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Discrimination payments promised to black farmers

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Rep. Artur Davis reassured black farmers Wednesday that Congress and the Obama administration will deliver on a promise to compensate them for past discrimination by the Department of Agriculture.

"We are going to put more money on the table," Davis, D-Ala., told a group of black farmers. "This is a starting point."

Black farmers charge that agriculture officials have denied them loans and assistance based on their race.

The farmers, mostly from Southern states, were in Washington this week to press Congress and the Obama administration to increase the \$100 million set aside in the 2008 farm bill to pay thousands of farmers as part of a 1999 settlement of a discrimination case.

Farmers also complained that payments have not been disbursed.

Black farmers rallied Tuesday outside the Department of Agriculture and held a legislative conference Wednesday near the Capitol.

Thousands of black farmers received \$50,000 payments as part of the settlement with the USDA, known as the Pigford case.

Davis and other members of the Congressional Black Caucus, including Mississippi's 2nd District U.S. Rep. Bennie Thompson, a Democrat, pressed to get extra funding to pay late filers whose claims were rejected.

Obama, then a senator for Illinois, also pushed the legislation and later campaigned on the issue.

But Justice Department officials recently filed a motion arguing the fund is "demonstrably inadequate to resolve the claims of the current plaintiffs, let alone all of the potential claimants under the act."

The Justice Department estimates 65,000 black farmers could file claims totaling about \$4 billion.

At that rate, justice officials wrote, the fund would run out after the first 1,600 successful claims.

Davis tried to assure farmers Obama and Congress would act to ensure the funding was in place. "I know the heart of the president," Davis said. "I think you're going to like what's going to happen."
