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DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Agricultural Marketing Service

7 CFR Part 915

[Docket No. FV95-915-11FR]

Avocados Grown in South Florida; Revision of Grade Requirements for Certain Florida Avocados

AGENCY: Agricultural Marketing Service, USDA.

ACTION: Interim final rule with request for comments.

SUMMARY: This interim final rule revises grade requirements for fresh Florida avocados shipped in certain containers to destinations within the production area in Florida. The marketing order regulates the handling of avocados grown in South Florida and is administered locally by the Florida Avocado Administrative Committee (committee). This rule will enable Florida growers and handlers to market a larger percentage of their crop in the production area, in response to demand.

DATES: Effective on August 17, 1995; comments which are received by September 18, 1995 will be considered prior to issuance of any final rule.

ADDRESSES: Interested persons are invited to submit written comments concerning this rule. Comments must be sent in triplicate to the Docket Clerk, Fruit and Vegetable Division, AMS, USDA, room 2525-S, P.O. Box 96456, Washington, DC 20090-6456, FAX Number (202) 720-5698. 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.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Aleck Jonas, Marketing Specialist, Southeast Marketing Field Office, Fruit and Vegetable Division, AMS, USDA,

P.O. Box 2276, Winter Haven, Florida 33883-2276; telephone: 813-299-4770; or Caroline C. Thorpe, Marketing Specialist, Marketing Order Administration Branch, F&V, AMS, USDA, room 2522-S, P.O. Box 96456, Washington, DC 20090-6456; telephone: (202) 720-8139.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: This rule is issued under Marketing Order No. 915 (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 (Department) is issuing this rule in conformance with Executive Order 12866.

This rule has been reviewed under Executive Order 12778, Civil Justice Reform. This rule is not intended to have retroactive effect. This interim final 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 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 exempted therefrom. A 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 a principal place of business, has jurisdiction in equity to review the Secretary's ruling on the petition, provided a bill in equity is filed not later than 20 days after the date of the entry of the ruling.

Pursuant to requirements set forth in the Regulatory Flexibility Act (RFA), the Administrator of the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) has considered the economic impact of this action on small entities.

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 65 handlers of avocados who are subject to regulation under the marketing order and approximately 95 producers of avocados in the regulated area. Small agricultural service firms are defined by the Small Business Administration (13 CFR 121.601) as those having annual receipts of less than \$5,000,000, and small agricultural producers are defined as those whose annual receipts are less than \$500,000. The majority of handlers and producers of South Florida avocados may be classified as small entities.

This rule invites comments on a change in grade requirements for Florida avocados. This rule revises the order's rules and regulations by removing all grade requirements for fresh avocados shipped to destinations within the production area in Florida packed in containers other than those authorized under § 915.305. The committee met July 12, 1995, and unanimously recommended this action.

Sections 915.50 and 915.52 provide the authority for the committee to recommend various regulations and modifications, suspension, or termination of regulations to the Secretary. Section 915.306 of the regulations specifies grade, pack, and container marking regulations for fresh shipments of avocados grown in Florida. Currently § 915.306 of the order specifies that all fresh Florida avocados must grade at least U.S. No. 2, when shipped in any container.

This rule revises § 915.306 by removing all grade requirements for fresh avocados shipped to destinations within the Florida production area packed in containers other than those authorized under § 915.305. Section 915.306 was amended through a proposed rule published at 56 FR 4953 on February 7, 1991, and finalized at 56 FR 36079 on July 31, 1991. That amendment established a minimum grade requirement of U.S. No. 2 and container marking and sealing requirements for Florida avocados handled to points within the production

area (South Florida). This rule was established prior to Hurricane Andrew when avocados were plentiful. Shipments of poorer quality avocados to the markets within the production area depressed prices for better quality avocados and resulted in lower overall returns to producers. Plentiful supplies of avocados had allowed for higher quality avocados to be offered at a relatively lower cost, encouraging consumption by presenting a higher quality product.

