

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

Wonder J Grocery Store Inc. #5120,

Appellant,

v.

Retailer Operations Division,

Respondent.

Case Number: C0244386

FINAL AGENCY DECISION

It is the decision of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) that there is sufficient evidence to support a finding that a six-month disqualification of Wonder J Grocery Store Inc. #5120 (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(f)(1) and 7 CFR § 278.6(a) and (e)(5) in its administration of the SNAP, when it imposed a six-month period of disqualification against Appellant.

AUTHORITY

7 USC § 2023 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

The USDA investigated the compliance of Appellant with federal SNAP law and regulations during the period of September 11, 2021, through September 24, 2021. The investigative report documented that personnel at Appellant accepted SNAP benefits in exchange for ineligible merchandise on three separate occasions. As a result of evidence compiled during this investigation, by letter dated November 24, 2021, the Retailer Operations Division charged ownership with violating the terms and conditions of the SNAP regulations at 7 CFR § 278.2(a)

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and noted the violations warranted a six-month disqualification period. The letter also stated that under certain conditions, FNS may impose a civil money penalty (CMP) in lieu of a disqualification.

Appellant, through counsel, replied to the charges by letter dated December 20, 2021. Appellant explained that the violative transactions were committed by inexperienced clerks. After considering the retailer's reply and the evidence, the Retailer Operations Division notified Appellant in a letter dated February 28, 2022, that the violations cited in the charge letter occurred at the firm and that a six-month period of disqualification was warranted. The letter stated that eligibility for a hardship CMP was not applicable as there were other authorized retail stores in the area selling as large a variety of staple foods at comparable prices.

By letter dated March 8, 2022, Appellant requested an administrative review of the Retailer Operations Division's determination. The appeal was granted and implementation of the disqualification has been held in abeyance pending completion of this review.

STANDARD OF REVIEW

In appeals of adverse actions, the Appellant bears the burden of proving by a preponderance of the evidence, that the administrative actions 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). Sections 278.6(a) and (e)(5) establish the authority upon which a six-month disqualification may be imposed against a retail food store or wholesale food concern.

7 CFR § 278.6(a) states, inter alia:

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 . . .

Section 278.6(e)(5) of the SNAP regulations states, in part, that a firm is to be disqualified for six months:

[I]f it is to be the first sanction for the firm and the evidence shows that personnel of the firm have committed violations such as but not limited to the sale of common nonfood items due to carelessness or poor supervision by the firm's ownership or management.

In addition, 7 CFR § 278.6(f)(1) provides for civil money penalty (CMP) assessments in lieu of disqualification in cases where disqualification would cause “hardship” to SNAP households benefit because of the unavailability of a comparable participating food store in the area to meet their shopping needs. It reads:

FNS may impose a civil money penalty as a sanction in lieu of disqualification when . . . the firm’s disqualification would cause hardship to SNAP households benefit because there is no other authorized retail food store in the area selling as large a variety of staple food items.

SUMMARY OF CHARGES

During an investigation conducted between September 11, 2021, and September 24, 2021, an investigator conducted five compliance visits at Appellant. A report of the investigation dated October 1, 2021, was provided to Appellant as an attachment to the charge letter. The investigation report included Exhibits A through E which provide full details on the results of each compliance visit. The investigation report documents that SNAP violations were recorded during three of the compliance visits and involved the sale of liquid dish soap, chopsticks, a shampoo and condition combo pack, plastics forks, and plastic plates. Upon review, the evidence indicates that Appellant established a record of selling non-food items, as defined by Section 271.2 of the regulations, on multiple occasions as noted in Exhibits A, C, and D, furnished with the charge letter.

APPELLANT’S CONTENTIONS

Appellant, through counsel, made the following summarized contention in its administrative review request dated March 8, 2022, in relevant part:

- The evidence shown was insufficient and prejudicial to provide a finding of violations against the client.

Appellant’s December 20, 2021, reply to the charges also contained the following summarized contentions, in relevant part:

- Appellant apologizes.
- The transactions were conducted by inexperienced workers.
- Appellant will provide better training to its employees.
- Appellant requests consideration be given to their dire economic circumstance due to the Pandemic.

