

Proposed Rules

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This section of the FEDERAL REGISTER contains notices to the public of the proposed issuance of rules and regulations. The purpose of these notices is to give interested persons an opportunity to participate in the rule making prior to the adoption of the final rules.

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Agricultural Marketing Service

7 CFR Part 900

[Docket No. FV03-900-1 EXT]

Proposed Rule To Exempt Organic Producers and Marketers From Assessments for Market Promotion Activities Under Marketing Order Programs

AGENCY: Agricultural Marketing Service, USDA.

ACTION: Proposed rule; extension of comment period.

SUMMARY: Notice is hereby given that the comment period on the proposal to exempt producers and marketers from assessments for marketing promotion activities under marketing order programs is extended.

DATES: Comments must be received by February 2, 2004.

ADDRESSES: Interested persons are invited to submit written comments concerning this proposal. 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. Comments should reference the docket number and the date and page number of this issue of the **Federal Register**. All comments received will be available for public inspection in the Office of the Docket Clerk at the Marketing Order Administration Branch, AMS, USDA, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW., STOP 0237, Washington, DC 20250-0237 during regular business hours, or can be viewed at: <http://www.ams.usda.gov/fv/moab.html>.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:

George Kelhart or 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.

Small businesses may request information on compliance with this proposed regulation by contacting: Jay Guerber, Marketing Order Information Branch, Fruit and Vegetable Programs, AMS, USDA, 1400 Independence Avenue SW., STOP 0237, Washington, DC 20250-0237; Telephone: (202) 720-2491, Fax: (202) 720-5698, or E-mail: Jay.Guerber@usda.gov.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: The proposed rule on the exemption of organic producers and marketers from assessments for market promotion activities under marketing orders was published in the **Federal Register** on December 2, 2003 (68 FR 67381). The proposed rule invited comments through January 2, 2004.

The Executive Director of the Organic Trade Association requested, in consideration of the holiday season, that the comment period be extended thirty days to provide ample time for a thorough review and to ensure that those most likely to be affected by the proposed rule have the opportunity to calculate the impact.

An extension would provide interested persons more time to review and assess the proposed rule's impacts. Therefore, USDA is extending the period in which to file written comments until February 2, 2004. This notice is issued pursuant to the Agricultural Marketing Agreement Act of 1937 and the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act (Pub. L. 107-171).

Authority: 7 U.S.C. 601-674 and 7 U.S.C. 7401.

Dated: December 22, 2003.

Kenneth C. Clayton,

Associate Administrator, Agricultural Marketing Service.

[FR Doc. 03-31945 Filed 12-23-03; 10:27 am]

BILLING CODE 3410-02-P

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Agricultural Marketing Service

7 CFR Part 930

[Docket No. FV04-930-1 PR]

Tart Cherries Grown in the States of Michigan, et al.; Final Free and Restricted Percentages for the 2003-2004 Crop Year for Tart Cherries

AGENCY: Agricultural Marketing Service, USDA.

ACTION: Proposed rule.

SUMMARY: This proposal invites comments on the establishment of final free and restricted percentages for the 2003-2004 crop year. The percentages are 75 percent free and 25 percent restricted and would establish the proportion of cherries from the 2003 crop which may be handled in commercial outlets. The percentages are intended to stabilize supplies and prices, and strengthen market conditions and were recommended by the Cherry Industry Administrative Board (Board), the body which locally administers the marketing order. The marketing order regulates the handling of tart cherries grown in the States of Michigan, New York, Pennsylvania, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and Wisconsin.

DATES: Comments must be received by January 14, 2004.

ADDRESSES: Interested persons are invited to submit written comments concerning this action. Comments must be sent to the Docket Clerk, Fruit and Vegetable Programs, AMS, USDA, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW STOP 0237, Washington, DC 20250-0237; Fax: (202) 720-8938, or E-mail: moabdocket.clerk@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:

Patricia A. Petrella or Kenneth G. Johnson, Marketing Order Administration Branch, Fruit and Vegetable Programs, AMS, USDA, Suite 2A04, Unit 155, 4700 River Road, Riverdale, MD 20737; telephone: (301

734-5243, or Fax: (301) 734-5275; 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, or Fax: (202) 720-8938.

