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CONGRESS

Black farmers push rights case

Claiming discrimination in the issuance of government loans, black farmers are seeking a settlement from Congress.

WASHINGTON - (AP) -- Thousands of black farmers who say they have been left out of a landmark civil rights case are turning to Congress as their last hope to receive compensation for years of being denied loans by the government.

"This is not discrimination that took place in the 1950s. That discrimination is taking place right now, and it took place a few years ago for me, in 1996," said John Boyd, a Virginia farmer who is president of the National Black Farmers Association. "Congress needs to help us fix this."

Rep. Steve Chabot, chairman of the House Judiciary Committee's subcommittee on the Constitution, planned a hearing today in Cincinnati on the settlement. Chabot, R-Ohio, said a legislative solution was being considered.

Republican Sen. Chuck Grassley of Iowa, meanwhile, was continuing to work with the Agriculture Department to find a possible administrative remedy, his office said.

SETTLEMENT REACHED

In the 1999 case, the department agreed to pay \$50,000 or more to each farmer who filed for compensation within six months. About 13,500 people have qualified for more than \$830 million under this settlement.

But the Environmental Working Group and Boyd's association say that as many as 66,000 black farmers missed out because they were improperly notified of the settlement and thus filed late claims.

Lawyers for some of the farmers say that they notified their clients, but that the farmers didn't file for damages because they didn't believe the government would pay them.

A judge last month rejected an effort by the farmers to reopen the settlement and allow those farmers' cases to be heard. However, U.S. District Judge Paul L. Friedman in Washington left room in his decision for Congress to act.

ROLE OF CONGRESS

"In this particular situation, Congress is going to have to pass legislation to allow those persons who were deemed ineligible to be eligible under the law," said James W. Myart Jr., the lead lawyer in the case.

Myart noted that Congress already has passed special legislation to extend the statute of limitations for farmers to file claims under a law that allows for compensation for cases of discrimination.

Agriculture Department spokesman Ed Loyd said the department has worked since the 1999 settlement to change its training and business programs for minority farmers. Vernon B. Parker,

head of the department's newly created Office of Civil Rights, was scheduled to testify today.

"We intend to be held accountable for our performance," Loyd said. ``This isn't just something that we're giving lip service to. This is something that we take very seriously as a department."

About 200 farmers from around the country planned to attend the hearing, which represents their last chance to be heard.

"We're not asking for any handouts," Boyd said. ``We're asking to be treated like you treat large white farms or corporate farms. What happened to these black farmers was wrong. And the longer this issue festers, the worse it gets."