

**Statement John Conyers, Jr.**  
**Subcommittee Markup H.R. 3073, the “Pigford Claims Remedy Act”**

**July 18, 2007**

On April 14, 1999, I stood in victory with African-American farmers across our Nation after the United States Department of Agriculture agreed to a \$1 billion settlement in the *Pigford* case, which was the largest civil rights settlement in the history of the United States. Sadly, this groundbreaking victory for civil rights proved be illusory. In an effort to secure their settlement payments, the farmers have encountered overwhelming obstacles, including alleged retaliatory discrimination by the USDA. Eight long years and multiple lawsuits later, most of these farmers still have not completed the *Pigford* claims process.

With the bipartisan Pigford Claims Remedy Act, I hope we can restore equity to the claims process. Our hearing record indicates that the settlement-funded arbitrator rejected more than 66,000 claims on the basis of their tardiness in meeting the original deadline, even though all claims were submitted to the court within the established late claims period. Moreover, claimants faced the formidable burden of proving discrimination without the benefit of access to information held in USDA files, particularly information about similarly situated white farmers.

Given that the Consent Decree was designed to streamline years of potential litigation and provide an expeditious forum for all claimants to

receive a speedy determination on the merits, Congressional action is necessary to preserve the original intent of the Consent Decree and ensure that every potential claimant is provided with the same access to the claims resolutions process.

There can be no mistake about the stakes involved in remedying the injustices of the claims process. On the day of our hearing, the *Washington Post* ran a front page article report pointing out that in the Mississippi Delta – where a large section of our Nation’s farms are located – 95 percent of the agricultural subsidies went to large, commercial farms primarily owned by white farmers, despite the fact that the majority of residents in that region are African-Americans.

This is a situation that demands attention and time is of the essence. With every day that passes, more and more African-American farmers are gradually being forced out of their chosen profession.

We must act now to allow these *Pigford* claimants to have their opportunity to pursue their claims for just compensation. If we do address their plight, we will not only fail our African-American farmers, but all Americans because the principles of equality and fairness should be afforded to everyone in our Nation.