Small businesses may request information on complying with this regulation, or obtain a guide on complying with fruit, vegetable, and specialty crop marketing agreements and orders 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 proposal is issued under Marketing Agreement and Order No. 930 (7 CFR part 930), regulating the handling of tart cherries produced in the States of Michigan, New York, Pennsylvania, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and Wisconsin, 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 (Department) is issuing this rule in conformance with Executive Order 12866.

This proposal has been reviewed under Executive Order 12988, Civil Justice Reform. Under the marketing order provisions now in effect, final free and restricted percentages may be established for tart cherries handled by handlers during the crop year. This rule would establish final free and restricted percentages for tart cherries for the 2003-2004 crop year, beginning July 1, 2003, through June 30, 2004. This rule would 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 § 608c(15)(A) of the Act, any handler subject to an order may file with the Secretary 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 exempt therefrom. Such handler is afforded the opportunity for a hearing on the petition. After the hearing, the Secretary 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 in equity to review the Secretary's ruling on the petition, provided an action is filed not later than 20 days after the date of the entry of the ruling.

The order prescribes procedures for computing an optimum supply and preliminary and final percentages that establish the amount of tart cherries that can be marketed throughout the season. The regulations apply to all handlers of tart cherries that are in the regulated districts. Tart cherries in the free percentage category may be shipped immediately to any market, while restricted percentage tart cherries must be held by handlers in a primary or secondary reserve, or be diverted in accordance with § 930.59 of the order and § 930.159 of the regulations, or used for exempt purposes (and obtaining diversion credit) under § 930.62 of the order and § 930.162 of the regulations. The regulated Districts for this season are: District one—Northern Michigan; District two—Central Michigan; District three—Southwest Michigan; District seven—Utah; District eight—Washington and District nine—Wisconsin. Districts four, five, and six (New York, Oregon, and Pennsylvania, respectively) would not be regulated for the 2003-2004 season.

The order prescribes under § 930.52 that those districts to be regulated shall be those districts in which the average annual production of cherries over the prior three years has exceeded six million pounds. A district not meeting the six million-pound requirement shall not be regulated in such crop year. Because this requirement was not met in the districts of Oregon, and Pennsylvania, handlers in those districts would not be subject to volume regulation during the 2003-2004 crop year. Section 930.52 also prescribes that any district producing a crop which is less than 50 percent of the average annual processed production in that district in the previous five years would be exempt from any volume regulation if, in that year, a restricted percentage is established. Because New York's production is less than 50 percent of the previous 5-year production average, handlers in New York also would not be subject to volume regulation during the 2003-2004 crop year.

Demand for tart cherries at the farm level is derived from the demand for tart cherry products at retail. Demand for tart cherries and tart cherry products tends to be relatively stable from year to year. The supply of tart cherries, by contrast, varies greatly from crop year to crop year. The magnitude of annual

fluctuations in tart cherry supplies is one of the most pronounced for any agricultural commodity in the United States. In addition, since tart cherries are processed either into cans or frozen, they can be stored and carried over from crop year to crop year. This creates substantial coordination and marketing problems. The supply and demand for tart cherries is rarely balanced. The primary purpose of setting free and restricted percentages is to balance supply with demand and reduce large surpluses that may occur.

Section 930.50(a) of the order describes procedures for computing an optimum supply for each crop year. The Board must meet on or about July 1 of each crop year, to review sales data, inventory data, current crop forecasts and market conditions. The optimum supply volume shall be calculated as 100 percent of the average sales of the prior three years to which is added a desirable carryout inventory not to exceed 20 million pounds or such other amount as may be established with the approval of the Secretary. The optimum supply represents the desirable volume of tart cherries that should be available for sale in the coming crop year.

