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DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Agricultural Marketing Service

7 CFR Part 915

[Docket No. FV02-915-2 FR]

Avocados Grown in South Florida; Increased Assessment Rate

AGENCY: Agricultural Marketing Service, USDA.

ACTION: Final rule.

SUMMARY: This rule increases the assessment rate established for the Avocado Administrative Committee (Committee) for the 2002-03 and subsequent fiscal periods from \$0.19 to \$0.20 per 55-pound bushel container or equivalent of avocados handled. The Committee locally administers the marketing order which regulates the handling of avocados grown in South Florida. Authorization to assess avocado handlers enables the Committee to incur expenses that are reasonable and necessary to administer the program. The fiscal period began April 1 and ends March 31. The assessment rate will remain in effect indefinitely unless modified, suspended, or terminated.

EFFECTIVE DATE: May 13, 2002.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:

Doris Jamieson, Marketing Specialist, Southeast Marketing Field Office, Marketing Order Administration Branch, Fruit and Vegetable Programs, AMS, USDA, 799 Overlook Drive, Suite A, Winter Haven, Florida 33884; telephone: (863) 324-3375, Fax: (863) 325-8793; or George Kelhart, Technical Advisor, Marketing Order Administration Branch, Fruit and Vegetable Programs, AMS, USDA, 1400 Independence Avenue SW., STOP 0237, Washington, DC 20250-0237; 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, 1400 Independence Avenue SW., STOP 0237, Washington, DC 20250-0237; 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. 121 and Order No. 915, both as amended (7 CFR part 915), regulating the handling of avocados grown in South Florida, 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, Florida avocado handlers are subject to assessments. Funds to administer the order are derived from such assessments. It is intended that the assessment rate as issued herein will be applicable to all assessable avocados beginning April 1, 2002, 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 increases the assessment rate established for the Committee for

the 2002-03 and subsequent fiscal periods from \$0.19 to \$0.20 per 55-pound bushel container or equivalent of avocados handled.

The Florida avocado 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 Florida avocados. 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 January 9, 2002, and unanimously recommended 2002-03 expenditures of \$211,082 and an assessment rate of \$0.20 per 55-pound bushel container or equivalent of avocados. In comparison, last year's budgeted expenditures were \$187,384. The assessment rate of \$0.20 is \$0.01 higher than the rate currently in effect.

The Florida Lime Administrative Committee and the Avocado Administrative Committee have shared certain costs (staff, office space, and equipment) for economy and efficiency. Each Committee's share of these costs was based upon the amount of work and time devoted to their particular programs. In April 2001, the Lime Administrative Committee voted to suspend its regulations, including assessment collection. The suspension runs from February 19, 2002, to February 24, 2003 (67 FR 6837). They will not need an administrative staff, office space, or equipment during the suspension period. Therefore, the Avocado Administrative Committee must assume increased costs. The increased assessment is needed to generate more assessment funds to cover the increased expenses, and to reduce

the amount of reserve funds the avocado committee has to use to pay those expenses. Without the assessment rate increase, the Avocado Administrative Committee would have had to use \$26,582 of its operating reserve to cover the estimated expenses. With the increase, the Committee only has to use \$17,082 of its operating reserve to cover expenses.

The major expenditures recommended by the Committee for the 2002–03 year include \$76,800 for salaries, \$39,850 for local & national enforcement, \$20,000 for research, \$19,499 for insurance and bonds, and \$17,958 for employee benefits. Budgeted expenses for these items in 2001–02 were \$60,000, \$45,615, \$17,000, \$14,336, and \$15,180, respectively.

The assessment rate recommended by the Committee was derived by dividing anticipated expenses by expected shipments of Florida avocados. Avocado shipments for the year are estimated at 950,000 bushels which should provide \$190,000 in assessment income. Income derived from handler assessments, along with interest income and funds from the Committee's authorized reserve, should be adequate to cover budgeted expenses. Funds in the reserve (currently \$96,633) will be kept within the maximum permitted by the order (approximately three fiscal periods' expenses).

