5 sit down, enjoy the trip and visit to Mexico and
6 the food -- Mexican food, which if you didn't take
7 advantage of, your missing because this is the best
8 place -- the best place for Mexican food, you know.
9 But if you didn't to take advantage of it, well,
10 hopefully you will take advantage of it this
11 afternoon.

12 But what I'm trying to say is the fact
13 that I challenge you to go back to your office and
14 what an office you've got in Washington, D.C. I
15 was there looking at it from the Holocaust Museum
16 and seeing United States Department of Agriculture.
17 Man, that things -- you're blocks are like miles,
18 you know, in Washington. I was there the second
19 (inaudible) and that's a beautiful feeling to see
20 that, you know.

21 And the way Kika de la Garza started, you
22 know, where they put on -- to see that and to put
23 it altogether. It's amazing to say, you know, we
24 still can start working and having plans to go back
25 to our land, you know, work our land with one acre.

1 and own several acres. It's still possible, if you
2 work hard that is, and you don't give up. And you
3 have to fall -- get up, fall down and get up. And
4 one of the things I had like to add on that
5 Mr. Meyers, I admire the man that came up here
6 trying to put those things. I work with the
7 Department of Corrections and I told him that if he
8 can convince me that there are -- you know, 501
9 nonprofit, I told him that we would give him all
10 the community service. Last year we did over seven
11 hundred -- seventy thousand hours of community
12 service hours, and we would give him a lot of the
13 people on probation and possibly people that are
14 incarcerated to help him out.

15 So that was nice to be here. But the
16 other thing is, I'm still saying, you know, these
17 (inaudible) problems ladies and their reason and
18 what are they going to do with this information?
19 What did I do with the information and when I
20 listened to people, you know? And I challenge you
21 to go back and to make changes, think about the
22 future of our children. I brought my son that's
23 about thirteen years old, and I want him to listen
24 to these conversations of what's going on, because
25 I'll ask today when I do talks and I work with a

1 lot of young adolescents. I ask them, Where does
2 the chicken come from? I know, sir, I know. Where
3 does it come from? Church's Fried Chicken. And
4 then the other say, no, no, I know. Where does it
5 come from? And he says, It comes from H.E.B. Or
6 you ask them about toilet paper. They think
7 Mr. Charmin came over on the Nina, the Pinta, the
8 Santa Maria, you know.

9 And I'm saying, I'd like to challenge you
10 to go back and do things and make difference. But
11 don't forget what it's all about, that we still
12 have a lot of children that are in need to
13 understand. And through the Department of
14 Agriculture, I think that we could contact and
15 break the barriers that are so desperately needed
16 in our great government and Country. God bless you
17 and thank you.

18 MR. BURT: Thank you, sir. We have
19 another speaker over here.

20 MS. SHAWN: Good afternoon. My name is
21 Maria Shawn, and I am the District Director for the
22 local (inaudible) land. And I am very pleased and
23 very, very honored to have our United States
24 Department for Agriculture here to hear our
25 grievances. This is very much needed right now.

1 This might be the breakthrough that we needed.

2 This is a time when we are going through
3 welfare reform, that we are going through changes
4 in immigration laws. In this area, I think the
5 majority of the people, having one way or another,
6 been involved with agriculture. As you know, most
7 of us have come from families that have migrated,
8 and that we are very much part of the U.S.
9 Agriculture.

10 One thing that I want to say is that
11 there is -- even though I know you've done a good
12 job, we need a little bit more from you. I got
13 your fax about five days ago, and I waited to hear
14 the advertisement or the announcement on our local
15 Hispanic media. And we have very little of that in
16 this area to, even though we're ninety-five percent
17 Hispanic, we only have very few radios that carry
18 our -- our native language. We have two TV
19 stations that give us very little or no time for
20 the Hispanic. We have channel two that was taken
21 away (inaudible). And as you know, (inaudible)
22 spoke up against it, but we with very little luck.

