

Press Office

Press Releases

Allen Introduces Bill Provides Historic Remedy for Black Farmers Who Suffered Discrimination by USDA

Measure Allows Black Farmers Left Out of a Class Action Lawsuit to File Claims

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WASHINGTON, DC— In the South Hill Virginia country side, John Boyd has been tilling soybean, wheat and corn fields his family farm that goes back four generations. But like other African-American farmers, Boyd says that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) discriminated against black farmers when they applied for assistance between 1983 and 1997. That's why Boyd turned to Senator George Allen (R-VA) who today, introduced legislation expanding the number of black farmers eligible to receive compensation under a class action lawsuit agreed to by USDA for what Senator Allen calls "the historical injustices suffered by African American farmers who through hard work and toil are a part of the great American farming family."

Senator Allen refers to the legislation co-introduced by Sen. Charles Grassley (R-IA) as the Boyd "Claims Remedy Act," which stems from a class action lawsuit filed in 1997, *Pigford v. Glickman*. In that lawsuit, African American farmers sued USDA, claiming that they suffered discrimination when they applied for federal farm loans or assistance. In 1999, that class action was settled and USDA began disbursing checks to qualifying farmers. But, in the following years, it became apparent that many African American farmers had not been included in the original lawsuit. Senator Allen's legislation would in effect, allow any eligible African American farmer "who has not previously obtained a determination...may, in a civil action, obtain that claim."

"There is no doubt," says Senator Allen, "that this discrimination took place against many African-American farmers. What this bill attempts to do is to correct the limited number of farmers who actually benefited from a class action suit that should have extended to all African American farmers who suffered the indignity and inequality of being denied financial assistance through USDA."

Boyd—who is president of the National Black Farmers Association—says that the legislation is needed because many African American farmers were not aware that they were eligible to be a part of the original class action lawsuit. As a Virginian, he says that he wanted to turn to Senator Allen for help, saying that legislative action is needed to allow African-American farmers to receive benefits due them. "Our civil rights fight has taken a decade, but this is an important step in the struggle," said Boyd. "This historic legislation will ensure that all 72,000 Black farmers who filed late claims in the Black farmers' settlement agreement with the U.S. Department of Agriculture will have the opportunity to have their cases heard. Congress must join with Senator Allen and act now to pass this critical legislation.

At the turn of the century, there were more than a million black owned farms. That number dwindled to approximately 18,000 today. Senator Allen's bill mirrors legislation introduced in the House by Rep. Steve Chabot (R-OH) and co-sponsored by Rep. Bobby Scott, (D-VA). If passed, the affected farmers could request permission to file a late claim to the lawsuit under a process subsequently ordered by the court.

"African American farmers are a part of the rich diversity of our country's landscape and diverse farming communities," said Senator Allen. "Since my days as Governor, I have made it a top priority to help strengthen and protect the fabric of the family farm. This measure is an appropriate and reasonable remedy to allow African American farmers to have their cases finally heard on their merits."

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