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DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Agricultural Marketing Service

7 CFR Part 905

[Docket No. FV03-905-1 IFR]

Oranges, Grapefruit, Tangerines, and Tangelos Grown in Florida; Extension and Modification of the Exemption for Shipments of Tree Run Citrus

AGENCY: Agricultural Marketing Service, USDA.

ACTION: Interim final rule with request for comments.

SUMMARY: This rule extends for one season the exemption for tree run citrus under the Florida citrus marketing order (order). The order regulates the handling of oranges, grapefruit, tangerines, and tangelos grown in Florida and is administered locally by the Citrus Administrative Committee (committee). Under this rule, shipments of tree run citrus are exempt from grade, size, and assessment requirements for the 2003-04 season. This rule also increases the limit on the amount of citrus a grower can ship from 1,500 boxes to 3,000 boxes per variety and requires growers to identify their containers with their name and address. The committee believes this action may be a way to increase fresh market shipments, develop new markets, and improve grower returns.

DATES: Effective September 4, 2003; comments received by November 3, 2003 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 Administration Branch, Fruit and Vegetable Programs, AMS, USDA, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW., STOP 0237, Washington, DC 20250-0237; Fax: (202) 720-8938, or E-mail:

moab.docketclerk@usda.gov. All comments should reference the docket number and the date and page number of this issue of the **Federal Register** and will be made 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:

Doris Jamieson, Southeast Marketing Field Office, Marketing Order Administration Branch, Fruit and Vegetable Programs, AMS, USDA, 799 Overlook Drive, Suite A, Winter Haven, Florida 33884-1671; 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. 84 and Marketing Order No. 905, both as amended (7 CFR part 905), regulating the handling of oranges, grapefruit, tangerines, and tangelos 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 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 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 extends for one season an exemption to ship tree run citrus free from grade, size, and assessment requirements under the order. This rule also increases the limit on the total amount of citrus a grower can ship under the exemption from 1,500 boxes to 3,000 boxes per variety and requires growers to identify their containers with their name and address. This extension is for the 2003-04 season only. The committee believes this action may be a way to increase fresh market shipments, develop new markets, and improve grower returns. This action was recommended unanimously by the committee at its meeting on July 1, 2003.

Section 905.80 of the order provides authority for the Committee to exempt certain types of shipments from regulation. Exemptions can be implemented for types of shipments of any variety in such minimum quantities, or for such purposes as the committee with the approval of USDA may specify. No assessment is levied on fruit so shipped. The committee shall, with the approval of USDA, prescribe such rules, regulations, or safeguards as it deems necessary to prevent varieties handled under the provisions of this section from entering channels of trade for other than the purposes authorized by this section.

Section 905.149 of the order's rules and regulations defines grower tree run citrus and outlines the procedures to be used for growers to apply to the committee to ship their own tree run citrus exempt from grade, size, and assessment requirements. The provisions of this section were originally established just for the 2002-

03 season. It allowed growers to ship a maximum of 150 1³/₅ bushel boxes per variety per shipment up to a seasonal total of 1,500 boxes per variety of their tree run fruit free from order requirements.

This rule amends § 905.149 and extends its provisions for another season. This rule extends the exemption to ship tree run citrus free from grade, size, and assessment requirements as specified in § 905.149 for the 2003–04 season. This rule also amends § 905.149 by increasing the limit on the amount of citrus a grower can ship during the season from 1,500 boxes to 3,000 boxes per variety and by requiring that each container in each shipment be labeled with or contain the name and address of the grower. Growers must receive approval from the committee before they can utilize this exemption.

According to Florida Department of Citrus (FDOC) regulation 20–35.006, “Tree run grade is that grade of naturally occurring sound and wholesome citrus fruit which has not been separated either as to grade or size after severance from the tree.” Also, FDOC regulation 20–62.002 defines wholesomeness as fruit free from rot, decay, sponginess, unsoundness, leakage, staleness, or other conditions showing physical defects of the fruit. By definition, this fruit is handled by the grower and bypasses normal handler operations. Prior to implementation of the exemption, all tree run citrus had to meet all requirements of the marketing order, as well as State of Florida Statutes and Florida Department of Citrus regulations. Even with this rule, tree run citrus must continue to meet applicable State of Florida Statutes and Florida Department of Citrus regulations, including inspection and any container marking requirements. However, growers will be able to pick, box, and ship directly to buyers, and avoid the costs incurred when citrus is handled by packinghouses.