The order also provides that on or about July 1 of each crop year, the Board is required to establish preliminary free and restricted percentages. These percentages are computed by deducting the actual carryin inventory from the optimum supply figure (adjusted to raw product equivalent—the actual weight of cherries handled to process into cherry products) and subtracting that figure from the current year's USDA crop forecast. If the resulting number is positive, this represents the estimated over-production, which would be the restricted percentage tonnage. The restricted percentage tonnage is then divided by the sum of the USDA crop forecast or by an average of such other crop estimates for the regulated districts to obtain percentages for the regulated districts. The Board is required to establish a preliminary restricted percentage equal to the quotient, rounded to the nearest whole number, with the complement being the preliminary free tonnage percentage. If the tonnage requirements for the year are more than the USDA crop forecast, the Board is required to establish a preliminary free tonnage percentage of 100 percent and a preliminary restricted percentage of zero. The Board is required to announce the preliminary percentages in accordance with paragraph (h) of § 930.50.

The Board met on June 26, 2003, and computed, for the 2003-2004 crop year, an optimum supply of 180 million

pounds. The Board recommended that the desirable carryout figure be zero pounds. Desirable carryout is the amount of fruit required to be carried into the succeeding crop year and is set by the Board after considering market circumstances and needs. This figure can range from zero to a maximum of 20 million pounds. The Board calculated preliminary free and restricted percentages as follows: The USDA estimate of the crop was 218 million

pounds; a 10 million pound carryin added to that estimate results in a total available supply of 228 million pounds. The carryin figure reflects the amount of cherries that handlers actually have in inventory. Subtracting the optimum supply of 180 million pounds from the total estimated available supply results in a surplus of 48 million pounds of tart cherries. The surplus was divided by the production in the regulated districts (205 million pounds) and resulted in a

restricted percentage of 23 percent for the 2003–2004 crop year. The free percentage was 77 percent (100 percent minus 23 percent). The Board established these percentages and announced them to the industry as required by the order.

The preliminary percentages were based on the USDA production estimate and the following supply and demand information available at the June meeting for the 2003–2004 year:

		Millions of pounds
Optimum Supply Formula:		
(1) Average sales of the prior three years		180
(2) Plus desirable carryout		0
(3) Optimum supply calculated by the Board at the June meeting		180
Preliminary Percentages:		
(4) USDA crop estimate		218
(5) Plus carryin held by handlers as of July 1, 2003		10
(6) Total available supply for current crop year		228
(7) Surplus (item 6 minus item 3)		48
(8) USDA crop estimate for regulated districts		205
Percentages		
(11) Preliminary percentages (item 7 divided by item 8 × 100 equals restricted percentage; 100 minus restricted percentage equals free percentage)	77	23

Between July 1 and September 15 of each crop year, the Board may modify the preliminary free and restricted percentages by announcing interim free and restricted percentages to adjust to the actual pack occurring in the industry.

The Secretary establishes final free and restricted percentages through the informal rulemaking process. These percentages would make available the tart cherries necessary to achieve the optimum supply figure calculated by the Board. The difference between any final free percentage designated by the

Secretary and 100 percent is the final restricted percentage. The Board met on September 12, 2003, to recommend final free and restricted percentages.

The actual production reported by the Board was 222 million pounds, which is a four million pound increase from the USDA crop estimate of 218 million pounds.

A 10 million pound carryin was added to the Board's reported production of 222 million pounds, yielding a total available supply for the current crop year of 232 million pounds. The optimum supply of 180 million

pounds was subtracted from the total available supply which resulted in a 52 million pound surplus. The total surplus of 52 million pounds is divided by the 210 million-pound volume of tart cherries produced in the regulated districts. This results in a 25 percent restricted percentage and a corresponding 75 percent free percentage for the regulated districts.

