

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

A & P Coastal Mart,

Appellant,

v.

Retailer Operations Division,

Respondent.

Case Number: C0257345

FINAL AGENCY DECISION

It is the decision of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) that there is sufficient evidence to support a finding that the permanent disqualification of A & P Coastal Mart (Appellant) from participation as an authorized retailer in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), as initially imposed by the Retailer Operations Division, was appropriate.

ISSUE

The issue accepted for review is whether the Retailer Operations Division took appropriate action, consistent with 7 CFR § 278.6(a), (c) and (e)(1) in its administration of the SNAP, when it assessed a permanent disqualification against Appellant.

AUTHORITY

7 USC § 2021 and the implementing regulations at 7 CFR § 279.1 provide that “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 dated September 22, 2022, the Retailer Operations Division charged Appellant with trafficking, as defined in Section 271.2 of the SNAP regulations, based on a series of irregular SNAP transaction patterns that occurred during the months of January 2022 through June 2022. The letter noted that the penalty for trafficking is permanent disqualification as provided by 7 CFR § 278.6(e)(1). The letter also noted that Appellant could request a trafficking civil money penalty (CMP) in lieu of a permanent disqualification within ten days of receipt under the conditions specified in 7 CFR § 278.6(i).

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Appellant did not reply to the charge letter. After considering the evidence, the Retailer Operations Division issued a determination letter dated October 4, 2022. The determination letter informed Appellant that it was permanently disqualified from the SNAP in accordance with 7 CFR § 278.6(c) and § 278.6(e)(1). The determination letter also stated that Appellant was not eligible for a trafficking CMP because Appellant failed to submit sufficient evidence to demonstrate that the firm had established and implemented an effective compliance policy and program to prevent violations of the SNAP.

By an October 12, 2022, e-mail, Appellant appealed the Retailer Operations Division's determination and requested an administrative review. The appeal was granted.

STANDARD OF REVIEW

In appeals of adverse actions, the Appellant bears the burden of proving by a preponderance of the evidence, that the administrative action should be reversed. That means the Appellant has the burden of providing relevant evidence which a reasonable mind, considering the record as a whole, would accept as sufficient to support a conclusion that the matter asserted is more likely to be true than not true.

CONTROLLING LAW

The controlling statute in this matter is contained in the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008, as amended, 7 USC § 2021 and § 278 of Title 7 of the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR). Part 278.6(a) and (e)(1) establish the authority upon which a permanent disqualification may be imposed against a retail food store or wholesale food concern in the event that personnel of the firm have engaged in trafficking SNAP benefits.

7 USC § 2021(b)(3)(B) states, in part:

... a disqualification under subsection (a) shall be ... permanent upon ... the first occasion or any subsequent occasion of a disqualification based on the purchase of coupons or trafficking in coupons or authorization cards by a retail food store or wholesale food concern or a finding of the unauthorized redemption, use, transfer, acquisition, alteration, or possession of EBT cards ...

7 CFR § 271.2 defines trafficking, in part, as:

The buying, selling, stealing, or otherwise effecting an exchange of SNAP benefits issued and accessed via Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards, card numbers and personal identification numbers (PINs), or by manual voucher and signature, for cash or consideration other than eligible food, either directly, indirectly, in complicity or collusion with others, or acting alone; . . .

7 CFR § 278.6(a) states:

FNS may disqualify any authorized retail food store . . . if the firm fails to comply with the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008, as amended, or this part. Such disqualification shall result from a finding of a violation on the basis of evidence that may include facts established through on-site investigations, inconsistent redemption data, evidence obtained through a transaction report under an **electronic benefit transfer system**, . . .” (emphasis added)

7 CFR § 278.6(b)(2)(ii) states, inter alia:

Firms that request consideration of a civil money penalty in lieu of a permanent disqualification for trafficking shall have the opportunity to submit to FNS information and evidence . . . that establishes the firm’s eligibility for a civil money penalty in lieu of a permanent disqualification in accordance with the criteria included in § 278.6(i). This information and evidence shall be submitted within 10 days, as specified in § 278.6(b)(1).

7 CFR § 278.6(e)(1) reads, in part:

FNS shall disqualify a firm permanently if personnel of the firm have trafficked as defined in § 271.2.

7 CFR § 278.6(i) states, inter alia:

FNS may impose a civil money penalty in lieu of a permanent disqualification for trafficking . . . if the firm timely submits to FNS substantial evidence which demonstrates that the firm had established and implemented an effective compliance policy and program to prevent violations of the Program.

SUMMARY OF THE CHARGES

Appellant was charged and determined to be trafficking based on an analysis of EBT transaction data from January 2022 through June 2022. This involved the following SNAP transaction patterns which are indicative of trafficking:

- Multiple transactions were made from the accounts of individual SNAP households within a set time period.
- The store conducted EBT transactions that were large based on the observed store characteristic and recorded food stock.

