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Ag Dept. payouts pressed

Black farmers demand \$100M from agency as settlement

DEBORAH BARFIELD BERRY • CLARION-LEDGER WASHINGTON BUREAU • APRIL 29, 2009

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WASHINGTON — With Congress bailing out the auto industry and financial institutions, black farmers are pressing the federal government to pay money owed to thousands of black farmers as part of a discrimination settlement with the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

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"This is an issue that has been going on for years," said John Boyd Jr., president of the National Black Farmers Association. "(The government) ought to pay the black farmers what you owe us."

About 200 black farmers, mostly from Southern states, protested Tuesday in front of the Department of Agriculture, calling on lawmakers, President Barack Obama and federal agriculture officials to live up to a promise last year to pay black farmers \$100 million for years of discrimination by the agency.

"This is just a drop in the bucket for what we've suffered," said James Burrell, a 66-year-old farmer from Oak Grove, La.

For years, Burrell said, the USDA denied him loans while granting white farmers loans for new equipment and cattle. Burrell was part of a successful class-action discrimination lawsuit against the agency and one of thousands of black farmers who each received a \$50,000 payment as part of a 1999 settlement, known as the Pigford case.

It's not clear how many Mississippi farmers were compensated in the 1999 settlement. As of the start of 2005, \$133.5 million was paid out to 2,660 Mississippi farmers.

Burrell joined the protest Tuesday because he said many other black farmers have yet to be paid from the \$100 million Congress set aside in a farm bill last year.

"Are we going to get any justice this time?" Burrell asked. "We're still in the same boat where we started."

Rep. Artur Davis, D-Ala., who pressed for the funding, said it was never the intention of Congress to cap payments at \$100 million.

He said the farm bill allows Congress to add funding each year. The \$100 million was a "placeholder" to preclude lawmakers from stripping the provision from the bill, Davis said.



John Boyd Jr. of Baskerville, Va., founder and president of the National Black Farmers Association, speaks at a rally in front of the U.S. Department of Agriculture with his mule in Washington on Tuesday. The group is rallying in support of a bill for government funding of compensation for black farmers who were discriminated against by the department in the awarding of loans.

(The Associated Press)

ON THE WEB

National Black Farmers Association: www.blackfarmers.org

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"I'm expecting that there will be good news very soon on this front," Davis said.

After the class-action lawsuit was settled, lawmakers - including Obama, then a senator from Illinois - pushed legislation to allow black farmers who missed the deadline for the lawsuit to file claims. Funding for that provision was included in the 2008 farm bill.

But black farmers say it has been more than a year since Congress passed the bill.

"This is not an anti-Obama rally," Boyd said at Tuesday's demonstration. "We want the president to step in and clarify what he wanted his bill to do. We want to get this issue on the president's radar screen."

Kenneth Baer, communications director for the Office of Management and Budget, said, "The president has been a leader on this issue since his days as a U.S. senator and is deeply committed to closing this painful chapter in our history."

Protesters carried signs that read "Stop Promising, Start Paying" and chanted, "Pay the black farmers." Protesters also led a mule to the Capitol and unrolled a scroll with the names of 75,000 black farmers.

Black farmers will hold a conference today with members of Congress and federal farm officials to discuss the funding and other issues.

Cornwallis Hudson of Birmingham drove the 12 hours to Washington to protest what he called the wrongs against his father, who owned a farm in Annemanie, Ala. Hudson said the USDA repeatedly rejected his father's loan requests because he was black.

"My father was denied rights as a farmer. ... I need to represent what my father didn't get," said Hudson, 80.

Robert Binion, 59, a peach farmer from Clanton, Ala., was part of the original class-action suit and has traveled to Washington for years to protest what he calls the mistreatment of black farmers.

"Nothing has changed. That's why I'm here," said Binion. "I want my children to be able to farm if they want to."

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