During the past few seasons, small producers of Florida citrus have expressed concerns about problems incurred when trying to sell their citrus. These concerns include increasing production costs, limited returns, and the availability of markets. For some growers, there is limited demand for the variety of citrus they produce or they do not produce much volume. Consequently, they have difficulty getting packinghouses to pack their fruit. These problems, along with market conditions, have driven a fair number of citrus growers out of the citrus industry.

According to Florida Agricultural Statistics Service, over the past five

years, fresh grapefruit sales have dropped 22 percent and fresh orange shipments are down 16 percent. This means fewer cartons are being packed. This can cause problems for varieties that may be out of favor with handlers and consumers, or for a particular variety of fruit where there may be a glut on the market. As a result, packinghouses do not wish to become over stocked with fruit which is difficult to market and, therefore, will not pack less popular minor varieties of fruit or fruit that is in oversupply. Packinghouses do not want to pack what they cannot sell. These factors have caused wholesome fruit to be shipped to processing plants or left on the tree.

When citrus cannot be sold into the fresh market, it can be sold to the processing plants. However, the prices received are considerably lower. During the last five years, only the 1999–2000 season produced on-tree returns for processed grapefruit that exceeded one dollar per box. Over the period from 1977 through 2000, the differential between fresh prices and processed prices has averaged \$3.55 per box. The average on-tree price for processed Florida oranges during the 2001–02 season was \$3.08 compared to \$4.50 for fresh oranges.

In addition, the costs associated with growing for the fresh market are greater than the costs for growing for the processed market. While the costs of growing for the fresh market have been increasing, in many cases the returns to the grower have been decreasing. The cost of picking, packing, hauling, and associated handling costs for fresh fruit is sometimes greater than the grower's return on the fruit. In some cases, where the cost of harvesting exceeds the returns to the grower or the grower cannot find a buyer for the fruit, economic abandonment can occur. According to information from the National Agricultural Statistics Service, the seasons of 1995–96, 1996–97, 1997–98, and 2000–01 had an average economic abandonment of two million boxes or more of red seedless grapefruit alone.

Consequently, growers are looking for other outlets for their fruit in an effort to increase returns. Some growers believe secondary markets exist which are not currently being supplied that would provide additional outlets for their citrus. They think niche markets exist that could be profitable and want the opportunity to service them. They believe they can ship quality fruit directly to out-of-state markets and that it would be well received. These growers contend tree run citrus does not

need a minimum grade and size to be marketable, and that they can supply quality fruit to secondary markets not served by packed fruit. However, they believe they need to bypass normal handler operations and the associated costs for it to be profitable.

To address these concerns, the committee recommended that for the 2002–03 season producers be allowed to ship small quantities of their own production directly to market exempt from order requirements. The exemption was for the 2002–03 season and expired July 31, 2003. A final rule on this action was published in the **Federal Register** on January 29, 2003 [68 FR 4361]. The committee agreed that following the 2002–03 season they would review the information provided by growers who applied for and used the tree run exemption to determine if the exemption should be continued.

During the 2002–03 season, 75 growers were approved to ship under the exemption. Approximately 25 growers actually used the exemption, shipping a total of 5,000 1–3/5 bushel boxes of oranges, grapefruit, tangerines, and tangelos. Those producers who took advantage of the exemption believe the program was successful. They were able to sell their fruit and supply markets not already supplied by packed fruit.

The growers who used the exemption believe that one year was not long enough and that it should be extended. They think more time is needed to determine the benefits of the exemption and whether it should be extended on a continuous basis. Growers believe to successfully develop new markets they must demonstrate they can consistently supply new markets with quality fruit and this cannot be done in a single season or without the exemption.

Growers also believe more markets exist. They think more time is needed to identify and research potential markets. In some cases, potential markets were not identified until late in the 2002–03 season when there was not enough fruit available to supply them. Growers want the opportunity to try to supply these markets in the coming season.

In addition, some interested growers did not take advantage of the exemption during the past season. Some stated if the exemption were to be extended for another season, they would use it to try shipping tree run citrus. By extending the exemption for another season, growers will have more time to utilize this opportunity and it will provide the committee with a better indicator of the level of interest and success.

There was also some discussion that the previously established 1,500 box

limit on the total amount of each variety of citrus a grower could ship during the season may prevent growers from fully developing new markets. One concern expressed was that should a buyer want additional fruit during the season, a grower may not be able to supply it because they had reached their shipping limit. Another concern was for growers that only produce one variety of citrus. The limit of 1,500 boxes per variety for the season may prevent them from utilizing more of their fruit. Also, a producer may identify two or more potential markets, but with the limited amount of fruit that can be shipped, the grower can only supply fruit to one market. Growers believe raising the limit on the number of boxes per variety they can ship for the season will allow them to supply the markets previously developed as well as develop additional markets for their tree run fruit.