The final percentages are based on the Board's reported production figures and the following supply and demand information available in September for the 2003–2004 crop year:

		Millions of pounds
Optimum Supply Formula:		
(1) Average sales of the prior three years		180
(2) Plus desirable carryout		0
(3) Optimum supply calculated by the Board at the October meeting		180
Final Percentages:		
(4) Board reported production		222
(5) Plus carryin held by handlers as of July 1, 2003		10
(6) Tonnage available for current crop year		232
(7) Surplus (item 6 minus item 3)		52
(8) Production in regulated districts		210
Percentages		
(11) Final Percentages (item 7 divided by item 8 × 100 equals restricted percentage; 100 minus restricted percentage equals free percentage)	75	25

The Department's "Guidelines for Fruit, Vegetable, and Specialty Crop

Marketing Orders" specify that 110 percent of recent years' sales should be

made available to primary markets each season before recommendations for

volume regulation are approved. This goal would be met by the establishment of a preliminary percentage which releases 100 percent of the optimum supply and the additional release of tart cherries provided under § 930.50(g). This release of tonnage, equal to 10 percent of the average sales of the prior three years sales, is made available to handlers each season. The Board recommended that such release should be made available to handlers the first week of December and the first week of May. Handlers can decide how much of the 10 percent release they would like to receive on the December and May release dates. Once released, such cherries are released for free use by such handler. Approximately 18 million pounds would be made available to handlers this season in accordance with Department Guidelines. This release would be made available to every handler and released to such handler in proportion to its percentage of the total regulated crop handled. If a handler does not take his/her proportionate amount, such amount shall remain in the inventory reserve.

The Regulatory Flexibility Act and Effects on Small Businesses

The Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) has considered the economic impact of this action on small entities and has prepared this initial regulatory flexibility analysis. The Regulatory Flexibility Act (RFA) would allow AMS to certify that regulations do not have a significant economic impact on a substantial number of small entities.

However, as a matter of general policy, AMS' Fruit and Vegetable Programs (Programs) no longer opt for such certification, but rather perform regulatory flexibility analyses for any rulemaking that would generate the interest of a significant number of small entities. Performing such analyses shifts the Programs' efforts from determining whether regulatory flexibility analyses are required to the consideration of regulatory options and economic or regulatory impacts.

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 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 40 handlers of tart cherries who are subject to regulation under the tart cherry

marketing order and approximately 900 producers of tart cherries in the regulated area. Small agricultural service firms, which includes handlers, have been defined by the Small Business Administration (13 CFR 121.201) as those having annual receipts of less than \$5,000,000, and small agricultural producers are defined as those having annual receipts of less than \$750,000. A majority of the producers and handlers are considered small entities under SBA's standards.

Board and subcommittee meetings are widely publicized in advance and are held in a location central to the production area. The meetings are open to all industry members (including small business entities) and other interested persons who are encouraged to participate in the deliberations and voice their opinions on topics under discussion. Thus, Board recommendations can be considered to represent the interests of small business entities in the industry.

The principal demand for tart cherries is in the form of processed products. Tart cherries are dried, frozen, canned, juiced, and pureed. During the period 1998/99 through 2002/03, approximately 91 percent of the U.S. tart cherry crop, or 240.6 million pounds, was processed annually. Of the 240.6 million pounds of tart cherries processed, 55 percent was frozen, 30 percent was canned, and 15 percent was utilized for juice and other products.

Based on National Agricultural Statistics Service data, acreage in the United States devoted to tart cherry production has been trending downward. Bearing acreage has declined from a high of 50,050 acres in 1987/88 to 36,900 acres in 2002/03. This represents a 26 percent decrease in total bearing acres. Michigan leads the nation in tart cherry acreage with 70 percent of the total and produces about 75 percent of the U.S. tart cherry crop each year.

The 2003/04 crop is moderate in size at 222.1 million pounds. The largest crop occurred in 1995 with production in the regulated districts reaching a record 395.6 pounds. The price per pound received by tart cherry growers ranged from a low of 7.3 cents in 1987 to a high of 46.4 cents in 1991. These problems of wide supply and price fluctuations in the tart cherry industry are national in scope and impact. Growers testified during the order promulgation process that the prices they received often did not come close to covering the costs of production.

The industry demonstrated a need for an order during the promulgation process of the marketing order because large variations in annual tart cherry

supplies tend to lead to fluctuations in prices and disorderly marketing. As a result of these fluctuations in supply and price, growers realize less income. The industry chose a volume control marketing order to even out these wide variations in supply and improve returns to growers. During the promulgation process, proponents testified that small growers and processors would have the most to gain from implementation of a marketing order because many such growers and handlers had been going out of business due to low tart cherry prices. They also testified that, since an order would help increase grower returns, this should increase the buffer between business success and failure because small growers and handlers tend to be less capitalized than larger growers and handlers.

