

STOC Testimony of Bret Erickson

Executive Vice President, Little Bear Produce

My name is Bret Erickson, and I serve as Executive Vice President of Little Bear Produce in Edinburg, Texas. We are a family-owned grower/packer/shipper and fresh cut processor based in Edinburg, Texas. We employ nearly 200 full-time people, plus an additional 500 seasonal workers. We farm roughly 6,000 acres of vegetables, including onions. I've worked in agriculture for nearly 30 years—more than half of that in fresh produce—and have served on boards including IFPA, TIPA, and the Texas Vegetable Association. I've testified before both the U.S. Senate and House Agriculture Committees and have served on USDA's Fruit and Vegetable Industry Advisory Committee and the Agricultural Policy Advisory Committee for Fruits and Vegetables.

Today, I speak on behalf of the South Texas onion industry, drawing on decades of experience to offer support for the proposed updates to Federal Marketing Order #959.

1. Addition of a Public Member

The South Texas Onion Committee would benefit from including a public voting member. Broader representation brings transparency and fresh ideas, helping ensure that decisions reflect not only growers and shippers but also the communities we serve. The ability to include outside expertise—from academia, allied industries, or institutional partners—will help the Committee stay forward-looking and responsive to an evolving marketplace.

2. Permission to Use Outside Funds

Our industry should be allowed to supplement assessments with outside funding sources such as federal and state grants. Marketing Texas onions takes resources, and our current budget of around \$70,000 per year simply isn't enough to make a meaningful impact. In a marketplace where national campaigns and branded commodities spend millions, access to external funds would allow the Committee to better promote Texas onions and compete for consumer attention.

3. Expanded Marketing and Promotion Authority

To make those dollars work, the Committee must also have the flexibility to use funds for paid promotions and advertising. Limiting outreach to internal channels like social media and research outreach isn't enough. The ability to advertise, work with influencers, and develop in-store promotions would help expand reach, drive demand, and ultimately increase sales of Texas onions.

4. Adjust Continuation Vote Threshold

The current requirement of a 67% threshold for continuation is unnecessarily high and inconsistent with most other marketing orders. Both of the last two continuation votes exceeded 51% but required a second round to meet 67%. Reducing the threshold to a simple majority—51%—would streamline the process, better reflect producer sentiment, and ensure the program continues to serve growers effectively.

Conclusion

The proposed changes—adding a public member, allowing access to outside funds, expanding marketing authority, and modernizing the voting threshold—are practical steps that will strengthen the Committee’s effectiveness and relevance.

The South Texas onion industry represents a proud legacy and a promising future. These updates will help us continue to grow, innovate, and promote one of Texas’s signature crops while maintaining the transparency and accountability our growers and communities deserve.

Thank you for your consideration and for your continued support of the South Texas onion industry.