The assessment rate established in this rule will 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 will be in effect for an indefinite period, the Committee will 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 will evaluate Committee recommendations and other available information to determine whether modification of the assessment rate is needed. Further rulemaking will be undertaken as necessary. The Committee's 2002–03 budget and those for subsequent fiscal periods would be reviewed and, as appropriate, approved by USDA.

Final 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 final 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 150 producers of avocados in the production area and approximately 33 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.

According to the Florida Agricultural Statistics Service, the average f.o.b. price for fresh avocados during the 2000–01 season was \$14.60 per 55-pound bushel container or equivalent for all domestic shipments and total shipments were 1,005,000 bushels. Using these prices, virtually all avocado handlers could be considered small businesses under the SBA definition. The majority of Florida avocado handlers and producers may be classified as small entities.

This rule increases the assessment rate established for the Committee and collected from handlers for the 2002–03 and subsequent fiscal periods from \$0.19 to \$0.20 per 55-pound bushel container or equivalent of avocados. The Committee unanimously recommended 2002–03 expenditures of \$211,082 and an assessment rate of \$0.20 per 55-pound bushel container. The assessment rate of \$0.20 is \$0.01 higher than the 2001–02 rate. The quantity of assessable avocados for the 2002–03 season is estimated at 950,000. Thus, the \$0.20 rate should provide \$190,000 in assessment income. Income derived from handler assessments, along with interest income and funds from the Committee's authorized reserve, should be adequate to cover budgeted expenses.

The major expenditures recommended by the Committee for the 2002–03 fiscal year include \$76,800 for salaries, \$39,850 for local & national enforcement, \$20,000 for research, \$19,499 for insurance and bonds, and \$17,958 for employee benefits. Budgeted expenses for these items in 2001–02

were \$60,000, \$45,615, \$17,000, \$14,336, and \$15,180, respectively.

The Florida Lime Administrative Committee and the Avocado Administrative Committee shared certain costs (staff, office space, and equipment) for economy and efficiency. Each Committee's share of these costs was based upon the amount of work and time devoted to their particular programs. In April 2001, the Lime Administrative Committee voted to suspend its regulations, including assessment collection. The suspension runs from February 19, 2002, to February 24, 2003 (67 FR 6837). They will not need an administrative staff, office space, or equipment during the suspension period. Therefore, the Avocado Administrative Committee must assume increased costs. The increased assessment is needed to cover the increased costs and to keep its operating reserve at an acceptable level.

The Committee reviewed and unanimously recommended 2002–03 expenditures of \$211,082 which included increases in administrative and office salaries, and research programs. Prior to arriving at this budget, the Committee considered information from various sources, such as the Committee's Budget Subcommittee. These groups discussed alternative expenditure levels. The assessment rate of \$0.20 per 55-pound bushel container of assessable avocados was then determined by dividing the total recommended budget by the quantity of assessable avocados, estimated at 950,000 55-pound bushel containers or equivalents for the 2002–03 fiscal year. This is approximately \$21,000 below the anticipated expenses, which the Committee determined to be acceptable.

A review of historical information and preliminary information pertaining to the upcoming fiscal year indicates that the average grower price for the 2002–03 season could range between \$10.00 and \$60.00 per 55-pound bushel container or equivalent of avocados. Therefore, the estimated assessment revenue for the 2002–03 fiscal year as a percentage of total grower revenue could range between .3 and 2 percent.

This action increases 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 are offset by the benefits derived by the operation of the marketing order. In addition, the Committee's meeting was widely publicized throughout the Florida avocado industry and all

interested persons were invited to attend the meeting and participate in Committee deliberations on all issues. Like all Committee meetings, the January 9, 2002, meeting was a public meeting and all entities, both large and small, were able to express views on this issue.

