

marketing agreements and orders may be viewed at: <http://www.ams.usda.gov/fv/moab.html>. Any questions about the compliance guide should be sent to Jay Guerber at the previously mentioned address in the **FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT** section.

A 30-day comment period is provided to allow interested persons to respond to this proposed rule. Thirty days is deemed appropriate because: (1) The 2002 fiscal period begins on January 1, 2002, and the marketing order requires that the rate of assessment for each fiscal period apply to all assessable grapes handled during such fiscal period; (2) the Committee needs to have sufficient funds to pay its expenses which are incurred on a continuous basis; and (3) handlers are aware of this action which was unanimously recommended by the Committee at a public meeting and is similar to other assessment rate actions issued in past years.

List of Subjects in 7 CFR Part 925

Grapes, Marketing agreements, Reporting and recordkeeping requirements.

For the reasons set forth in the preamble, 7 CFR part 925 is proposed to be amended as follows:

PART 925—GRAPES GROWN IN A DESIGNATED AREA OF SOUTHEASTERN CALIFORNIA

1. The authority citation for 7 CFR part 925 continues to read as follows:

Authority: 7 U.S.C. 601–674.

2. Section 925.215 is revised to read as follows:

§ 925.215 Assessment rate.

On and after January 1, 2002, an assessment rate of \$0.015 per lug is established for grapes grown in a designated area of southeastern California.

Dated: January 3, 2002.

A.J. Yates,

Administrator, Agricultural Marketing Service.

[FR Doc. 02–576 Filed 1–9–02; 8:45 am]

BILLING CODE 3410–02–P

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Agricultural Marketing Service

7 CFR Part 959

[Docket No. FV02–959–1 PR]

Onions Grown in South Texas; Increased Assessment Rate

AGENCY: Agricultural Marketing Service, USDA.

ACTION: Proposed rule.

SUMMARY: This rule would increase the assessment rate established for the South Texas Onion Committee (Committee) for the 2001–02 and subsequent fiscal periods from \$0.03 to \$0.05 per 50-pound container or equivalent of onions handled. The Committee locally administers the marketing order which regulates the handling of onions grown in South Texas. Authorization to assess onion handlers enables the Committee to incur expenses that are reasonable and necessary to administer the program. The fiscal period begins August 1 and ends July 31. The assessment rate would remain in effect indefinitely unless modified, suspended, or terminated.

DATES: Comments must be received by February 11, 2002.

ADDRESSES: Interested persons are invited to submit written comments concerning this rule. Comments must be sent to the Docket Clerk, Marketing Order Administration Branch, Fruit and Vegetable Programs, AMS, USDA, room 2525–S, P.O. Box 96456, Washington, DC 20090–6456; Fax: (202) 720–8938, or e-mail: moab.docketclerk@usda.gov. Comments should reference the docket number and the date and page number of this issue of the **Federal Register** and will be available for public inspection in the Office of the Docket Clerk during regular business hours, or can be viewed at: <http://www.ams.usda.gov/fv/moab.html>.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:

Belinda G. Garza, Regional Manager, McAllen Marketing Field Office, Fruit and Vegetable Programs, AMS, USDA, 1313 E. Hackberry, McAllen, Texas 78501; telephone: (956) 682–2833, Fax: (956) 682–5942; or George Kelhart, Technical Advisor, Marketing Order Administration Branch, Fruit and Vegetable Programs, AMS, USDA, room 2525–S, P.O. Box 96456; Washington, DC 20090–6456; telephone: (202) 720–2491, Fax: (202) 720–8938.

Small businesses may request information on complying with this regulation by contacting Jay Guerber, Marketing Order Administration

Branch, Fruit and Vegetable Programs, AMS, USDA, room 2525–S, P.O. Box 96456, Washington, DC 20090–6456; telephone: (202) 720–2491, Fax: (202) 720–8938, or e-mail: Jay.Guerber@usda.gov.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: This rule is issued under Marketing Agreement No. 143 and Order No. 959, both as amended (7 CFR part 959), regulating the handling of onions grown in South Texas, hereinafter referred to as the “order.” The order is effective under the Agricultural Marketing Agreement Act of 1937, as amended (7 U.S.C. 601–674), hereinafter referred to as the “Act.”

