

Sunday, March 6, 2005

## Hearings for farmers help right a wrong

### Editorials

The Underground Railroad Freedom Center last week provided an appropriate setting for the third in a series of civil rights hearings by Rep. Steve Chabot, R-Ohio, chairman of the House Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution.

Thousands of black farmers say they were left out of a landmark 1999 civil rights case stemming from years of being denied farm loans from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Without loans, many farmers faced foreclosure or lost their farms. In 1920, an African-American owned one in seven farms. Today, that number is one in 100.

So we welcome the hearings by Chabot, who said a legislative solution could resolve the matter this spring. A fourth hearing is expected in Washington next month. Last week's hearing, though held on Cincinnati's riverfront, was not exclusive to Ohio, Kentucky or Indiana. More than 300 farmers from all over the country drove, flew and rode buses to Cincinnati to participate in the hearings.

In 1999, the USDA primarily used urban media to inform potential class-action litigants about the Pigford vs. Glickman consent decree, the largest racial discrimination settlement in history, and as many as 66,000 black farmers say they missed the notification. The government gave farmers six months to file for compensation of \$50,000 or more. So far, about 13,500 people have qualified for more than \$830 million under the settlement. Pigford also called for discrimination reform within the USDA.

"Our investigation is providing critical information about past discrimination in the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the deficiencies of the Pigford settlement," Chabot said. "I'm convinced that these hearings will help us craft full and just solution that protects the civil rights of black farmers. Most importantly, those with a viable claim of discrimination should be allowed to have their cases considered on merit."

Chabot is right.

In a January ruling, U.S. District Judge Paul Friedman in Washington would not allow the settlement to be reopened so that farmers could submit claims, but he did leave room for legislative action.

We hope Congress takes heed.

Congress should consider any legitimate claim from farmers who were not properly notified of the Pigford settlement, and who missed out, then offer them help to re-establish or strengthen their farms for the greater good. It would be a travesty if farmers lost their livelihood partly because of the actions of their government, and then suffer again essentially because the government didn't find an adequate way to tell them help was available.

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