Aggregate demand for tart cherries and tart cherry products tends to be relatively stable from year-to-year. Similarly, prices at the retail level show minimal variation. Consumer prices in grocery stores, and particularly in food service markets, largely do not reflect fluctuations in cherry supplies. Retail demand is assumed to be highly inelastic which indicates that price reductions do not result in large increases in the quantity demanded. Most tart cherries are sold to food service outlets and to consumers as pie filling; frozen cherries are sold as an ingredient to manufacturers of pies and cherry desserts. Juice and dried cherries are expanding market outlets for tart cherries.

Demand for tart cherries at the farm level is derived from the demand for tart cherry products at retail. In general, the farm-level demand for a commodity consists of the demand at retail or food service outlets minus per-unit processing and distribution costs incurred in transforming the raw farm commodity into a product available to consumers. These costs comprise what is known as the "marketing margin."

The supply of tart cherries, by contrast, varies greatly. The magnitude of annual fluctuations in tart cherry supplies is one of the most pronounced for any agricultural commodity in the United States. In addition, since tart cherries are processed either into cans or frozen, they can be stored and carried over from year-to-year. This creates substantial coordination and marketing problems. The supply and demand for tart cherries is rarely in equilibrium. As a result, grower prices fluctuate widely, reflecting the large swings in annual supplies.

In an effort to stabilize prices, the tart cherry industry uses the volume control

mechanisms under the authority of the Federal marketing order. This authority allows the industry to set free and restricted percentages. These restricted percentages are only applied to states or districts with a 3-year average of production greater than six million pounds.

The primary purpose of setting restricted percentages is an attempt to bring supply and demand into balance. If the primary market is over-supplied with cherries, grower prices decline substantially.

The tart cherry sector uses an industry-wide storage program as a supplemental coordinating mechanism under the Federal marketing order. The primary purpose of the storage program is to warehouse supplies in large crop years in order to supplement supplies in short crop years. The storage approach is feasible because the increase in price—when moving from a large crop to a short crop year—more than offsets the cost for storage, interest, and handling of the stored cherries.

The price that growers' receive for their crop is largely determined by the total production volume and carryin inventories. The Federal marketing order permits the industry to exercise supply control provisions, which allow for the establishment of free and restricted percentages for the primary market, and a storage program. The establishment of restricted percentages impacts the production to be marketed in the primary market, while the storage program has an impact on the volume of unsold inventories.

The volume control mechanism used by the cherry industry results in decreased shipments to primary markets. Without volume control the primary markets (domestic) would likely be over-supplied, resulting in lower grower prices.

To assess the impact that volume control has on the prices growers receive for their product, an econometric model has been developed. The econometric model provides a way to see what impacts volume control may have on grower prices. The three districts in Michigan, along with the districts in Utah, Washington, and Wisconsin are the restricted areas for this crop year and their combined total production is 210 million pounds. A 25 percent restriction means 158 million pounds is available to be shipped to primary markets from these three states. Production levels of 7 million pounds for New York, 1.3 million pounds for Oregon, and 3.8 million pounds for Pennsylvania, result in an additional 12.1 million pounds available for primary market shipments.

In addition, USDA requires a 10 percent release from reserves as a market growth factor. This results in an additional 18 million pounds being available for the primary market. The 158 million pounds from Michigan, Utah, Washington, and Wisconsin, the 12 million pounds from the other producing states, the 18 million pound release, and the 10 million pound carryin inventory gives a total of 198 million pounds being available for the primary markets.

The econometric model is used to estimate grower prices with and without regulation. Without the volume controls, the estimated grower price would be approximately \$0.36 per pound. With volume controls, the estimated grower price would increase to approximately \$0.43 per pound.