The Department of Agriculture (USDA) is issuing this rule in conformance with Executive Order 12866.

This rule has been reviewed under Executive Order 12988, Civil Justice Reform. Under the marketing order now in effect, South Texas onion handlers are subject to assessments. Funds to administer the order are derived from such assessments. It is intended that the assessment rate as proposed herein would be applicable to all assessable onions beginning on August 1, 2001, and continue until amended, suspended, or terminated. This rule will not preempt any State or local laws, regulations, or policies, unless they present an irreconcilable conflict with this rule.

The Act provides that administrative proceedings must be exhausted before parties may file suit in court. Under section 608c(15)(A) of the Act, any handler subject to an order may file with USDA a petition stating that the order, any provision of the order, or any obligation imposed in connection with the order is not in accordance with law and request a modification of the order or to be exempted therefrom. Such handler is afforded the opportunity for a hearing on the petition. After the hearing USDA would rule on the petition. The Act provides that the district court of the United States in any district in which the handler is an inhabitant, or has his or her principal place of business, has jurisdiction to review USDA’s ruling on the petition, provided an action is filed not later than 20 days after the date of the entry of the ruling.

This rule would increase the assessment rate established for the Committee for the 2001–02 and subsequent fiscal periods from \$0.03 to \$0.05 per 50-pound container or equivalent of onions.

The South Texas onion marketing order provides authority for the Committee, with the approval of USDA,

to formulate an annual budget of expenses and collect assessments from handlers to administer the program. The members of the Committee are producers and handlers of South Texas onions. They are familiar with the Committee's needs and with the costs for goods and services in their local area and are thus in a position to formulate an appropriate budget and assessment rate. The assessment rate is formulated and discussed in a public meeting. Thus, all directly affected persons have an opportunity to participate and provide input.

For the 2000–01 and subsequent fiscal periods, the Committee recommended, and USDA approved, an assessment rate that would continue in effect from fiscal period to fiscal period unless modified, suspended, or terminated by USDA upon recommendation and information submitted by the Committee or other information available to USDA.

The Committee met on June 12, 2001, and unanimously recommended 2001–02 expenses of \$115,189.85 for personnel, office, compliance, and partial promotion expenses. The assessment rate and specific funding for research and promotion projects were to be recommended at a later Committee meeting.

The Committee subsequently met on October 10, 2001, and recommended 2001–02 expenditures of \$449,189 and an assessment rate of \$0.05 per 50-pound container or equivalent of onions. Ten of the 11 committee members present voted in support of the \$0.02 per 50-pound container equivalent increase. One committee member abstained from voting. In comparison, last year's budgeted expenditures were \$306,740. The assessment rate of \$0.05 is \$0.02 higher than the rate currently in effect. The Committee recommended the increased rate to fund a major market development program to promote the consumption of South Texas onions, without having to draw a large amount from reserves. Without the increase, the Committee's reserve fund would drop to \$52,576. The Committee believes that a reserve that low is not adequate for its operations.

The major expenditures recommended by the Committee for the 2001–02 fiscal period include \$75,190 for administrative expenses, \$30,000 for compliance, \$254,000 for promotion, and \$90,000 for research projects. Budgeted expenses for these items in 2000–01 were \$87,109, \$27,498, \$39,500, and \$122,200, respectively. In addition, \$30,435 was expended for a retirement package for the outgoing Committee manager.

The assessment rate recommended by the Committee was derived by dividing anticipated expenses by expected shipments of South Texas onions. Onion shipments for the fiscal period are estimated at 7.5 million 50-pound equivalents, which should provide \$375,000 in assessment income. Income derived from handler assessments, along with interest income and funds from the Committee's authorized reserve, would be adequate to cover budgeted expenses. Funds in the reserve (currently \$276,705) would be kept within the maximum permitted by the order (approximately two fiscal periods' expenses, \$ 959.43).

The proposed assessment rate would continue in effect indefinitely unless modified, suspended, or terminated by USDA upon recommendation and information submitted by the Committee or other available information.

Although this assessment rate would be in effect for an indefinite period, the Committee would continue to meet prior to or during each fiscal period to recommend a budget of expenses and consider recommendations for modification of the assessment rate. The dates and times of Committee meetings are available from the Committee or USDA. Committee meetings are open to the public and interested persons may express their views at these meetings. USDA would evaluate Committee recommendations and other available information to determine whether modification of the assessment rate is needed. Further rulemaking would be undertaken as necessary. The Committee's 2001–02 budget and those for subsequent fiscal periods would be reviewed and, as appropriate, approved by USDA.

