

National Black Farmers Association

Prepared Testimony of John W. Boyd, Jr.
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before
United States Senate
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
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Chairman Luger, Ranking Member Harkin, and other distinguished members of the Senate Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry Committee,

Good Morning:

My name is John Boyd, Jr., President of the National Black Farmers Association and a farmer from Mecklenburg County, Virginia. I thank you for the opportunity to discuss some of the issues that are facing the members of the NBFA and farmers across the nation. It is our belief that actions taken, or not taken, by the U.S. government over the past century have systematically deteriorated rural America and the livelihoods of tens of thousands of American farmers. At critical times, when our farmers needed government most it failed to come through for them.

For this reason I wish to thank you, Mr. Chairman, and the entire committee for holding this hearing today. Rural America is watching us right now, and it is our responsibility to ensure that their best interests are taken to heart. I hope that my statements here today will educate your committee about the plight of black farmers, the remarkable work the NBFA has been doing to help black farmers, and the need for bipartisanship in dealing with the issues that have arisen out of problems within the U.S. Department of Agriculture and remain to this day. I would like to acknowledge, Mr. Chairman, that the Clinton Administration has taken some new steps toward bringing justice for black farmers, but much is yet to be achieved.

In the early 1900's, there were more than one million black farmers. Today, that number has declined to less than 30,000. The NBFA believes that much of this decline can be directly attributed to the actions and inaction of USDA and government officials.

I remind you that the examples of illegal and immoral actions over the past few decades at USDA are numerous and shocking. Loan applications denied on the basis of race. One case when a handgun sat on the desk of an administrator as applicants met to discuss farm loan opportunities. Black farmers -- waiting in line for hours to meet with USDA officials -- who later learned that the officials slept through the application process. And a party-like atmosphere in many parts of the country as USDA officials gave out millions of dollars in gifts to their friends in the farming community -- all while thousands of black farmers were left without help.

Seven years ago, as I personally faced some discriminatory acts by the USDA -- as I sat in my farmhouse by candlelight, during the dead of winter -- it was becoming very clear to me. My lights had been turned off; federal officers were knocking at my door threatening to confiscate my farm equipment; foreclosure signs were being posted on my property; stress had destroyed my family; and there was no money. All of this, at no fault of my own. Through conversations with others in my community, and through outreach to other communities, I realized that I was

not alone. Many other black farmers had also been the victims of some of the most incredulous acts of discrimination by the US government in American history.

As these acts of discrimination continued within the US Department of Agriculture, our government distanced itself from the core values on which this country had been founded. During the Reagan Administration, America's top decision-makers dismantled the Office of Civil Rights within USDA. This resulted in thousands of discrimination claims simply being thrown away or stored in boxes standing as much as ten cubic feet high. As a result of actions like these, Black and other economically disadvantaged farmers have been, and continue to be, denied access to the financial and programmatic resources readily available to others throughout our society. Mr. Chairman, I report to you today that: the American dream is still being denied to many American farmers.

One of the first leaders to recognize the problems at USDA, and actually devote personal energy to fixing them, was the former chairperson of the Congressional Black Caucus, Congresswoman Maxine Waters. She requested congressional hearings to begin a discussion and examination of the discrimination against black farmers by the USDA. With her leadership and a sincere dedication to making things right, and our unrelenting grassroots effort, the largest civil rights settlement in US history was made a reality. The Clinton Administration has taken the first steps to start addressing this problem, but everyone knows that many more Administration and congressional steps must be taken. We must continue to make progress.

But, only the hearts of few have been pricked as it relates to the devastation caused by this monumental deception. With thousands and thousands of the farmers yet to be compensated from the settlement, this appears to be another example of hollow promises -- like that from the 1800's promising the "40 acres and a mule" -- to those who had been wronged.

Mr. Chairman and other committee members, let me be straight: more work is needed to ensure that America's black farmers receive their just due. It's not a political game, like some have treated it, it's the livelihood of thousands of hard working families that are at stake.

The settlement with Black Farmers is just the nucleus of what is necessary to begin the healing.

My recommendations to the committee list some key points that will begin the healing process and seriously address the discrimination problems within USDA. The NBFA calls upon Congress and USDA to create and fund the following:

- FIRST: New programs must be developed and implemented to promote adult education and Farm Administration outreach, and to bridge the technological and digital divide that we now view as a growing ocean between developing rural America and the rest of the great national continent.
- SECOND: An endowment to provide low interest emergency loans must be created; including an assessment of the farm management practices for black and economically disadvantaged farmers to ensure sustainability.
- THIRD: A new study conducted by the US General Accounting Office must be commissioned with the major focus on reviewing the hiring practices and possible ongoing discriminatory activities of the Farm Service Agency and its County Committees in which the racial make-up is 8,000 white males, 28 blacks, and 2 females.

- **FOURTH:** A new outreach effort must initiate forums which will discuss (a) the results of the settlement, (b) all problems with payments to claimants, and (c) new opportunities made available to claimants resulting from the settlement. These forums should be held throughout rural America through a partnership between USDA, the Department of Justice, non-profit organizations, and black economically disadvantaged farmers.
- **FINALLY:** We urge your committee and the Administration to hold a national, bipartisan conference on the issues most affecting rural America comprised of Members of Congress, the farm community, the Administration and USDA staff and officials. This conference's goal should be to develop recommendations and performance measures for the USDA that will be presented to the full Senate and House Committees on Agriculture as well as to the Administration.

Mr. Chairman, in the coming weeks I hope to work with congressional leaders to develop and introduce legislation that will deal with each of these new proposed steps – among others – on how to best fix the system and begin moving to bring justice through new programs and initiatives.

Mr. Chairman, the members of the National Black Farmers Association and I often look out from our farmhouses, and we see an America with so much purpose and so much hope. But, we find ourselves continually perplexed by the way Black and even many White farmers in rural America often live like they are living in third-world countries. In the year 2000, all my neighbors should all have running water, electricity, access to phone lines and modern technology. But they don't.

While the US leads the world in agricultural processes and technologies, rural America continues to be treated as second class. While their labor feeds and clothes the American people, they still receive a raw deal from the US Government when they are most in need. Mr. Chairman, rural access has been denied, and we must do something about it.

Let me tell you, a few more months of waiting for Congressional action can equal three years of financial losses for family farmers. Today's small farmers need action. Today's small farmers need leaders who rise to the occasion. Today's small farmers need a Congress that is ready to commit what it takes to keep family farms strong for the long term.

I sincerely thank you for the opportunity to appear before your committee.