The issue in this review is whether, through a preponderance of evidence, it is more likely true than not true that the questionable transactions were the result of trafficking.

APPELLANT'S CONTENTIONS

By a December 20, 2022, e-mail, Appellant, through counsel provided the firms invoices for food purchased during the review period.

The preceding may represent only a brief summary of the Appellant's contentions presented in this matter. However, in reaching a decision, full attention and consideration has been given to all contentions presented, including any not specifically recapitulated or specifically referenced.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Store Visit

FNS authorized A & P Coastal Mart as a convenience store on November 19, 2018. The case file indicates that in reaching a disqualification determination, the Retailer Operations Division considered information obtained during an August 22, 2022, store visit conducted by a FNS contractor to observe the nature and scope of the firm's operation, stock, and facilities. This information was then used to ascertain if there were justifiable explanations for the firm's irregular SNAP transactions. The store visit report and photographs documented the following store size, description, and characteristics:

- Appellant is approximately 768 square feet.
- The checkout counter was small with limited space to place items.
- There were no shopping baskets or shopping carts for customer use.
- There were two cash registers, two point of sale (POS) devices, and two optical scanners.
- There was no fresh unprocessed meat, poultry, or fish.
- There were packages of deli meat and a couple of bacon.
- Dairy included milk, cheese, and margarine.
- The only fresh produce were some bananas.
- Other staple foods available for purchase were eggs, juice, bread, rice, cereal, pasta, and a limited selection of canned goods.
- Much of the remaining stock consisted of accessory foods such as candy and carbonated and uncarbonated drinks.
- Ineligible items included gas, lottery, tobacco, paper goods, cleaning products, paper goods, and health and beauty aids.

The SNAP eligible food stocked by the store was generally of a low dollar value consisting mainly of inexpensive canned and packaged goods, snack foods, single-serving food items and accessory food items. The highest priced items noted included a case of clear fruit water - \$25.99; case of Arizona tea \$19.96; 12 pack of soda - \$7.99; smoked sausage - \$5.99; and a case of water - \$5.99. Given the available inventory, there was very little sign that the firm would be likely to have SNAP redemption patterns that differed significantly from those of similar-sized competitors, especially competitors that sell similar or identical food items.

Charge Letter Attachment

Each attachment furnished with the charge letter represents the questionable and unusual patterns of SNAP transactions indicative of trafficking which were conducted at the Appellant firm during the review period. As there is more than one pattern of irregular transactions, the case of trafficking becomes more convincing.

Charge Letter Attachment 1. Multiple transactions were made from individual benefit accounts in a set timeframe. This attachment documents 29 sets of transactions that total \$4,425.06 in SNAP benefits that meet the parameters of this scan. On January 11, 2022, and January 12, 2022, one household conducted two SNAP transactions at Appellant totaling \$205.44 (transactions #35-#36). Between April 5 and April 6, 2022, another household conducted four SNAP transactions at Appellant (three of them even dollar transactions) that total \$208.07 (transactions #52-#55). Similarly, between March 10 and March 12, 2022, another household transacted a total of \$302.72 in five SNAP transactions at Appellant (transactions #66-#70). Multiple transactions conducted by the same household account within a short period of time is a method which violating stores use to avoid single high dollar transactions that cannot be supported by a retailer's inventory and structure.

The SNAP transactions noted in the charge letter are questionable not because they exceed any limits for use, but rather because they display characteristics of use inconsistent with the nature and extent of Appellant's stock and facilities and are therefore indicative of trafficking. The photographs from the store visit offer no explanation as to why SNAP customers would routinely shop at Appellant multiple times during a short period or purchase such a large volume of items, there being no great variety of products, or price advantage. Although it is not uncommon for customers to have more than one transaction per day, it is not common that such multiple transactions are for large dollar amounts. The second and third transactions in each set are too large to consist of forgotten items.

Appellant has not offered sufficient evidence to show that the transactions listed in Attachment 1 were legitimate purchases of eligible food.

Charge Letter Attachment 2: Excessively large purchase transactions were made from recipient accounts. This attachment lists 121 transactions as large as \$163.74, and that total \$8,022.30. The substantial number of high-dollar transactions in a six-month period call into question the legitimacy of these transactions.

Appellant's total SNAP dollar redemption value during the review period was 130% greater than the average for convenience stores in Sumter County. Appellant also conduct 116% more SNAP transactions than the average for convenience stores in the County during the review period. Appellant is a gas station convenience store with no fresh meat, poultry or fish and the only fresh produce were some bananas. The invoices submitted supported Appellant stock of snack food and beverages. Appellant had no shopping baskets or carts and is selling mostly inexpensive single service items including beverages and snack food items. Appellant's layout, business structure, and food inventory do not support a high percentage of transactions markedly exceeding the average SNAP transaction amount of similar type stores.