Initial Regulatory Flexibility Analysis

Pursuant to requirements set forth in the Regulatory Flexibility Act (RFA), the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) has considered the economic impact of this rule on small entities. Accordingly, AMS has prepared this initial regulatory flexibility analysis.

The purpose of the RFA is to fit regulatory actions to the scale of business subject to such actions in order that small businesses will not be unduly or disproportionately burdened. Marketing orders issued pursuant to the Act, and the rules issued thereunder, are unique in that they are brought about through group action of essentially small entities acting on their own behalf. Thus, both statutes have small entity orientation and compatibility.

There are approximately 78 producers of onions in the production area and

approximately 40 handlers subject to regulation under the marketing order. Small agricultural producers are defined by the Small Business Administration (13 CFR 121.201) as those having annual receipts less than \$750,000, and small agricultural service firms are defined as those whose annual receipts are less than \$5,000,000.

Most of the handlers are vertically integrated corporations involved in producing, shipping, and marketing onions. For the 2000–01 marketing year, the industry's 40 handlers shipped onions produced on 15,166 acres with the average and median volume handled being 208,700 and 177,377 fifty-pound bag equivalents, respectively. In terms of production value, total revenues for the 40 handlers were estimated to be \$73,879,800, with average and median revenues being \$1,846,995 and \$1,569,786, respectively.

The South Texas onion industry is characterized by producers and handlers whose farming operations generally involve more than one commodity, and whose income from farming operations is not exclusively dependent on the production of onions. Alternative crops provide an opportunity to utilize many of the same facilities and equipment not in use when the onion production season is complete. For this reason, typical onion producers and handlers either produce multiple crops or alternate crops within a single year.

Based on the SBA's definition of small entities, the Committee estimates that all of the 40 handlers regulated by the order would be considered small entities if only their spring onion revenues are considered. However, revenues from other productive enterprises would likely push a large number of these handlers above the \$5,000,000 annual receipt threshold. All of the 78 producers may be classified as small entities based on the SBA definition if only their revenue from spring onions is considered. When revenues from all sources are considered, a majority of the producers would not be considered small entities because receipts would exceed \$750,000.

This rule would increase the assessment rate established for the Committee and collected from handlers for the 2001–02 and subsequent fiscal periods from \$0.03 to \$0.05 per 50-pound container equivalent of onions. The Committee recommended 2001–02 expenditures of \$449,189 and an assessment rate of \$0.05 per 50-pound container or equivalent. The proposed assessment rate of \$0.05 is \$0.02 higher than the 2000–01 rate. The quantity of

assessable onions for the 2001–02 fiscal period is estimated at 7.5 million 50-pound equivalents. Thus, the \$0.05 rate should provide \$375,000 in assessment income. Income derived from handler assessments, along with interest income and funds from the Committee's authorized reserve, would be adequate to cover budgeted expenses.

The major expenditures recommended by the Committee for the 2001–02 fiscal period include \$75,190 for administrative expenses, \$30,000 for compliance, \$254,000 for promotion, and \$90,000 for research projects. Budgeted expenses for these items in 2000–01 were \$87,109, \$27,498, \$39,500, and \$122,200, respectively. In addition, \$30,435 was expended for a retirement package for the outgoing Committee manager.

The Committee recommended the increased rate to fund a major market development program to promote the consumption of South Texas onions, without having to draw a large amount from reserves. Without the increase, the Committee's reserve fund would drop to \$52,576. The Committee believes that a reserve that low is not adequate for its operations.

The Committee reviewed and recommended 2001–02 expenditures of \$449,189, which included increases in research and promotion programs. Prior to arriving at this budget, the Committee considered information from various sources, including the Committee's Executive Committee, the Research Subcommittee, and the Market Development Subcommittee. Alternative expenditure levels were discussed by these groups, based upon the relative value of various research and promotion projects to the onion industry. The assessment rate of \$0.05 per 50-pound equivalent of assessable onions was then determined by dividing the total recommended budget by the quantity of assessable onions, estimated at 7.5 million 50-pound equivalents for the 2001–02 fiscal period. This is approximately \$74,190 below the anticipated expenses, which the Committee determined to be acceptable.

