

# The Washington Post

## PROMISES, PROMISES: Obama and black farmers

By BEN EVANS  
The Associated Press  
Tuesday, April 21, 2009 1:06 PM

WASHINGTON -- As a senator, Barack Obama led the charge last year to pass a bill allowing black farmers to seek new discrimination claims against the Agriculture Department. Now that he is president, his administration so far is acting like it wants the potentially budget-busting lawsuits to go away.

The change isn't sitting well with black farmers who thought they'd get a friendlier reception from Obama after years of resistance from President George W. Bush.

"You can't blame it on the Bush administration anymore," said John Boyd, head of the National Black Farmers Association, which has organized the lawsuits. "I can't figure out for the life of me why the president wouldn't want to implement a bill that he fought for as a U.S. senator."

At issue is a class-action lawsuit known as the Pigford case. Thousands of farmers sued USDA claiming they had for years been denied government loans and other assistance that routinely went to whites. The government settled in 1999 and has paid out nearly \$1 billion in damages on almost 16,000 claims.

Farmers, lawyers and activists like Boyd have worked for years to reopen the case because thousands of farmers missed the deadlines for participating. Many said the filing period was too short and they were unaware of the settlement until it was too late.

The cause gained momentum in August 2007 when Obama, then an Illinois senator, introduced Pigford legislation about six months into his presidential campaign.

Although the case was hardly a hot-button political issue, it had drawn intense interest among African-Americans in the rural South. It was seen as a way for Obama to reach out in those areas where he was not well-known and where he would need strong support to win the Democratic primary.

The proposal won passage in May as sponsors rounded up enough support to incorporate it into the 2008 farm bill. The potential budget implications were huge: It could easily cost \$2 billion or \$3 billion given an estimated 65,000 pending claims.

With pressure to hold down costs, lawmakers set an artificially low \$100 million budget. They called it a first step and said more money could be approved later.

Advertisement » Your Ad Here

Ads by Google



### [Structured Settlements](#)

Structured Settlement  
Cash Free Quote - Get a  
Check in a Week!  
[www.StoneStreet.com](http://www.StoneStreet.com)

### [Cash Now For Settlements](#)

Why Wait For Money  
That Belongs To You?  
Take Control - Contact Us  
Now!  
[ImperialStructuredSettlements.com](http://ImperialStructuredSettlements.com)

### [Structured Settlements](#)

Learn How to Receive a  
Lump Sum of Cash for  
Small Annuity Payments.  
[PeachtreeSettlementFunding.com](http://PeachtreeSettlementFunding.com)

### [Lawsuit Settlement](#)

Find Lawsuit Settlement.  
Top Lawsuit Settlement  
Listings.  
[WorldSiteIndex.com](http://WorldSiteIndex.com)

### [Pre-Settlement Loans](#)

Super Fast Pre-  
Settlement Loans  
Available 24/7 Call Now!  
[addisonpsf.com/pre-settlement](http://addisonpsf.com/pre-settlement)

But with 25,000 new claims and counting, the Obama administration is now arguing that the \$100 million budget should be considered a cap to be split among the successful cases.

The position \_ spelled out in a legal motion filed in February and reiterated in recent settlement talks \_ would leave payments as low as \$2,000 or \$3,000 per farmer. Boyd called that "insulting."

Boyd noted that Obama's legislation specifically called for the new claimants to be eligible for the same awards as the initial lawsuit, including expedited payments of \$50,000 plus \$12,500 in tax breaks that the vast majority of the earlier farmers received.

"I'm really disappointed," Boyd said. "This is the president's bill."

"They did discriminate against these farmers, maybe not all of them, but a lot of these people would prevail if they could go to court," he said.

Boyd, whose organization is planning a rally in Washington next week, estimated that 40 percent to 45 percent of the farmers filing claims will be successful.

The administration wouldn't discuss specific budget plans or commit to fully funding the claims.

But in a statement to The Associated Press, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said the department agrees that more must be done and is working with the Justice Department to "ensure that people are treated fairly."

Kenneth Baer, a budget spokesman for the White House, also suggested that the administration plans to do more.

"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," Baer said in a statement.

© 2009 The Associated Press

**Ads by Google**

**[Obama Home Rescue Plan](#)**

Obama Housing Plan Helps Millions Private Programs - Free Advice!  
[www.Homeowner-Bailout-Programs.org](http://www.Homeowner-Bailout-Programs.org)

**[Pre-Settlement Loans](#)**

Super Fast Pre-Settlement Loans Available 24/7 Call Now!  
[addisonpsf.com/pre-settlement](http://addisonpsf.com/pre-settlement)

**[Artery Clearing Secret](#)**

Hugh Downs reports on breakthrough from Nobel Prize Winning Doctor  
[www.bottomlinesecrets.com](http://www.bottomlinesecrets.com)