The use of volume controls is estimated to have a positive impact on grower's total revenues. Without regulation, growers' total revenues from processed cherries are estimated to be \$79.9 million in 2003–2004. In this scenario, production is 222 million pounds and price, without regulation, is estimated to be \$0.36 per pound. With regulation, growers' revenues from processed cherries are estimated to be \$85.1 million. In this scenario, 198 million pounds are available for the primary markets with an estimated price of \$0.43 per pound. Over the past several seasons, growers received approximately \$0.10 cents for restricted (diverted) cherries.

The results of econometric analysis are subject to some level of uncertainty. As long as average grower prices are \$0.38 per pound or greater, then growers' are better off with the regulation. With a price of \$0.38 per pound, the estimated revenues under no regulation would be similar to the revenues with a 25 percent regulation assuming that all the production would be sold and marketed under the no regulation scenario.

It is concluded that the 25 percent volume control would not unduly burden producers, particularly smaller growers. The 25 percent restriction would be applied to the growers in Michigan, Utah, Washington, and Wisconsin. The growers in the other three regulated states will benefit from this restriction. Michigan, New York, and Washington produced over 91 percent of the tart cherry crop during the 2001–2002 crop year.

Recent grower prices have been as high as \$0.44 per pound in the 2002–2003 crop year. At current production and yield levels, the cost of production is reported to be \$0.43 per pound. Thus, the estimated \$0.43 per pound received

by growers under the regulation scenario just covers the cost of production. Under the no regulation scenario, estimated grower prices would not cover the total cost of production. Lower yields and production result in higher costs of production. Overhead or fixed costs are spread over lower levels of production which result in higher costs of production per acre. Even in years when no production is harvested, growers face fixed costs of production and additional costs associated with maintaining the orchard for future years of production. The use of volume controls is believed to have little or no effect on consumer prices and will not result in fewer retail sales or sales to food service outlets.

Without the use of volume controls, the industry could be expected to start to build large amounts of unwanted inventories. These inventories have a depressing effect on grower prices. The econometric model shows for every 1 million-pound increase in carryin inventories, a decrease in grower prices of \$0.0033 per pound occurs. The use of volume controls allows the industry to supply the primary markets while avoiding the disastrous results of over-supplying these markets. In addition, through volume control, the industry has an additional supply of cherries that can be used to develop secondary markets such as exports and the development of new products. The use of reserve cherries in the production shortened 2002/03 crop year proved to be very useful and beneficial to growers and packers.

In discussing the possibility of marketing percentages for the 2003–2004 crop year, the Board considered the following factors contained in the marketing policy: (1) The estimated total production of tart cherries; (2) the estimated size of the crop to be handled; (3) the expected general quality of such cherry production; (4) the expected carryover as of July 1 of canned and frozen cherries and other cherry products; (5) the expected demand conditions for cherries in different market segments; (6) supplies of competing commodities; (7) an analysis of economic factors having a bearing on the marketing of cherries; (8) the estimated tonnage held by handlers in primary or secondary inventory reserves; and (9) any estimated release of primary or secondary inventory reserve cherries during the crop year.

The Board's review of the factors resulted in the computation and announcement in September 2003 of the restricted percentages proposed in this rule (75 percent free and 25 percent restricted).

One alternative to this action would be not to have volume regulation this season. Board members stated that no volume regulation would be detrimental to the tart cherry industry due to the size of the 2003–2004 crop. Returns to growers would not cover their costs of production for this season which might cause some to go out of business.

As mentioned earlier, the Department's "Guidelines for Fruit, Vegetable, and Specialty Crop Marketing Orders" specify that 110 percent of recent years' sales should be made available to primary markets each season before recommendations for volume regulation are approved. The quantity available under this rule is 110 percent of the quantity shipped in the prior three years.

The free and restricted percentages proposed to be established by this rule release the optimum supply and apply uniformly to all regulated handlers in the industry, regardless of size. There are no known additional costs incurred by small handlers that are not incurred by large handlers. The stabilizing effects of the percentages impact all handlers positively by helping them maintain and expand markets, despite seasonal supply fluctuations. Likewise, price stability positively impacts all producers by allowing them to better anticipate the revenues their tart cherries will generate.