A review of historical information and preliminary information pertaining to the upcoming fiscal period indicates that the grower price for the 2001–02 fiscal period could range between \$6 and \$11 per 50-pound equivalent of onions. Therefore, the estimated assessment revenue for the 2001–02 fiscal period as a percentage of total grower revenue could range between 0.45 and 0.83 percent.

This action would increase the assessment obligation imposed on handlers. While assessments impose

some additional costs on handlers, the costs are minimal and uniform on all handlers. Some of the additional costs may be passed on to producers. However, these costs would be offset by the benefits derived by the operation of the marketing order. In addition, the Committee's meeting was widely publicized throughout the South Texas onion industry and all interested persons were invited to attend the meeting and participate in Committee deliberations on all issues. Like all Committee meetings, the October 10, 2001, meeting was a public meeting and all entities, both large and small, were able to express views on this issue. Finally, interested persons are invited to submit information on the regulatory and informational impacts of this action on small businesses.

This proposed rule would impose no additional reporting or recordkeeping requirements on either small or large production area commodity handlers. As with all Federal marketing order programs, reports and forms are periodically reviewed to reduce information requirements and duplication by industry and public sector agencies.

USDA has not identified any relevant Federal rules that duplicate, overlap, or conflict with this rule.

A small business guide on complying with fruit, vegetable, and specialty crop marketing agreements and orders may be viewed at: <http://www.ams.usda.gov/fv/moab.html>. Any questions about the compliance guide should be sent to Jay Guerber at the previously mentioned address in the **FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT** section.

A 30-day comment period is provided to allow interested persons to respond to this proposed rule. Thirty days is deemed appropriate because: (1) The 2001–02 fiscal period began on August 1, 2001, and the marketing order requires that the rate of assessment for each fiscal period apply to all assessable onions handled during such fiscal period; (2) the Committee needs to have sufficient funds to pay its expenses which are incurred on a continuous basis; and (3) handlers are aware of this action which was recommended by the Committee at a public meeting and is similar to other assessment rate actions issued in past years.

List of Subjects in 7 CFR Part 959

Marketing agreements, Onions, Reporting and recordkeeping requirements.

For the reasons set forth in the preamble, 7 CFR part 959 is proposed to be amended as follows:

PART 959—ONIONS GROWN IN SOUTH TEXAS

1. The authority citation for 7 CFR part 959 continues to read as follows:

Authority: 7 U.S.C. 601–674.

2. Section 959.237 is revised to read as follows:

§ 959.237 Assessment rate.

On and after August 1, 2001, an assessment rate of \$0.05 per 50-pound container or equivalent is established for South Texas onions.

Dated: January 3, 2002.

A.J. Yates,

Administrator, Agricultural Marketing Service.

[FR Doc. 02–575 Filed 1–9–02; 8:45 am]

BILLING CODE 3410–02–P

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Agricultural Marketing Service

7 CFR Part 979

[Docket No. FV02–979–1 PR]

Melons Grown in South Texas; Increased Assessment Rate

AGENCY: Agricultural Marketing Service, USDA.

ACTION: Proposed rule.

SUMMARY: This rule would increase the assessment rate established for the South Texas Melon Committee (Committee) for the 2001–02 and subsequent fiscal periods from \$0.05 to \$0.06 per carton of melons handled. The Committee locally administers the marketing order which regulates the handling of melons grown in South Texas. Authorization to assess melon handlers enables the Committee to incur expenses that are reasonable and necessary to administer the program. The fiscal period begins October 1 and ends September 30. The assessment rate would remain in effect indefinitely unless modified, suspended, or terminated.

DATES: Comments must be received by February 11, 2002.

ADDRESSES: Interested persons are invited to submit written comments concerning this rule. Comments must be sent to the Docket Clerk, Marketing Order Administration Branch, Fruit and Vegetable Programs, AMS, USDA, room 2525–S, P.O. Box 96456, Washington, DC 20090–6456; Fax: (202) 720–8938, or E-mail: moab.docketclerk@usda.gov. Comments should reference the docket number and the date and page number of this issue of the **Federal Register** and