

Sowing Seeds of Victory

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Dressed in a dark pinstripe suit with a blue striped shirt and tie, John Boyd Jr. looks the part of Washington insider.

After eight years of knocking on doors on Capitol Hill nearly twice a week, Boyd can walk the walk and talk the talk with the best of them.

But unlike much of K Street, where big retainers and steak dinners are the norm, Boyd isn't doing it for the money.

For him, it's personal.

As a soybean, corn and wheat farmer from Baskerville, Va., and the founder and president of the National Black Farmers Association, Boyd has made it his mission to get black farmers on equal footing with their white counterparts.

It's an issue he knows something about, because his story is intertwined with that of the farmers he fights for.

Like many of his 80,000 members, Boyd said the Agriculture Department denied him, without cause, assistance and agricultural loans provided more freely to white farmers. In his case, he said the discrimination occurred for nine years.

That personal experience led Boyd to play an integral role in securing the biggest Congressional victory in history for black farmers, a \$100 million line item in this year's farm bill that effectively reopened the government's discrimination settlement with black farmers. And he isn't letting up.

For example, at 8 a.m. last Tuesday, in the middle of the Fourth of July recess, Boyd was already back on the Hill meeting with staff.

His near-constant presence there has translated into a lot of friends among fellow lobbyists who work similar issues.

"John was just really passionate, and I think when you have the facts behind you and a good way of presenting the facts, it makes a difference," said Sandra Schubert of the Environmental Working Group, who lobbied with Boyd on other farm bill provisions. "He's very passionate about the issue and cares very deeply about current farmers and the farmers that were hurt from the past."

The allocation in the farm bill allows new claims to be brought against the government almost 10 years after the Agriculture Department settled a class-action lawsuit brought on behalf of thousands of black farmers. Based largely in rural southern areas, the farmers alleged that local USDA offices regularly refused to grant loans and assistance that were afforded to white farmers.

The government had originally awarded \$981 million to nearly two-thirds of the 22,500

farmers who filed claims, in most cases tax-free payments of \$50,000 per farmer. But nearly 75,000 more farmers came forward with claims after the October 1999 deadline.

Until this year's farm bill passed on May 22, those farmers had been too late to collect. Since then, however, nearly 800 cases seeking payment have been filed in D.C. federal court. as the law requires for new claims.

While Boyd concedes that the allocation was a victory, it wasn't everything he was hoping for.

"It's going to take billions of dollars, not \$100 million, to settle with the farmers," Boyd said. "But I had to take that deal to keep the lawsuit open."

Boyd's learning curve on Capitol Hill was fast and hard. When it was clear that tens of thousands of potential claimants would never receive a settlement, Boyd turned his attention to Congress.

"I didn't have any money, or a whole lot of relationships," Boyd said of his lobbying start.

That didn't dissuade him.

Beyond meeting with lawmakers' staffs, Boyd also began a series of near-monthly protests where farmers would come to Washington.

But despite coming to Washington twice a week starting in 2000 — and for a while bunking on a friend's couch for easier access to the Hill — he couldn't get the House or Senate Agriculture committees to hold a hearing.

He wasn't above using gimmicks, including naming two mules, which he would bring to protests, "Struggle" and "40 Acres," symbolizing the plight of the black farmer and the 40 acres that was promised to freed slaves after the Civil War.

During one protest in 2000, Boyd called out Rep. Steve Chabot (R-Ohio) for going back on his word to introduce legislation after holding three Judiciary subcommittee hearings.

"Legislation never came," Boyd said. "What I didn't know was he was in trouble with his district."

Still, Boyd's point was made. Two weeks later, Rep. Bobby Scott (D-Va.) introduced legislation.

"It was a long, ugly process," Boyd said of trying to get Congress to take notice of black farmers. "It's difficult even getting a bill introduced in the House."

In 2004, the Environmental Working Group and the black farmers association jointly put out a report, "Obstruction of Justice." The report culled numbers put out by the Agriculture Department and showed the disparity in payments, according to Schubert. The numbers helped lawmakers understand how stark the contrasts were, Boyd said.

Yet the legislation languished without a sponsor in the Senate. While many lawmakers were supportive, Boyd couldn't get advocates to try to whip the bill. He also struggled to get civil rights groups, like the NAACP, to take notice of the issue.

In a Republican-controlled Congress Boyd understood the importance of having a GOP Senator co-sponsor the bill.

While Sen. Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa) was supportive of the black farmers efforts, he wanted other co-sponsors before introducing a bill, Boyd said.

Boyd found an unlikely ally in then-Sen. George Allen (R-Va.). Allen had been supportive of black farmers when he was governor, but his unsuccessful 2006 re-election campaign was dogged by controversy after he used the racially charged term “macaca” to refer to an Indian-American at a campaign rally.

Boyd sought out Allen and suggested that if he were to sponsor a bill, Boyd would help him with black supporters in Virginia.

But it was the change in Congressional power that ultimately helped Boyd sway lawmakers from the Congressional Black Caucus, among others, to take on the issue.

“It was a very lonely battle because we didn’t have a lobbying firm,” Boyd said.

And he isn’t through.

Now Boyd has set his sights on making sure that nonbiotech seed is available for farmers and that the practice of horse slaughtering is stopped. And, of course, he will continue to fight for equality for black farmers.

“I want us to be a part of American agriculture,” Boyd said. “We want to get to the point as an organization where we have a full-time lobbyist. A lot of people don’t understand if you don’t have visibility you don’t have a seat at the table.”

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