The Department has not identified any relevant Federal rules that duplicate, overlap, or conflict with this regulation.

While the benefits resulting from this rulemaking are difficult to quantify, the stabilizing effects of the volume regulations impact both small and large handlers positively by helping them maintain markets even though tart cherry supplies fluctuate widely from season to season.

In compliance with Office of Management and Budget (OMB) regulations (5 CFR part 1320) which implement the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995 (Pub. L. 104–13), the information collection and recordkeeping requirements have been previously approved by OMB and assigned OMB Number 0581–0177.

There are some reporting, recordkeeping, and other compliance requirements under the marketing order. The reporting and recordkeeping burdens are necessary for compliance purposes and for developing statistical data for maintenance of the program. The forms require information which is readily available from handler records and which can be provided without data processing equipment or trained statistical staff. As with other, similar

marketing order programs, reports and forms are periodically studied to reduce or eliminate duplicate information collection burdens by industry and public sector agencies. This rule does not change those requirements.

A 15-day comment period is provided to allow interested persons to respond to this proposal. Fifteen days is deemed appropriate because this rule needs to be in place as soon as possible to achieve its intended purpose of making the optimum supply quantity computed by the Board available to handlers marketing 2003–2004 crop year cherries. All written comments timely received will be considered before a final determination is made on this matter.

List of Subjects in 7 CFR Part 930

Marketing agreements, Reporting and recordkeeping requirements, Tart cherries.

For the reasons set forth in the preamble, 7 CFR Part 930 is proposed to be amended as follows:

PART 930—TART CHERRIES GROWN IN THE STATES OF MICHIGAN, NEW YORK, PENNSYLVANIA, OREGON, UTAH, WASHINGTON, AND WISCONSIN

1. The authority citation for 7 CFR part 930 continues to read as follows:

Authority: 7 U.S.C. 601–674.

2. Section 930.253 is added to read as follows:

Note: This section will not appear in the annual Code of Federal Regulations.

§ 930.253 Final free and restricted percentages for the 2003–2004 crop year.

The final percentages for tart cherries handled by handlers during the crop year beginning on July 1, 2003, which shall be free and restricted, respectively, are designated as follows: Free percentage, 75 percent and restricted percentage, 25 percent.

Dated: December 22, 2003.

A.J. Yates,

Administrator, Agricultural Marketing Service.

[FR Doc. 03–31946 Filed 12–29–03; 8:45 am]

BILLING CODE 3410–02–P

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Rural Utilities Service

7 CFR Part 1720

RIN 0572–AB83

Guarantees for Bonds and Notes Issued for Electrification or Telephone Purposes

AGENCY: Rural Utilities Service, USDA.

ACTION: Proposed rule.

SUMMARY: This rule proposes to establish procedures for a guarantee program for cooperatives and other not-for-profit lenders that make loans eligible for assistance under the Rural Electrification Act of 1936 (the RE Act). Criteria for eligibility of lenders and transactions are set forth in the rule together with application procedures. Program participants are required to pay an annual fee for the guarantee. The fee will be credited to the Rural Development Subaccount to provide funds for zero-interest loans and grants pursuant to section 313 of the RE Act. The Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 (Pub. L. 107–171), amended the RE Act, by adding section 313A which establishes this program.

DATES: Written comments must be received by RUS or carry a postmark or equivalent no later than March 1, 2004.

ADDRESSES: Written comments should be addressed to Blaine D. Stockton, Assistant Administrator, Electric Program, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Rural Utilities Service, Room 5156 South Building, Stop 1560, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW., Washington, DC 20250–1560. Telephone (202) 720–9545. RUS requires a signed original and three copies of all comments (7 CFR Part 1700). All comments received will be made available for inspection in room 4037 South Building during regular business hours.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Patrick R. Sarver, Management Analyst, Electric Program, Rural Utilities Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW., STOP 1560, Room 5158, Washington, DC 20250–1560. Telephone number (202) 690–2992, Facsimile (202) 690–0717.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

Executive Order 12866

This proposed rule has been determined to be significant for purposes of Executive Order 12866 and, therefore, has been reviewed by the