

# Black farmer resolution draws ire from leaders

WASHINGTON (AP) — A House resolution urging the federal government to speed up settlement payments to black farmers in a discrimination lawsuit has the unlikeliest of opponents: black congressional leaders.

Indeed, the Congressional Black Caucus has accused the measure's sponsor, Rep. Jay Dickey, R-Ark., of playing politics and trying to curry favor with blacks for his re-election bid.

The measure, expressing a sense of the Congress on the need to speed up payments, is scheduled to come up for a vote Monday.

The other sponsor is Rep. J.C. Watts, R-Okla., and chair of the House Republican Conference.

Black lawmakers accused Dickey of being absent during efforts to reach last year's landmark settlement with the Agriculture Department. Adding to their ire, they say, is a resolution that does little.

"On the surface this legislation seems to help the black farmers who have been forced into near extinction," said Caucus Chairman James Clyburn of South Carolina. "Once you get past the smoke and mirrors, this resolution does nothing . . . The Congressional Black Caucus cannot, in good faith, support this legislation."

Added Rep. Bennie Thompson, D-Miss., "I could be wrong but I don't remember Jay Dickey's participation in any of these events."

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—Caucus Chairman James Clyburn, South Carolina

Dickey responded saying he has been active in black farmers' issues since he first came to Congress in 1993.

"I was doing this because it was right, not because I expect anything politically back from it. If they've got an alternative solution I'll get behind it."

"What are they offering?"

Dickey said.

The Agriculture Department last year reached a settlement that is expected to spend millions of dollars paying black farmers who had complained that they were systematically discriminated against when applying for loans and subsidy programs.

Some 18,000 farmers filed

claims under the settlement.

Some 7,329 cases have been approved so far, and payments of \$50,000 each have been made to 3,594 of those, according to a USDA report last month. Another 4,742 claims have been denied.

Dickey angered black farmers in his district in January when, after being approached by a group of farmers for help in getting their settlement payments, he told them it would be difficult to support them when they refused to support him politically.

The state's Democratic Party denounced the comments as a "shakedown" and Dickey later apologized.

Critics say Dickey, a four-

term representative from heavily Democratic southern Arkansas, has only stepped forward now to gain political favor during his re-election. Four Democrats are vying for the seat, including former state Rep. Judy Smith, who received 42 percent against Dickey in 1998.

With 27 percent of its electorate black, Dickey's district has Arkansas' largest black voter population. Dickey was the first Republican elected to the seat.

Gary Grant, president of the Black Farmers and Agriculturists Association, said he supports the legislation but farmers "just don't need people speaking two languages. We won't be played in this political game."

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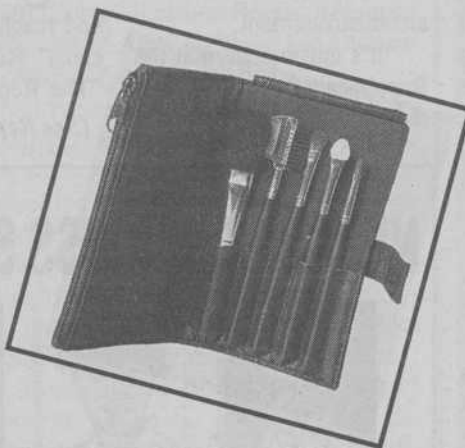
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