The committee reviewed this issue and discussed the concerns of small growers and the problems encountered during the past season. The committee determined that offering the exemption for another season will provide additional information on how fruit shipped under the exemption was received by the market. It will also provide a better indication of whether or not other markets exist that packed fruit is not currently supplying, where these markets are located, and approximately how much fruit can be sold in such markets. Extending the exemption also gives other growers an opportunity to try it.

Tree run fruit will be sold primarily to non-competitive, niche markets, such as farmers' markets, flea markets, roadside stands, and similar outlets and will not compete with non-exempt fruit shipped under the order. Fruit is sold in similar markets within the state, and such markets have been successful. Continuing the exemption for another season allows growers to sell directly to similar markets outside of the state, supplying markets that might not otherwise be supplied. The committee believes this action will allow the industry to service more non-traditional markets and may be a way to increase fresh market shipments and to develop new markets.

The committee also discussed the limits on the amount of fruit growers can ship during the season. Several different combinations of shipment totals were discussed. The committee determined the previously established limit of 150 boxes of each variety per shipment was still appropriate, allowing the grower to ship a sufficient amount of fruit to make the exemption cost effective, while preventing too much

fruit from entering market channels exempt from order requirements. However, the committee did agree that by raising the total amount of citrus a grower can ship during the season, the grower may be able to service more markets and sell more fruit. The committee supported increasing the volume limit from 1,500 boxes to 3,000 boxes per variety under the exemption. This amount provides additional volume for the grower while limiting the amount of fruit that can be shipped under the exemption. Maintaining shipments at these levels will help keep this fruit in non-competitive outlets.

With the potential for additional fruit entering the market under the exemption, ensuring compliance with the provisions of the exemption and reducing the chances of tree run fruit getting into regular market channels is an important consideration. As a means of tracking the fruit and ensuring compliance, the committee decided that each container of tree run fruit should contain the name and address of the grower. Because tree run fruit can be shipped in a variety of containers, the committee thought requiring a label on the containers themselves may be impractical. For some containers, such as cardboard box, having the name and address printed on the outside of the container would not be problematic. However, on other containers, such as field boxes, plastic boxes, or mesh bags, it can be difficult to print the name and address or affix a label. Therefore, the committee agreed that placing the name and address inside the container provides a means for identifying the owner of the fruit with the least amount of difficulty.

Consequently, for the reasons discussed, the committee voted unanimously to extend the tree run exemption for the 2003–04 season, raise the limit on the amount of citrus a grower can ship from 1,500 boxes to 3,000 boxes per variety, and require that growers identify each container with their name and address. The exemption is being extended for the 2003–04 season only, and will expire on July 31, 2004. At the end of the season, the committee will review all available information and decide whether the exemption should be continued on a permanent basis.

Growers will continue to be required to apply to the committee, on the "Grower Tree Run Certificate Application" form provided by the committee, for an exemption to ship tree run citrus fruit to interstate markets. On this form, the grower must provide their name; address; phone number; legal description of the grove; variety of citrus

to be shipped; and the approximate number of boxes produced in the specified grove. The grower must also certify that the fruit to be shipped comes from the grove owned by the grower applicant. The application form will be submitted to the committee manager and reviewed for completeness and accuracy. The manager will also verify the information provided. After the application has been reviewed, the manager will notify the grower applicant in writing whether the application is approved or denied.

Once the grower has received approval for their application for exemption and begins shipping fruit, a "Report of Shipments Under Grower Tree Run Certificate" form, also provided by the committee, must be completed for each shipment. On this form, the grower will provide the location of the grove, the amount of fruit shipped, the shipping date, and the type of transportation used to ship the fruit, along with the vehicle license number. The grower must supply the Road Guard Station with a copy of the grower certificate report for each shipment, and provide a copy of the report to the committee. This report will enable the committee to maintain compliance and gather data, which will be used to determine the effectiveness of the exemption. Failure to comply with these requirements may result in the cancellation of a grower's certificate.

This rule does not affect the provision that handlers may ship up to 15 standard packed cartons (12 bushels) of fruit per day exempt from regulatory requirements. Fruit shipped in gift packages that are individually addressed and not for resale, and fruit shipped for animal feed are also exempt from handling requirements under specific conditions. Also, fruit shipped to commercial processors for conversion into canned or frozen products or into a beverage base are not subject to the handling requirements under the order.

