



This document is scheduled to be published in the Federal Register on 11/25/2015 and available online at <http://federalregister.gov/a/2015-30018>, and on FDsys.gov

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Agricultural Marketing Service

7 CFR Part 966

[Doc. No. **AMS-FV-15-0058; FV15-966-1 IR**]

Tomatoes Grown in Florida; Decreased Assessment Rate

AGENCY: Agricultural Marketing Service, USDA.

ACTION: Interim rule with request for comments.

SUMMARY: This rule implements a recommendation from the Florida Tomato Committee (Committee) for a decrease in the assessment rate established for the 2015-16 and subsequent fiscal periods from \$0.0375 to \$0.03 per 25-pound carton of tomatoes handled under the marketing order (order). The Committee locally administers the order and is comprised of producers of tomatoes operating within the area of production. Assessments upon tomato handlers are used by the Committee to fund reasonable and necessary expenses of the program. The fiscal period begins August 1 and ends July 31. The assessment rate will remain in effect indefinitely unless modified, suspended, or terminated.

DATES: Effective November 27, 2015. Comments received by [INSERT DATE 60 DAYS AFTER THE DATE OF PUBLICATION IN THE FEDERAL REGISTER], will be considered prior to issuance of a final rule.

ADDRESSES: Interested persons are invited to submit written comments concerning this rule. Comments must be sent to the Docket Clerk, Marketing Order and Agreement Division, Specialty Crops Program, AMS, USDA, 1400 Independence Avenue SW, STOP 0237, Washington, DC 20250-0237; Fax: (202) 720-8938; or Internet: <http://www.regulations.gov>.

Comments should reference the document 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.regulations.gov>. All comments submitted in response to this rule will be included in the record and will be made available to the public. Please be advised that the identity of the individuals or entities submitting the comments will be made public on the Internet at the address provided above.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Steven Kauffman, Marketing Specialist or Christian D. Nissen, Regional Director, Southeast Marketing Field Office, Marketing Order and Agreement Division, Specialty Crops Program, AMS, USDA; Telephone: (863) 837-3375, Fax: (863) 291-8614, or E-mail:

Steven.Kauffman@ams.usda.gov or

Christian.Nissen@ams.usda.gov.

Small businesses may request information on complying with this regulation by contacting Jeffery Smutny, Marketing Order and Agreement Division, Specialty Crops Program, AMS, USDA, 1400 Independence Avenue SW, STOP 0237, Washington, DC 20250-0237; Telephone: (202) 720-2491, Fax: (202) 720-8938, or E-mail: Jeffery.Smutny@ams.usda.gov.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: This rule is issued under Marketing Agreement No. 125 and Order No. 966, both as amended (7 CFR part 966), regulating the handling of tomatoes grown in 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 Orders 12866, 13563, and 13175.

This rule has been reviewed under Executive Order 12988, Civil Justice Reform. Under the marketing order now in effect, Florida tomato 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 Florida tomatoes beginning August 1, 2015, and continue until amended, suspended, or terminated.

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 decreases the assessment rate established for the Committee for the 2015-16 and subsequent fiscal

periods from \$0.0375 to \$0.03 per 25-pound carton of tomatoes.

The Florida tomato 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 of Florida tomatoes. 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 2013-14 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 August 25, 2015, and unanimously recommended 2015-16 expenditures of \$1,513,177 and an assessment rate of \$0.03 per 25-pound carton of tomatoes.

In comparison, last year's budgeted expenditures were \$1,823,925. The assessment rate of \$0.03 is \$0.0075 lower than the rate currently in effect. The budget recommended for 2015-16 include decreases in education and promotion expenditures and personnel costs. The Committee recommended decreasing the assessment rate to more closely align assessment income to the lower budget.

The major expenditures recommended by the Committee for the 2015-16 year include \$435,377 for salaries, \$400,000 for education and promotion, and \$400,000 for research. Budgeted expenses for these items in 2014-15 were \$498,500, \$750,000, and \$300,000, respectively.

The assessment rate recommended by the Committee was derived by reviewing anticipated expenses, shipments, funds from block grants, interest income, and available reserves. Florida tomato shipments for the year are estimated at 33 million 25-pound cartons which should provide \$990,000 in assessment income. Income derived from handler assessments, along with funds from the Committee's authorized reserve, interest income, and funds from block grants, will be adequate to cover budgeted expenses. Funds in the reserve (currently \$1,136,195) will be kept within

the maximum permitted by the order of not to exceed one fiscal period's expenses as authorized in § 966.44.

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 is effective 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 2015-16 budget and those for subsequent fiscal periods will be reviewed and, as appropriate, approved by USDA.

Initial Regulatory Flexibility Analysis

Pursuant to requirements set forth in the Regulatory Flexibility Act (RFA) (5 U.S.C. 601-612), 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 businesses 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.

There are approximately 100 producers of tomatoes in the production area and approximately 80 handlers subject to regulation under the marketing order. Small agricultural producers are defined by the Small Business Administration (SBA) as those having annual receipts of less than \$750,000, and small agricultural service firms are defined as those whose annual receipts are less than \$7,000,000 (13 CFR 121.201).