However, Hurricane Andrew, in August of 1992, reduced production acreage from approximately 9,000 acres to less than 6,000 acres with many non-producing trees in the remaining acreage. Production in the 1991-92 season was 1,110,105 bushels. In the 1992-93 season, production fell to 283,666 bushels and in the 1993-94 season it was at 174,712 bushels. In response to this reduced production the committee requested and was granted a temporary suspension of grade requirements for fresh avocados shipped in certain containers to destinations within the production area in Florida. The relaxation for the 1993-94 season was published as a final rule at 58 FR 34684, on June 29, 1993, and for the 1994-95 season by a final rule published at 59 FR 33417 on June 29, 1994. These temporary relaxations were requested and granted under the assumption that production would return to pre-Hurricane Andrew levels.

Although the 1994-95 season recovered to 778,951 bushels, it is still well below the levels reached prior to the hurricane. Also, changing economic and environmental priorities of the South Florida area are capping the growth on Florida avocado production. Future production is expected to remain flat at approximately 700,000 bushels annually, or to increase only slightly. The committee considers production levels set prior to Hurricane Andrew as unattainable.

The temporary grade relaxations of the last two seasons were successful in making additional supplies of fruit available to meet consumer needs consistent with crop and market conditions. The relaxations demonstrated that there is a market for lower quality avocados in the production area. Also, better quality avocados did not suffer depressed prices due to the availability of the lower quality fruit.

The container and marking requirements clearly identify graded avocados from non-graded avocados. Those avocados sold in the production area which are not subject to grade cannot be packed in regulated

containers. This allows customers to readily identify graded versus those not meeting grade.

This relaxation will provide Florida avocado growers and handlers with an opportunity to sell, in the production area, fresh avocados which would otherwise be culled during the packing process, thus making additional avocados available to consumers. This rule is expected to facilitate the movement of fresh market avocados sold within the production area.

This relaxation will only apply to Florida avocados shipped to destinations within the production area. Thus, the U.S. No. 2 grade requirement will continue to apply unchanged to avocados shipped to destinations outside the production area, as well as to all avocados shipped to any destination in those containers whose size and type are specified in § 915.305. Also unchanged by this action are current maturity, container, pack and inspection requirements for all fresh Florida avocado shipments under the avocado marketing order.

Avocados imported into the United States must grade at least U.S. No. 2, as provided in § 944.28 (7 CFR 944.28). Since this rule does not change the minimum grade requirement of U.S. No. 2 specified in § 915.306 for avocados handled to points outside the production area, there is no need to change the avocado import regulation. Section 8e of the Act (7 U.S.C. 608e-1) requires that whenever specified commodities, including avocados, are regulated under a Federal marketing order, imports of that commodity into the United States must meet the same or comparable grade, size, quality, or maturity requirements as those in effect for the domestically produced commodity.

This rule reflects the committee's and the Department's appraisal of the need to relax the grade requirements for certain avocados grown in Florida. The Department's view is that this action will have a beneficial impact on producers and handlers since it will permit avocado handlers to make additional supplies of fruit available to meet consumer needs consistent with crop and market conditions.

Based on these considerations, the Administrator of the AMS has determined that this rule will not have a significant economic impact on a substantial number of small entities.

After consideration of all relevant material presented, including the Committee's recommendation, and other available 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 that good cause exists for not postponing the effective date of this rule until 30 days after publication in the **Federal Register** because: (1) This action relaxes grade requirements currently in effect for avocados grown in Florida; (2) Florida avocado handlers are aware of this action which was unanimously recommended by the committee at a public meeting, and they will need no additional time to comply with the relaxed requirements; (3) since Florida avocado shipments began on May 29, 1995, this rule needs to be in effect as soon as possible to cover as much of the crop as possible; and (4) this rule provides a 30-day comment period and any comments received will be considered prior to finalization of this rule.

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 915.306 is amended by revising paragraph (a)(7) to read as follows:

§ 915.306 Florida avocado grade, pack, and container marking regulation.

(a) * * *

(7) Notwithstanding the provisions in this section, such avocados may be handled not subject to the grade requirements specified in paragraph (a)(1) of this section when they are shipped in containers other than those authorized under § 915.305 to destinations within the production area.

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Dated: August 11, 1995.

Terry C. Long,

Acting Deputy Director, Fruit and Vegetable Division.

[FR Doc. 95-20352 Filed 8-16-95; 8:45 am]

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