The Retailer Operations Division compared Appellant to two nearby similarly stocked convenience stores. The data from these nearby stores also show that the transaction patterns at the Appellant firm were unusual. Moreover, if these flagged sets of transactions could be explained by household shopping patterns for this local area, then similar shopping patterns would be seen at the other two local comparable stores. However, this was not the case. Thus, there is no evidence that the firm would be likely to have SNAP redemption patterns that differ significantly from nearby, similar-sized competitors.

Store	Attachment 1 Pattern	Attachment 2 Pattern
Appellant	29	121
Store #1	0	21
Store #2	1	34

Sometimes a firm may have higher than average SNAP transaction amounts due to the lack of access to other SNAP authorized stores. However, the Retailer Operations Division determined that 28 other convenience stores within a two-mile radius of Appellant including four supermarkets and two super stores. The Retailer Operations Division reviewed the transaction history of five households that conducted some of the questionable flagged transactions. Each of the five households conducted a flagged transaction at Appellant within one day of visiting a supermarket, super store, or large grocery store. It is questionable as to why households would conduct large transactions at Appellant, when these households had just visited or planned to visit larger stores with a better selection of fresh meat and produce and likely better prices. The Retailer Operations Division also determined that these household s conducted flagged transactions mostly and sometimes only at Appellant.

Evidence

In support of its contentions, Appellant submitted inventory invoices/receipts to the Retailer Operations Division. The invoices show that Appellant purchased sufficient inventory during the review period to satisfy the SNAP redemptions. However, the inventory was almost exclusively beverages, candy, and snack items. Even with sufficient food stock purchased at Appellant to mathematically support high dollar transactions, the frequent repeated large dollar transactions and large dollar transactions conducted at a gas station convenience store while these households shopped at larger stores with greater inventory are still questionable.

The documentation and evidence provided by the Retailer Operations Division was thoroughly examined. From all indications, the Retailer Operations Division obtained the EBT data (provided by ALERT), found it to be suspicious in comparison to other area stores of similar size, and then undertook a thorough investigation before concluding that trafficking was likely occurring. Appellant bears the burden of demonstrating by a preponderance of the evidence that the administrative actions should be reversed and that the transactions detailed in the charge letter were more likely than not due to the legitimate sale of eligible food in exchange for SNAP benefits. Appellant offered insufficient evidence to prove that the transactions listed in the charge letter were legitimate purchases of eligible food. In the absence of compelling information or documentation weighed in comparison to the evidence provided by the Retailer Operations Division, the evidence weighs in favor of the Retailer Operations Division's determination that

SNAP-benefit trafficking substantially produced the transaction activity at issue in the present case.

CIVIL MONEY PENALTY

In the charge letter, the Retailer Operations Division informed Appellant of its right to request a trafficking CMP under 7 CFR § 278.6(i). Appellant was informed that it would need to provide both the request and supporting evidence within ten calendar days of receiving the charge letter and that no extension of time could be granted for making the request or for providing the required evidence. Appellant did not timely request a CMP in lieu of a permanent disqualification.

SNAP regulations at 7 CFR § 278.6(b)(2)(iii) states that “if a firm fails to request consideration for a civil money penalty in lieu of a permanent disqualification for trafficking and submit documentation and evidence of its eligibility **within the 10 days** specified in § 278.6(b)(1), the firm **shall not be eligible** for such a penalty.” [Emphasis added.] Even if a timely request had been submitted, the Appellant would likely not have been eligible for a trafficking CMP in lieu of disqualification because there is insufficient evidence to demonstrate that the firm had established and implemented an effective SNAP compliance policy and program prior to the violations.

CONCLUSION

The Retailer Operations Division’s analysis of Appellant’s EBT transaction record was the primary basis for its determination to permanently disqualify Appellant. This data provided substantial evidence that the questionable transactions during the review period had characteristics that are consistent with trafficking violations in SNAP benefits. Therefore, based on a review of all the evidence in this case, it is more likely true than not true that program violations did occur as charged by the Retailer Operations Division. The determination to impose a permanent disqualification against Appellant is sustained. The Retailer Operations Division’s determination that Appellant was not eligible for a trafficking civil money penalty according to the terms of 7 CFR Section 278.6(i) of the SNAP regulations is also sustained.

RIGHTS AND REMEDIES

Applicable rights to a judicial review of this decision are set forth in 7 USC § 2023 and 7 CFR § 279.7. If a judicial review is desired, the Complaint, naming the United States as the defendant, must be filed in the U.S. District Court for the district in which the Appellant’s owners reside or are engaged in business, or in any court of record of the State having competent jurisdiction. If any Complaint is filed, it 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.

MARY KATE KARAGIORGOS
Administrative Review Officer

April 20, 2023