

Boots GAO auditors

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WASHINGTON (AP) - The U.S. Agriculture Department abruptly ordered congressional auditors to leave its D.C. headquarters and told its employees not to cooperate with them.

Top USDA attorney Michael Watts ordered employees in an e-mail yesterday not to talk to auditors with the GAO, or auditors. The e-mail was obtained by The Associated Press.

The auditors were seeking information for an ongoing audit on Agriculture's office of civil rights and its handling of discrimination complaints.

A spokesman for GAO, the investigative arm of Congress, said the agency could not immediately comment on the matter.

John Boyd of Virginia, president of the National Black Farmers Association, says the latest development shows that the department is not open about its handling of civil rights complaints.

He calls the USDA memo "appalling," and adds ... quote ... "It's obvious that they have something to hide."

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