23 I waited for the announcement to come on
24 the radio and there was none. I called your office
25 and they told me that it had not been referred to

1 the Hispanic media. If you really want to reach
2 the people that are out there, I would appreciate
3 it if you would contact and send a fax to the local
4 Hispanic radios or you can send it to me and I'll
5 make sure it gets across. Thank you.

6 MR. BURT: Anyone else would like to
7 express some comments? Anyone else? If not, we
8 will wrap this session up at this time. But before
9 we do, I'd like to ask that Denise if she'd like to
10 give us closing comments.

11 MS. BLANCHARD: Again, thank you very
12 much as we conclude this session. I'd like to
13 conclude it on behalf of the Congressman by, first
14 of all, giving a great warm -- matter of fact, I
15 think we ought to give a great applause right now
16 to all the USDA officials here, and in particular
17 Secretary -- the -- the Deputy Secretary Rominger
18 that is here with us this afternoon. In fact,
19 could we please have a big round of applause.

20 Since our office was contacted that
21 they were going to be here, we were just excited.
22 First we thought, Civil Rights issues in the
23 Valley? But we know there are problems around the
24 United States. I think that we are very fortunate
25 here in the Valley that we may not have the same

1 problems that other people have everywhere else.
2 But nonetheless we have a great team of USDA
3 officials that continue to work for you.

4 And if anything, it exemplifies the fact
5 that we are still a form of government that's for
6 the people, by the people. And on behalf of the
7 Congressman and also your -- your respective
8 Congressman for the visitors that are here today,
9 is that if you have an issue or concern, do not
10 hesitate, first of all, to contact your
11 administration that oversees your particular
12 program. If that doesn't work, your recourse is
13 your Congressman. We are here to help you. So on
14 that note, I just want to, again, tell everyone
15 here today thank you very much for being here, for
16 spending your Saturday. I know that I've picked up
17 a lot of information that I'd like to share with
18 the Congressman. And we're going to continue to
19 work together to make this thing work. Thank you
20 very much.

21 MR. BURT: Thank you, Denise. I would
22 like to express my gratitude of appreciation for
23 all of these speakers that came forth. I learned a
24 lot. I'm sure other members of the USDA Food and
25 Agriculture Council in Texas learned a lot.

1 They're been very informative, and I just want to
2 express my deep heart felt thanks for coming out
3 and speaking to this group and to the Secretary. I
4 will now turn the podium over to Deputy Secretary
5 Rick Rominger.

6 MR. ROMINGER: I want to add my thanks to
7 all of you for coming out here today to tell us of
8 your concerns, and also thank those of you who had
9 praises for USDA and our program. That's always
10 nice to hear as well. But we do know that we can
11 improve our programs, we can improve how we deliver
12 our programs, we can improve how we get the
13 information out so that you know about those
14 programs. So we appreciate very much your being
15 here today so that this team that Secretary
16 Glickman appointed can hear your concerns and put
17 those together with what we're hearing from other
18 areas of the Country so that we can make some
19 improvements on how we treat you, our customers,
20 how we treat our own employees and how we deliver
21 our programs.

22 We do believe that USDA is an important
23 part of the lives of most of the people in this
24 Country with all of the programs that we have. And
25 we still believe in President Lincoln's statement

1 that this is a Department for the people, that it
2 is the people's department. And we want to keep it
3 that way. So thanks again for being here.

4 Secretary Glickman is adamant that we are going to
5 listen and make changes at USDA to address your
6 concerns. Thanks again.

7 MR. BURT: Thank you and drive home
8 safely, please.

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1 STATE OF T E X A S *

2 COUNTY OF HIDALGO *

3 I, JOHN FELLOWS, a Certified Shorthand Reporter in
4 and for the State of Texas, hereby certify that this
5 United States Department of Agriculture Civil Rights
6 Listening Form transcript is a true record of the
7 proceedings held on Saturday, January 11, 1997.

8 WITNESS MY HAND, this the 14 day of January,
9 A.D. 1997.

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