

**U.S. Department of Agriculture
Food and Nutrition Service
Administrative Review Branch**

Peoples Market & Liquor,

Appellant,

v.

**Office of Retailer Operations and
Compliance,**

Respondent.

Case Number: C0245974

FINAL AGENCY DECISION

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) finds that there is sufficient evidence to support the determination by the Office of Retailer Operations and Compliance to levy a Transfer of Ownership Civil Money Penalty of \$44,000 against the former ownership of Peoples Market & Liquor (“Appellant”) for having sold a store during a period of disqualification from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

ISSUE

The purpose of this review is to determine whether the Office of Retailer Operations and Compliance took appropriate action, consistent with Title 7 of the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) § 278.6(f)(2), when it levied a Transfer of Ownership Civil Money Penalty (TOCMP) against Appellant on May 11, 2022.

AUTHORITY

According to 7 U.S.C. § 2023 and its implementing regulations at 7 CFR § 279.1, “A food retailer or wholesale food concern aggrieved by administrative action under § 278.1, § 278.6 or § 278.7 . . . may . . . file a written request for review of the administrative action with FNS.”

CASE CHRONOLOGY

In a letter received by the former owner on January 10, 2012, Appellant was notified that it was permanently disqualified as a SNAP-authorized retailer. A purchase agreement dated February 15, 2019 established Appellant sold Peoples Market & Liquor. In the Office of Retailer Operations and Compliance’s letter dated May 11, 2022, Appellant was assessed a lump sum Transfer of Ownership Civil Money Penalty (TOCMP) of \$44,000 in accordance with 7 CFR § 278.6(f)(2) for the sale or transfer of ownership of Peoples Market & Liquor during a period of disqualification.

On May 26, 2022, Appellant appealed the Office of Retailer Operations and Compliance's assessment and requested an administrative review of this action. The appeal was granted and implementation of the sanction has been on hold pending completion of this review.

STANDARD OF REVIEW

In an appeal of an adverse action, Appellant bears the burden of proving by a preponderance of evidence that the administrative action should be reversed. That means Appellant has the burden of providing relevant evidence that a reasonable mind, considering the record as a whole, would accept as sufficient to support a conclusion that the argument asserted is more likely to be true than untrue.

CONTROLLING LAW

The controlling law in this matter is contained in the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008, as amended (7 U.S.C. § 2021), and implemented through regulation under Title 7 CFR Part 278. In particular, 7 CFR § 278.6(f)(2) establishes the authority upon which a civil money penalty may be imposed against a disqualified retail food store or wholesale food concern in the event that it has been sold or the ownership is otherwise transferred.

7 CFR § 278.6(f)(2) reads, in part:

In the event any retail food store . . . which has been disqualified is sold or the ownership thereof is otherwise transferred . . . the person or other legal entity who sells or otherwise transfers ownership . . . shall be subjected to and liable for a civil money penalty

APPELLANT'S CONTENTIONS

Appellant's responses regarding this matter are essentially as follows:

- Appellant failed to receive adequate notice that selling the business would result in a TOCMP.
- The statute of limitations for collections is six years when inaccurate information is provided according to 7 CFR § 3550.164. That period had elapsed at the time of the imposition of the TOCMP.
- Appellant cannot pay the TOCMP. In support of its contention, Appellant provided ~160 pages of financial documents including personal bank statements, business bank statements, 2018 tax return documents, and proof of sale documents.
- The TOCMP would pose a hardship to Appellant.

These explanations may represent only a brief summary of Appellant's contentions. However, in reaching a decision, full consideration has been given to all contentions presented, including any others that have not been specifically listed here.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Appellant Received Determination and Notice of TOCMP

Appellant contends that it failed to receive adequate notice that selling the business would result in a TOCMP. Appellant further contends that since inaccurate information was provided, the statute of limitations to impose a TOCMP expired. Appellant's argument regarding the applicability of 7 CFR § 3550.164 imposing a statute of limitations on the imposition of a TOCMP is not relevant to this case.