Based on industry and Committee data, the average annual price for fresh Florida tomatoes during the 2014-15 season was approximately \$10.58 per 25-pound container, and total fresh shipments for the 2014-15 season were approximately 36.5 million cartons. Based on the average price, about 80 percent of handlers could be considered small businesses under SBA's definition. In addition, based on production data, grower prices as reported by the National Agricultural Statistics Service, and the total number of Florida tomato growers, the average annual grower revenue is below \$750,000. Thus, the majority of handlers and producers of Florida tomatoes may be classified as small entities.

This rule decreases the assessment rate established by the Committee and collected from handlers for the 2015-16 and subsequent fiscal periods from \$0.0375 to \$0.03 per 25-pound carton of tomatoes. The Committee unanimously recommended 2015-16 expenditures of \$1,513,177 and an assessment rate of \$0.03 per 25-pound carton. The assessment rate of \$0.03 is \$0.0075 lower than the 2013-14 rate. The quantity of assessable tomatoes for the 2015-16 season is estimated at 33 million cartons. Thus, the \$0.03

rate should provide \$990,000 in assessment income. Income derived from handler assessments, along with funds from the Committee's authorized reserve, interest income, and funds from block grants, will be adequate to cover budgeted expenses.

The major expenditures recommended by the Committee for the 2015-16 year include \$435,377 for salaries, \$400,000 for education and promotion, and \$400,000 for research. Budgeted expenses for these items in 2014-15 were \$498,500, \$750,000, and \$300,000, respectively. The Committee recommended a decrease in the assessment rate based on a reduction in expenditures for education and promotion, and personnel expenses.

Prior to arriving at this budget and assessment rate, the Committee considered information from various sources, such as the Committee's Executive Subcommittee, Research Subcommittee, and Education and Promotion Subcommittee. Alternative expenditure levels were discussed by these groups, based upon the relative value of various activities to the tomato industry. The Committee ultimately determined that assessment revenue, along with grant funds,

funds from reserves and interest income, would generate sufficient revenue to meet its expenses.

A review of historical information and preliminary information pertaining to the upcoming crop year indicates that the average grower price for the 2015-16 season may be around \$10.50 per 25-pound carton of tomatoes. Therefore, the estimated assessment revenue for the 2015-16 crop year as a percentage of total grower revenue could be approximately 0.3 percent.

This action decreases the assessment obligation imposed on handlers. Assessments are applied uniformly on all handlers, and some of the costs may be passed on to producers. However, decreasing the assessment rate reduces the burden on handlers. In addition, the Committee's meeting was widely publicized throughout the Florida tomato industry and all interested persons were invited to attend the meeting and participate in Committee deliberations on all issues. Like all Committee meetings, the August 25, 2015, 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 comments

on this interim rule, including the regulatory and informational impacts of this action on small businesses.

In accordance with the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995 (44 U.S.C. Chapter 35), the order's information collection requirements have been previously approved by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and assigned OMB No. 0581-0178 Vegetable and Specialty Crops. No changes in those requirements are necessary as a result of this action. Should any changes become necessary, they would be submitted to OMB for approval.

This action imposes no additional reporting or recordkeeping requirements on either small or large Florida tomato 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.

AMS is committed to complying with the E-Government Act, to promote the use of the internet and other information technologies to provide increased opportunities for citizen access to Government information and services, and for other purposes.

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/rules-regulations/moa/small-businesses>. Any questions about the compliance guide should be sent to Jeffery Smutny 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 is also found and determined upon good cause that it is impracticable, unnecessary, and contrary to the public interest to give preliminary notice prior to putting this rule into effect, and that good cause exists for not postponing the effective date of this rule until 30 days after publication in the **Federal Register** because: (1) The 2015-16 fiscal period

began on August 1, 2015, and the marketing order requires that the rate of assessment for each fiscal period apply to all assessable Florida tomatoes 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 this action decreases the assessment rate for assessable tomatoes beginning with the 2015-16 fiscal period; (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; and (4) this interim rule provides a 60-day comment period, and all comments timely received will be considered prior to finalization of this rule.

List of Subjects in 7 CFR Part 966

Marketing agreements, Reporting and recordkeeping requirements, Tomatoes.

For the reasons set forth in the preamble, 7 CFR part 966 is amended as follows:

PART 966 - TOMATOES GROWN IN FLORIDA

1. The authority citation for 7 CFR part 966 continues to read as follows:

Authority: 7 U.S.C. 601-674.

2. Section 966.234 is revised to read as follows:

§ 966.234 Assessment rate.

On and after August 1, 2015, an assessment rate of \$0.03 per 25-pound container is established for Florida tomatoes.

Dated: November 20, 2015.

Rex A. Barnes,
Associate Administrator,
Agricultural Marketing Service.
[FR Doc. 2015-30018 Filed: 11/24/2015 8:45 am; Publication Date: 11/25/2015]