Section 8e of the Act requires that whenever grade, size, quality, or maturity requirements are in effect for certain commodities under a domestic marketing order, including citrus, imports of that commodity must meet the same or comparable requirements. This rule does not change the minimum grade and size requirements under the order. Therefore, no change is necessary in the citrus import regulations as a result of this action.

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 action 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 11,000 producers of Florida citrus in the production area and approximately 75 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.

Based on industry and Committee data, the average annual f.o.b. price for fresh Florida oranges, grapefruit, tangerines, and tangelos during the 2002–03 season was approximately \$8.55 per 4/5 bushel carton, and total fresh shipments for the 2002–03 season where around 49.3 million cartons of oranges, grapefruit, tangerines, and tangelos. Approximately 20 handlers handled 65 percent of Florida's citrus shipments in 2002–03. Considering the average f.o.b. price, at least 55 percent of the oranges, grapefruit, tangerine, and tangelo handlers could be considered small businesses under SBA's definition. Therefore, the majority of Florida citrus handlers may be classified as small entities. The majority of Florida citrus producers may also be classified as small entities.

This rule extends the provisions of § 905.149 of the rules and regulations under the order for one more season. This rule exempts shipments of small quantities of tree run citrus from the grade, size, and assessment requirements for the 2003–04 season. This rule also increases the limit on the amount of citrus a grower can ship from 1,500 boxes to 3,000 boxes per variety during the season and requires growers to identify their containers with their name and address. Growers must receive approval from the committee before they can use this exemption. The committee believes this action may be a way to increase fresh market shipments, develop new markets, and improve grower returns. Authority for this action is provided in § 905.80(e).

According to a recent study by the University of Florida—Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, production costs for the 2001–02 season ranged from \$1.71 per box for processed oranges to \$2.41 per box for grapefruit grown for the fresh market. The average packing charge for oranges is approximately \$6.50 per box, for grapefruit the charge is approximately \$5.75 per box, and for tangerines the charge can be as high as \$9 per box. In a time when grower returns are weak, sending fruit to a packinghouse can be cost prohibitive, especially for the small grower. This rule may provide an additional outlet for fruit that might otherwise be forced into the processing market or left on the tree altogether.

This rule will not impose any additional costs on the grower, but have the opposite effect, providing growers the opportunity to reduce the costs associated with having fruit handled by a packinghouse. This action will allow growers to ship small quantities of their tree run citrus directly into interstate commerce exempt from the order's grade, size, and assessment requirements and their related costs. With this action, growers will be able to reduce handling costs and use those savings toward developing additional markets not serviced by packed fruit. This will benefit all growers regardless of size, but it is expected to have a particular benefit for the small grower.

The committee considered alternatives to this action. One possible alternative was not extending the exemption for another season. However, the committee believes the exemption does provide other possible outlets for fruit and may help increase returns to growers, so this alternative was rejected. Another alternative considered was removing the limit on the total amount of citrus a grower could ship during the season. Committee members had concerns about allowing this exemption without some limit on total shipments. The committee agreed that an increase in the limit would provide additional opportunities for growers without causing any market disruption or making it more difficult to keep tree run fruit in noncompetitive outlets. Therefore, this alternative was also rejected.

In accordance with the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995 (44 U.S.C. Chapter 35), the information collection requirements contained in this rule have been previously approved by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and assigned OMB No. 0581–0189. USDA has not identified any relevant Federal rules that duplicate, overlap or conflict with this rule. 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.

The committee's meeting was widely publicized throughout the citrus industry and all interested persons were invited to attend the meeting and participate in committee deliberations. Like all committee meetings, the July 1, 2003, meeting was a public meeting and all entities, both large and small, were able to express their views on this issue. Interested persons are invited to submit information on the regulatory and informational impacts of this action on small businesses.

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.

This rule invites comments on extending for one season the exemption to ship tree run citrus free from grade, size, and assessment requirements under the order. The rule also invites comments on the increase in the limit on the total amount of citrus a grower can ship per variety under the exemption from 1,500 boxes to 3,000 boxes and the requirement that growers identify their citrus with their name and address. Any comments received will be considered prior to finalization of this rule.

After consideration of all relevant material presented, including the committee's recommendation, and other information, it is found that this interim final 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 good cause exists for not postponing the effective date of this rule until 30 days after publication in the **Federal Register**. This rule needs to be in place as soon as possible to cover as many shipments during the 2003–04 season as possible. Growers need to know this rule is in place so they can begin making plans on how to utilize the exemption. In addition, growers and handlers are aware of this rule, which was recommended at a public meeting. Also, a 60-day comment period is provided for in this rule and any comments

received will be considered prior to finalization.