The administrative record documents that in a letter dated November 22, 2011, the Office of Retailer Operations and Compliance informed Appellant that it was being considered for permanent disqualification from participation in SNAP, or the imposition of a civil money penalty in lieu of disqualification. This letter was received on November 23, 2011. Appellant was subsequently informed by a letter dated January 6, 2012 that the firm was denied a trafficking civil money penalty and was being permanently disqualified from participation as a retail store in SNAP. This letter was received on January 10, 2012. The letter ordered the firm to cease accepting SNAP benefits, and from that time forward Appellant was subject to the provisions of 7 CFR § 278.6(f). The pertinent part of both letters stated as follows:

In the event that you sell or transfer ownership of your store subsequent to your disqualification, you will be subject to and liable for a CMP

Notice of the imposition of a TOCMP for the sale or transfer of a store is also contained in the regulations at 7 CFR § 278.6(f)(2). Therefore, being unaware of the assessment of the TOCMP if the store was sold does not provide a valid basis for mitigating or dismissing the TOCMP assessed by the Office of Retailer Operations and Compliance.

Appellant Responsibility for TOCMP

Appellant contended that it cannot pay the TOCMP. The calculation of the amount of a CMP is based on regulations that delineate the exact formula to be used when calculating a CMP. These regulations at 7 CFR § 278.6(g) state, in relevant part:

FNS shall determine the amount of the civil money penalty as follows:

- (1) Determine the firm's average monthly redemptions of coupons for the 12-month period ending with the month immediately preceding that month during which the firm was charged with violations.
- (2) Multiply the average monthly redemption figure by 10 percent.
- (3) Multiply the product arrived at in paragraph (g)(2) by the number of months for which the firm would have been disqualified under paragraph (e) of this section. The civil money penalty may not exceed an amount specified in §3.91(b)(3)(i) of this title for each violation.

As stated above, the formula for the calculating the CMP is specific per 7 CFR § 278.6(g) and does not allow for any reductions. However, the regulations do provide the option of an installment plan for paying the CMP over the period of disqualification. The regulations at 7 CFR § 278.6(h), state the following:

A firm has 15 days from the date the FNS regional office notifies the firm in writing in which to pay the civil money penalty or to notify the regional office in writing of its intent to pay in installments as specified by the regional office . . . The civil money penalty must be paid in full by the end of the period for which the firm would have been disqualified.

Appellant can contact Financial Management at 703-305-2830 to discuss payment of this penalty in installment payments or online in one lump sum.

No Undue Hardship to Appellant

Appellant contends that the penalty would impose an extreme hardship on the former ownership. While the former owner's financial situation may be worthy of sympathy, the transfer of ownership civil money penalty cannot be reduced based on Appellant's personal circumstances.

Economic hardship is a likely consequence whenever a store is permanently disqualified from SNAP participation and is assessed a transfer of ownership civil money penalty in the amount levied in this case. However, there is no provision in the SNAP regulations for reducing an administrative penalty on the basis of possible economic hardship to the firm resulting from imposition of such penalty. To excuse Appellant from an assessed administrative penalty based on purported economic hardship to the firm would render the enforcement provisions of the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008 and the enforcement efforts of the USDA virtually meaningless.

Moreover, giving special consideration to the firm for economic hardship would forsake fairness and equity, not only to competing stores and other participating retailers who are complying fully with program regulations, and also to those retailers who have been disqualified from the program in the past for similar violations and also assessed civil money penalties. Therefore, Appellant's contention that it will incur economic hardship based on the assessment of an administrative penalty does not provide any valid basis for dismissing the charges or for mitigating the imposed penalty.

Summary

Based on a review of the evidence, Peoples Market & Liquor was, indeed, sold following its disqualification from SNAP on January 10, 2012. Therefore, 7 CFR § 278.6(f)(2) of the SNAP regulations is applicable in this case as it pertains to a civil money penalty for the sale or transfer of a disqualified firm.

CONCLUSION

Based on the discussion above, the determination by the Office of Retailer Operations and Compliance to levy a Transfer of Ownership Civil Money Penalty of \$44,000 against Appellant for selling Peoples Market & Liquor during a period of disqualification from SNAP is sustained.

RIGHTS AND REMEDIES

Applicable rights to a judicial review of this decision are set forth in 7 U.S.C. § 2023 and 7 CFR § 279.7. If Appellant desires a judicial review, the complaint must be filed in the U.S. District Court for the district in which Appellant's owner resides, is engaged in business, or in any court of record of the State having competent jurisdiction. This complaint, naming the United States as the defendant, must be filed within thirty (30) days of receipt of this decision.

Under the Freedom of Information Act, we are releasing this information in a redacted format as appropriate. FNS will protect, to the extent provided by law, personal information that could constitute an unwarranted invasion of privacy.

RICH PROULX
ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW OFFICER

August 22, 2022