

Written Testimony of Jed Murray
Before the Administrative Law Judge

Hearing on Proposed Amendments to Federal Marketing Order No. 959 (South Texas Onions)

Submitted by: Jed Murray

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Industry Role: Industry Representative (Proponent)

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My name is Jed Murray, and I am appearing today in support of the proposed amendments to Federal Marketing Order No. 959, which governs onions produced in South Texas. I serve as Director of Government Relations for the Texas International Produce Association (TIPA), representing growers, handlers, and allied partners engaged with the Texas 1015 Sweet Onion industry.

The purpose of my testimony is to provide a factual overview of the Texas 1015 Sweet Onion industry, its economic conditions, and the role of the South Texas Onion Committee (STOC) in ensuring regional marketing, quality standards, effective research, and promotion activities essential to this critical Texas crop.

The South Texas Onion Committee (STOC) administers Federal Marketing Order No. 959, established in 1961 under the Agricultural Marketing Agreement Act of 1937. The Order provides authority for quality inspection, research, and promotion of onions produced within 35 South Texas counties, extending from the Rio Grande Valley northward through the Winter Garden region.

This production area benefits from a mild winter climate that allows onions to mature earlier than in most other U.S. growing regions, making Texas the nation's first domestic onion crop each spring.

The Committee consists of both producers and handler members and alternates. A "producer" is a person who grows onions for market in the production area; a "handler" (or packer/shipper) is a firm that receives, grades, packs, and markets onions produced in the area. Any qualified producer or handler regardless of operation size may be nominated and serve in accordance with the Marketing Order's nomination and appointment procedures.

As of the 2024–2025 season, the industry includes approximately 65 active producers and nearly 25 handlers/packers, ranging from small family farms to large vertically integrated operations. The Texas onion industry operates through close coordination between growers and handlers. Many growers contract production with shippers, while some operations manage their own packing and marketing. Cooperative organizations, including the Texas International Produce Association (TIPA), support grower education, research, and market development.

There are two principal growing regions for Texas 1015 Sweet Onions: the Rio Grande Valley (RGV) and the Winter Garden. In the RGV, planting typically occurs in September–October

with harvest beginning in March and continuing through May or early June. In the Winter Garden, planting generally follows later (October–November), with harvest typically running from late April through June, depending on weather and variety.

The Texas 1015 Sweet Onion (+TX1015), developed at Texas A&M University in 1983 by Dr. Leonard Pike, is the signature variety for the region renowned for its mild flavor and low pungency.

Because of its sweetness and low pyruvic content, the TX1015 does not store long-term and is marketed fresh, with most sales occurring days after harvest. By contrast, storage onions (e.g., long-day types from northwestern states) are cured for longer storage and marketed over extended periods. Texas onions' "first-to-market" advantage provides an important economic premium before overlapping supply from Georgia, California, and New Mexico enters the market.

Texas onion growers also face unique competitive pressures as the state's harvest season bridges production between Mexico and Georgia. This overlap creates intense market pressure on both price and quality. Texas producers work diligently to maintain high size and grade standards within the Marketing Order region, ensuring that poor-quality product does not move through the state and compromise the integrity of the Texas onion brand.

Once Georgia's onion harvest begins, Texas growers must work hard to sustain sales volume and preserve their market share. Georgia's success in promoting its "Vidalia Sweet Onion" has been impressive, but it also highlights the need for renewed attention to Texas's own marketing heritage. The Texas 1015 Sweet Onion was the first recognized sweet onion in the nation developed by Texas A&M University and proudly representing the state's agricultural innovation. Texas growers are committed to reclaiming and strengthening this promotional identity, reminding consumers and buyers alike that the Texas 1015 is the *original* and *true* American sweet onion.

Texas onion producers and handlers face several persistent constraints that affect planting decisions, harvest execution, and market outcomes. These challenges underscore the importance of maintaining and modernizing the Marketing Order framework. The ongoing drought and reduced Rio Grande River allocations have limited irrigation capacity, increasing production costs and constraining expansion.

Besides the lack of water, labor shortages and the cost of production have gone up. Onions are heavily dependent on farmworker labor the limited availability of domestic workers have strained profitability and forced the producer to rely heavily on imported H2A workers.

COVID-19 caused severe market disruption, particularly in foodservice. Although retail sales offset some losses, volatility underscored the need for coordinated marketing. Growers face many challenges but those out of their control illustrate the corps vulnerability like the 2021 Valentine's day freeze and heavy rains further justify the need for insurance and collective data reporting supported by STOC.

The industry is pursuing mechanical harvesting solutions to address labor shortages and improve efficiency. Texas A&M AgriLife, with USDA-NIFA support, is conducting multi-year trials to evaluate harvester designs, bulb durability, and field configurations for mechanization.

The Texas 1015 Sweet Onion industry, through STOC and TIPA, has implemented several initiatives connecting consumers with the crop's identity and strengthening sales.

Key Marketing Programs include the TX1015 Restaurant Week. Launched in 2022, this annual promotion partners with restaurants across the Rio Grande Valley and throughout Texas to feature dishes made with Texas 1015 Sweet Onions.

Now in its third year, the program has drawn strong community and media engagement while driving customer traffic during the promotional period. Future plans include expanding into additional Texas markets beginning with San Antonio in 2026 to continue growing consumer awareness statewide.

The TX1015 Sweet Onion Eating Contest occurred in San Antonio's 4th of July Celebration. First held in 2024, this event brought the Texas 1015 brand to thousands of attendees at one of the state's largest Independence Day celebrations, providing high-visibility exposure and positive local media coverage that reinforced consumer awareness of the crop.

The City of Weslaco proclaimed themselves the TX1015 Sweet Onion City. The proclamation Established by the City of Weslaco in 2024, this annual civic recognition honors the Texas 1015 Sweet Onion's economic and cultural impact on the Rio Grande Valley, serving as a focal point for grower participation and community outreach.

The Texas 1015 Sweet Onion industry represents over a century of South Texas agricultural heritage. Through cooperative management under the Marketing Order, growers and handlers maintain high product quality, support market stability, and invest in modernization. Updating the Order is essential to align governance with today's industry realities—supporting data-driven research, adoption of mechanization, flexible marketing tools, and transparent representation for operations of all sizes. These improvements will help ensure reliable supply, preserve Texas's first-to-market advantage, and sustain producer viability in the face of water and labor constraints.

For these reasons, I respectfully submit my testimony in support of the proposed amendments to Federal Marketing Order No. 959.

Respectfully submitted,

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