

# Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20510

February 29, 2008

The Honorable Ed Schafer  
Secretary of Agriculture  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.  
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Schafer,

We were gravely disappointed to learn in an article yesterday by the Associated Press that "The Agriculture Department abruptly ordered congressional auditors to leave its headquarters and told its employees not to cooperate with them." There is no justification for denying Congress the ability to fulfill its oversight responsibilities. This latest action by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) appears to continue a troubling pattern of obstructing congressional efforts to understand and remedy decades of discrimination against African-American farmers.

According to the Associated Press, auditors from the Government Accountability Office (GAO) were seeking information for an ongoing audit on the USDA's Office of Civil Rights and its handling of discrimination complaints. We do not know the details of the audit nor the circumstances behind yesterday's actions. We do know, however, that for too long the USDA has failed to address complaints of discrimination seriously and protect the civil rights of America's black farmers. We also know that the only way we are going to right the wrongs of the past is to have a transparent investigation of the Department's actions. Instructing USDA employees not to cooperate with congressional auditors is counterproductive and entirely unacceptable.

It seems clear that the Department is trying to undermine Congress's efforts to repair decades of discrimination against African-American farmers. Over the summer, we complained about reports of USDA employees using federal resources to lobby against legislation in Congress that would give qualifying late claimants under the *Pigford* settlement the right to go to court and have their cases adjudicated on the merits. Not only is the use of federal resources for lobbying a violation of law, but the employees' efforts to undermine the legislation raised serious doubt about whether the Department is willing to reverse its record of discrimination and ensure that all farmers have fair and equal access to loans and services. We have also complained about the Department's General Counsel publicly criticizing the *Pigford* legislation without agreeing to work with Congress on alternative ways to bring justice to the victims of discrimination.

We request that you immediately explain the actions of the USDA in relation to the GAO's audit. We also ask that you commit to full transparency and cooperation with government audits and investigations. Finally, we request that the USDA be an honest broker with Congress as members of both the House and the Senate meet to reconcile the Farm Bill and ensure an effective remedy for victims of discrimination.

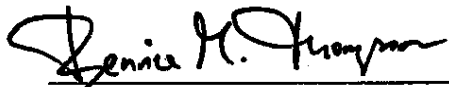
Sincerely,



Senator Barack Obama  
United States Senator



Representative John Conyers, Jr.  
United States Congressman



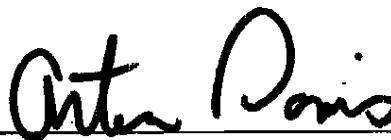
Representative Bennie Thompson  
United States Congressman



Representative Robert C. Scott  
United States Congressman



Representative G. K. Butterfield  
United States Congressman



Representative Artur Davis  
United States Congressman