

Bills to assist black farmers move forward

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WASHINGTON -- Although a compromise in the U.S. House of Representatives may eventually help some black farmers pursue loan discrimination claims against the U.S. government, other minority farmers are saying more needs to be done.

On Thursday, a House committee reached a compromise, combining two bills, including one by Rep. Artur Davis, D-Birmingham. The compromise would extend the deadline for black farmers to file loan discrimination claims with the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Although House Judiciary Committee members postponed action Thursday, supporters of the legislation are hopeful it will be included as part of this year's farm bill.

John Boyd, president of the National Black Farmers Association, said it is something that needs to happen.

"At least the farmers will get their cases heard on their merits," said Boyd, who raises corn, soybeans and chickens in southern Virginia. "I'm very hopeful that this will be added to the farm bill."

The legislation would allow about 73,800 black farmers to file in U.S. District Court for damages and would delay foreclosures against farmers who can prove discrimination.

In 1997, dozens of black farmers sued the Agriculture Department, saying the agency treated them differently from white farmers in approving loans, and a settlement was reached in 1999. The USDA has paid out nearly \$1 billion in claims to about 15,000 black farmers who said they suffered discrimination.

But tens of thousands of black farmers missed the Sept. 15, 2000, deadline.

If Thursday's compromise can be included in the farm bill currently being crafted to overhaul U.S. agriculture policy those farmers will get a second chance. But minorities also hope the new farm bill will solve other inequities.

"We're getting chump change," said Don Bustos, whose Hispanic and Native American ancestors have operated a farm for centuries in northern New Mexico

Bustos was at a press conference Thursday at which minority farmers said they get far fewer benefits from U.S. farm policy because it favors large producers and landowners, while the majority of minority farmers are small producers.

The contention was backed up by a study released Thursday, based partially on research done by Tuskegee University.

Just 18 percent of black farmers received government payments in 2002 compared with 34 percent of white farmers, according to the study, done by the anti-poverty advocacy group Oxfam America and based on research from Tuskegee University and the University of Minnesota. The average payment for black farmers was \$3,460 versus \$9,300 for whites, the study said.

Overall, although 5 percent of the nation's farmers are minorities, they get just 1 percent of federal commodity payments.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.