This rule imposes no additional reporting or recordkeeping requirements on either small or large Florida avocado 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 proposed rule concerning this action was published in the **Federal Register** on March 15, 2002 (67 FR 11614). Copies of the proposed rule were also mailed or sent via facsimile to all avocado handlers. Finally, the proposal was made available through the Internet by the Office of the Federal Register and USDA. A 30-day comment period ending April 15, 2002, was provided for interested persons to respond to the proposal. No comments were received.

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.

After consideration of all relevant material presented, including the information and recommendation submitted by the Committee and other available information, it is hereby found that this rule, as hereinafter set forth, will tend to effectuate the declared policy of the Act.

Pursuant to 5 U.S.C. 553, it also found and determined that good cause exists for not postponing the effective date of this rule until 30 days after publication in the **Federal Register** because handlers are already receiving 2002–03 crop avocados from growers. Moreover, the crop year began on April 1, 2002, and the assessment rate applies to all avocados handled during the 2002–03 and subsequent seasons. Further, the Committee needs sufficient funds to pay its expenses, and handlers are aware of this rule which was recommended at a public meeting. Also, a 30-day comment period was provided for in the proposed rule and no comments were received.

List of Subjects in 7 CFR Part 915

Avocados, Marketing agreements, Reporting and recordkeeping requirements.

For the reasons set forth in the preamble, 7 CFR part 915 is amended as follows:

PART 915—AVOCADOS GROWN IN SOUTH FLORIDA

1. The authority citation for 7 CFR part 915 continues to read as follows:

Authority: 7 U.S.C. 601–674.

2. Section 915.235 is revised to read as follows:

§ 915.235 Assessment rate.

On and after April 1, 2002, an assessment rate of \$0.20 per 55-pound container or equivalent is established for avocados grown in South Florida.

Dated: May 3, 2002.

A.J. Yates,

Administrator, Agricultural Marketing Service.

[FR Doc. 02–11676 Filed 5–9–02; 8:45 am]

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DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Agricultural Marketing Service

7 CFR Part 993

[Docket No. FV02–993–1 FR]

Dried Prunes Produced in California; Undersized Regulation for the 2002–03 Crop Year

AGENCY: Agricultural Marketing Service, USDA.

ACTION: Final rule.

SUMMARY: This rule changes the undersized regulation for dried prunes received by handlers from producers and dehydrators under Marketing Order No. 993 for the 2002–03 crop year. The marketing order regulates the handling of dried prunes produced in California and is administered locally by the Prune Marketing Committee (Committee). This rule removes the smallest, least desirable of the marketable size dried prunes produced in California from human consumption outlets and allows handlers to dispose of the undersized prunes in such outlets as livestock feed. The Committee estimated that this rule will reduce the excess of dried prunes by approximately 3,800 tons while leaving sufficient prunes to fill foreign and domestic trade demand.

EFFECTIVE DATE: August 1, 2002. This final rule applies to undersized dried prunes received by handlers during the

2002–03 crop year until the prunes are disposed of as required under the marketing order.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:

Richard P. Van Diest, Marketing Specialist, California Marketing Field Office, Marketing Order Administration Branch, Fruit and Vegetable Programs, AMS, USDA, 2202 Monterey Street, suite 102B, Fresno, California 93721; telephone: (559) 487–5901, Fax: (559) 487–5906; or George Kelhart, Technical Advisor, Marketing Order Administration Branch, Fruit and Vegetable Programs, AMS, USDA, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW STOP 0237, Washington, DC 20250–0237; 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, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW STOP 0237, 20250–0237; telephone: (202) 720–2491, Fax: (202) 720–8938, or E-mail: Jay.Guerber@usda.gov.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: This rule is issued under Marketing Agreement and Order No. 993, both as amended (7 CFR part 993), regulating the handling of dried prunes produced in California, hereinafter referred to as the “order.” The marketing agreement and order are 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. This rule is not intended to have retroactive effect. 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. A 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