List of Subjects in 7 CFR Part 905

Grapefruit, Oranges, Tangelos, Tangerines, Marketing agreements, Reporting and recordkeeping requirements.

■ For the reasons set forth in the preamble, 7 CFR part 905 is amended as follows:

PART 905—ORANGES, GRAPEFRUIT, TANGERINES, AND TANGELOS GROWN IN FLORIDA

■ 1. The authority citation for 7 CFR part 905 continues to read as follows:

Authority: 7 U.S.C. 601–674.

■ 2. In § 905.149:

■ a. Paragraph (d) is amended by revising “July 31, 2003.” to read “July 31, 2004.”.

■ b. Paragraph (f)(2) is amended by revising “1,500” to read “3,000”.

■ c. Paragraph (f)(3) is amended by revising “for the 2002–03 season only” to read “during the 2003–04 season only” and “July 31, 2003.” to read “July 31, 2004.”.

■ d. A new paragraph (f)(6) is added to read as follows:

§ 905.149 Procedure for permitting growers to ship tree run citrus fruit.

* * * * *

(f) * * *

(6) Each container of tree run fruit shipped under a Grower Tree Run Certificate shall be labeled with or contain the name and address of the grower shipping under the Grower Tree Run Certificate.

Dated: August 28, 2003.

A.J. Yates,

Administrator, Agricultural Marketing Service.

[FR Doc. 03–22414 Filed 9–2–03; 8:45 am]

BILLING CODE 3410–02–P

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Agricultural Marketing Service

7 CFR Parts 922, 923, and 924

[Docket No. FV03–922–1 FR]

Increased Assessment Rates for Specified Marketing Orders

AGENCY: Agricultural Marketing Service, USDA.

ACTION: Final rule.

SUMMARY: This rule increases the assessment rates established for the Washington Apricot Marketing Committee, the Washington Cherry

Marketing Committee, and the Washington-Oregon Fresh Prune Committee (Committees) for the 2003–2004 and subsequent fiscal periods. This rule increases the assessment rates established for the Committees from \$2.50 to \$3.00 per ton for Washington apricots, from \$0.75 to \$1.00 per ton for Washington sweet cherries, and \$1.00 to \$1.50 per ton for Washington-Oregon fresh prunes. The Committees are responsible for local administration of the marketing orders which regulate the handling of apricots and cherries grown in designated counties in Washington, and prunes grown in designated counties in Washington and in Umatilla County, Oregon. Authorization to assess apricot, cherry, and prune handlers enables the Committees to incur expenses that are reasonable and necessary to administer the programs. The fiscal period for these marketing orders begins April 1 and ends March 31. The assessment rates will remain in effect indefinitely unless modified, suspended, or terminated.

EFFECTIVE DATE: September 4, 2003.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:

Teresa L. Hutchinson, Marketing Specialist, Northwest Marketing Field Office, Marketing Order Administration Branch, Fruit and Vegetable Programs, AMS, USDA, 1220 SW Third Avenue, suite 385, Portland, OR 97204; telephone: (503) 326–2724, Fax: (503) 326–7440; or George J. 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, SW., STOP 0237, Washington, DC 20250–0237; telephone: (202) 720–2491, Fax: (202) 720–8938.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: This rule is issued under Marketing Agreement and Order No. 922 (7 CFR part 922), regulating the handling of apricots grown in designated counties in Washington; Marketing Agreement and Order No. 923 (7 CFR part 923) regulating the handling of sweet cherries grown in designated counties in Washington; and Marketing Agreement and Order No. 924 (7 CFR part 924) regulating the handling of fresh prunes grown in designated counties in Washington and Umatilla County, Oregon, hereinafter referred to as the

“orders.” The orders 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. Under the marketing orders now in effect, handlers in the designated areas are subject to assessments. Funds to administer the orders are derived from such assessments. It is intended that the assessment rates fixed herein will be applicable to all assessable Washington apricots, Washington sweet cherries, and Washington-Oregon fresh prunes beginning April 1, 2003, 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 rates established for the Committees for the 2003–2004 and subsequent fiscal periods from \$2.50 to \$3.00 per ton for Washington apricots, from \$0.75 to \$1.00 per ton for Washington sweet cherries, and \$1.00 to \$1.50 per ton for Washington-Oregon fresh prunes.

The orders provide authority for the Committees, 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 Committees are producers and handlers in designated counties in Washington and in Umatilla County, Oregon. They are familiar with the Committees’ needs and with the costs for goods and services in their