Farmers allege government bias against blacks continues

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courts independent monitor.

She was given quasi-judicial power to settle the claims of any black farmer who could prove he or she farmed and applied for some type of USDA assistance between 1981 and 1996 and had been discriminated against.

All claims were to be divided into two tracks, A and B.

Track A was designed to be less time intensive, farmers who had filed complaints were to provide some measure of proof and be eligible for a settlement of $50,000. The USDA would also send an additional $12,500 to the Internal Revenue Service to cover past taxes.

As of the end of 2004, 22,369 claims had been approved for adjudication in Track A; 13,532 of those had been found valid, 61 percent.

To date, more than $843 million has been paid to Track A claimants, according to Roth's 2004 report.

Track B was designed for those with larger, more detailed claims that resulted in actual damage. There was no limit on damages that could be awarded through this track. Of the 238 claims sent down this road, half were either converted to Track A or settled before a hearing.

Eighteen Track B claims were awarded by the monitor, with the average award being $551,587.

The black farmers feel duped by the process for many reasons, the largest being the size of the class itself.

A stipulation in the settlement set a deadline for filing a claim to enter the class, a deadline the National Black Farmers Association feels wasn't properly advertised to potential litigants, thereby cutting off more than 70,000 of them.

The monitor did allow more than 2,000 of these late applicants to enter, but felt it was properly advertised and therefore didn't allow that as an excuse. The court upheld this decision.

Smith said he hopes the farmers, 300 from each state, will turn out in Washington to protest this and other inequities.

"Were going to march for justice," he said. "Were going to stand at Fourteenth and Independence (in front of USDA headquarters), meet with representatives and try to get these issues resolve.

USDA public spokesman Ed Loyd said the agency is in no way shirking the responsibilities set forth in the settlement and respects their right to be heard.

"We have moved pretty clearly in saying this is something important we want to live up to. If there is an instance where there is some kind of dispute, its something we want to know about."

Earle moves up in effectiveness ranking

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Respondents rated legislators' effectiveness based on committee work, guiding bills through committees and floor debates and expertise in special fields. Consideration was also given lawmakers' relationship with peers, political power and ability to sway lawmakers' opinions.

"The rankings of attendance and voting participation tell citizens how often their legislator was there to represent them," said Ran Coble, the center's director. "The effectiveness rankings tell citizens how effective their legislator was when he or she was there. The surveys hold a mirror up to the legislature, and the rankings are the reflection."

Earle, a six-term incumbent and chair of the Legislative Black Caucus, ranked 29th in 2003, her previous best. She is the highest-ranking African American lawmaker on the House list; Thomas Wright of Wilmington is right behind at 13.

Earle said the survey's findings are gratifying, but fleeting. After all, it's based on opinion.

"The only time I think about it is where it comes out," she said. "Then I forget about it and go out and do what I'm doing."

Mecklenburg's top lawmaker is House Speaker Jim Black of Matthews, who is No. 1 for the fourth straight study. Mecklenburg representatives Martha Alexander (27) and Becky Carney (29) made the top 30. Pete Cunningham finished 50th.

In the 50-member Senate, the most effective Mecklenburg legislator was Sen. Dan Clodfelter at No. 4. Charlie Dannelly was 21st,

Dannelly

Graham

up two spots from the 2003 session and two places below the highest-ranking black senator, Jeanne Lucas of Durham.

Sen. Malcolm Graham finished 39th in his freshman term, while Robert Pittenger, a two-term incumbent, finished 47th.

New Orleans election draws grassroots activists

Continued from page 2A

African-Americans – who made up 63 percent of the New Orleans electorate – might lose political clout because of displacement. However, if the trend for early voting and absentee ballots holds, Blacks will vote in the same proportion that they did prior to Hurricane Katrina, election officials predict.

Still, Melanie Campbell, president and CEO of the NCBCP, remains concerned.

"You're talking about upwards of a hundred thousand who are displaced, as far as voters," Campbell says. "So that's a lot of people, and the numbers so far that have come in show there's a large hurdle to get to a high turnout in this election. I don't expect one. But, I'm an optimist. We're going to do everything we can."

She wishes the state officials had done everything within their power before now, such as establish satellite voting outlets around the country.

"They should have been allowed to vote where ever they are like we did for the Iraqi people and the government paid for it with our tax dollars," Campbell said.

"This is one situation in which I would not hazard to guess. I wouldn't have a clue," says Ron Walters, University of Maryland political scientist, who is usually brimming with predictions and analysis. However Walters did say that the intricate problems of former New Orleans residents will play a major role in whether they will participate.

"I would imagine that a lot of them are trying to deal with survival issues, which complicates any judgment about how many will get on a bus and come to New Orleans, even for one day to vote," says Walters.

Issues that have angered New Orleans residents include officials' failure to provide transportation for the poor out of the city before Katrina hit Aug. 29, the failure to provide basic food and shelter for those who were trapped, and the amount of time it has taken from many to be able to turn into homes that are inhabitable.

"We're talking about communities where they have not even turned on the lights, communities where they have not even picked up the trash," says Sylvain. "Now those are physical things that it does not take the rocket scientist to figure out. But, somehow those tasks have not been accomplished."

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