

The Process for Providing Debt Relief for Economically Distressed Farmers as a Result of Natural and Injustice Cause Begins Soon

The following e-letter article is being republished to provide updated information on the status of the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) and debt relief for economically distressed farming operation, resulting from natural and injustice causes.

The Agriculture Department on Thursday announced it is beginning the process of creating a program that will ultimately dole out \$2.2 billion to farmers who have faced discrimination from the agency in the past.

Beginning Friday, the department is seeking public comment on how it should design, implement and administer the program.

The department was directed by Congress in the recently passed Democratic reconciliation bill to create a brand-new program to give out the money. It was also directed to select one or more third parties, or nongovernmental organizations, to carry out the program instead of USDA itself. A Democratic staffer familiar with the legislation said that was done to address farmers' concerns of USDA bias in such a program.

AMERICA RECKONS WITH RACIAL INJUSTICE

The USDA Is Set To Give Black Farmers Debt Relief. They've Heard That One Before

This is another attempt to address past discrimination.

The funding is another push by congressional Democrats, led by Sen. Cory Booker, D-N.J., to address historical discrimination within farming and USDA. It also helps to fulfill one of President Biden's campaign promises to reduce inequities for socially disadvantaged farmers.

Advocates for farmers of color have long argued that for decades, the USDA denied loans, credit, representation and inclusion leading to a large loss of landownership particularly among Black farmers.

Last year, Democrats passed a \$5 billion debt relief program aimed specifically for farmers of color. But that program was swiftly stalled in courts by white farmers, including Texas Agriculture Commissioner Sid Miller, who sued in his own capacity backed by former Trump adviser Stephen Miller.

This forced Congress to either rewrite the law or abandon the effort.

POLITICS

Debt relief for Black farmers shows challenges of pursuing racial equity with policy

Tucked in the recently passed reconciliation bill are two provisions: the \$2.2 billion to address discrimination and a separate \$3.1 billion in debt relief for "economically distressed borrowers," which does include white farmers.

USDA has yet to announce how it will structure the latest debt relief effort. But the department has reviewed blowback over the delay to implement the promised financial relief — even while it was stalled.

Just Wednesday, four farmers of color in Virginia sued USDA claiming the repeal of the debt relief program and replacement in reconciliation is a breach of contract.

What to expect from the USDA moving forward

Thursday's move — known as a request for information — offers an opportunity for farmers, advocates, lawmakers and more to provide advice on selecting the third-party program administrator and to provide recommendations, conducting outreach to farmers who borrowed from USDA and how the department should even identify who has been discriminated against.

There is a 30-day comment period for the public along with weekly listening sessions hosted by the department. After the comments are collected and reviewed, the department will look to select the third parties to administer the program, according to a USDA official, and design the program while recruiting the organizations to run the program.

The request for information has "very specific questions but people are going to have very different lived experiences and what we really want to know is the thing that would make the program work for them," the USDA official said. "What we want is a farm-focused program that will work in ways that maybe others have not."

RACE

Black Farmers Will Receive Stimulus Aid After Decades Of USDA
Discrimination