

Bill would let black farmers seek claims

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WASHINGTON -- A provision that would allow tens of thousands of black farmers to make discrimination claims against the U.S. Department of Agriculture will be included in the Senate's initial farm bill.

Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, chairman of the Senate agriculture committee, plans to include the provision in the farm reauthorization bill, which the Senate takes up next week, spokeswoman Kate Cyrul said.

The House passed similar legislation in July that would allow about 74,000 black farmers who missed a deadline an opportunity to file suit against the Agriculture Department for loan discrimination.

"That is good news," said John Boyd, founder of the National Black Farmers Association. "My main objective is to get the claims heard on their merits."

The legislation still must pass the Senate and be signed into law.

The House bill would allow black farmers to file streamlined petitions that are capped at \$50,000 in damages and forestall foreclosures for those who can prove discrimination.

In 1997, dozens of black farmers sued the Agriculture Department, saying the agency treated them differently than white farmers in procuring loans, and a settlement was reached in 1999. The USDA has paid nearly \$750 million in claims to about 15,000 black farmers who said they suffered discrimination. About 7,000 claims were rejected.

But about 74,000 missed the Sept. 15, 2000, deadline.

Several lawmakers -- including Sen. Barack Obama, D-Ill., and Rep. Artur Davis, D-Birmingham - sent a letter to President Bush last week asking whether he supported petitioning the court to address the status of late filers. The Bush administration has not taken a position.

White House spokesman Blair Jones said the administration had received the letter and was in the process of reviewing it.

The lawmakers also asked the administration to address the issue of a USDA employee who reportedly sent an e-mail in August urging other employees to call their senators to complain about the deadline extension. These lawmakers called it illegal lobbying activities on behalf of a government agency.

"It's a personnel issue and it's being investigated at USDA," said spokeswoman Corrine Hirsch, who offered no further comment.