The preceding may represent only a 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

Appellant, through counsel, contends that the evidence shown was insufficient and prejudicial to provide a finding of violations against the client. The investigation report documents that the charges of violations are based on the findings of a formal investigation. The transactions cited in the letter of charges are thoroughly documented. A complete review of this documentation has yielded no error or discrepancy. The investigation report is specific and thorough regarding the dates of the violations, the specific facts related thereto, and is supported by documentation that confirms specific details of the transactions. The documentation presented by the Retailer Operations Division provides through a preponderance of the evidence that the violations as reported occurred at the Appellant firm.

The Retailer Operations Division determined that the violations committed by Appellant represent the first sanction for the firm and evidence carelessness or poor supervision. 7 CFR §278.6(e)(5) states that FNS shall disqualify a firm for six months if it is to be the first sanction for the firm and the evidence shows that personnel of the firm have committed violations such as but not limited to the sale of common nonfood items due to carelessness and poor supervision by the firm's ownership or management. The imposition of a six-month disqualification, the least severe penalty allowed by regulation, is appropriate.

Ownership Involvement

Appellant states that the transactions were conducted by inexperienced salesclerks. Regardless of whom the ownership of a store may utilize to handle store business, the ownership is accountable for the proper training of staff and the monitoring and handling of SNAP benefit transactions. To allow store ownership to disclaim accountability for the acts of persons whom the ownership chooses to utilize to handle store business would render virtually meaningless the enforcement provisions of the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008 and the enforcement efforts of the USDA.

Ownership signed the FNS reauthorization application for SNAP retailers on December 7, 2015, which included a certification and confirmation that the owner would "accept responsibility on behalf of the firm for violations of the SNAP regulations, including those committed by any of the firm's employees, paid or unpaid, new, full-time or part-time." The violations listed on this certification include accepting SNAP benefits for cash and as payment for ineligible items, a violation of the SNAP rules and regulations. The regulations establish that an authorized food store may be disqualified from participating in the program when the store fails to comply with the Act or regulations.

Corrective Action

Appellant explains that it will provide better training to its employees. It is important to clarify for the record that the purpose of this review is to either validate or to invalidate the earlier decision of the Retailer Operations Division. This review is limited to what circumstances were at the basis of the Retailer Operations Division action at the time such action was made. It is not within the authority of this review to consider what subsequent remedial actions may have been

taken or will be taken in the future so that a store may begin to comply with program requirements. There is no provision in the SNAP regulations for waiver or reduction of an administrative penalty assessment based on corrective actions implemented after investigative findings of program violations. Therefore, Appellant's contention that it will take corrective action to prevent future violations does not provide any valid basis for dismissing the charges or for mitigating the penalty imposed.

Appellant Hardship

Appellant contends that it is already suffering economically due to the Pandemic. It is recognized that economic hardship is a likely consequence whenever a store is disqualified from participation in SNAP. However, there is no provision in the SNAP regulations for a waiver or reduction of an administrative penalty assessment based on possible economic hardship to the firm resulting from imposition of such penalty. To excuse ownership from assessed administrative penalties based on purported economic hardship to the firm would render virtually meaningless the enforcement provisions of the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008 and the enforcement efforts of the USDA.

Moreover, giving special consideration to economic hardship to the firm would forsake fairness and equity, not only to competing stores and other participating retailers who are complying fully with program regulations, but also to those retailers who have been disqualified from the program in the past for similar violations. Therefore, Appellant's contention that the firm 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 penalty imposition.

Civil Money Penalty

7 CFR § 278.6(f)(1) reads, in part, "FNS may impose a civil money penalty as a sanction in lieu of disqualification when . . . the firm's disqualification would cause hardship to [SNAP] households because there is no other authorized retail food store in the area selling as large a variety of staple food items at comparable prices." The Retailer Operations Division determined that there are 146 other authorized stores located within a one-mile radius of Appellant. Thus, in its letter dated February 28, 2022, the Retailer Operations Division determined that a hardship CMP would not be appropriate, as there are other authorized retail stores in the area selling as large a variety of staple foods at comparable prices. Some degree of inconvenience to SNAP customers is inherent whenever any SNAP authorized retailer is disqualified. For example, the normal shopping pattern of SNAP customers may be temporarily altered during the period of disqualification. Nevertheless, the determination of the Retailer Operations Division that the six-month disqualification of Appellant from the SNAP would not create a hardship to customers, as differentiated from potential inconvenience, is sustained and a civil money penalty in lieu of disqualification is not appropriate in this case.

CONCLUSION

The determination by the Retailer Operations Division to impose a six-month disqualification against Wonder J Grocery Store Inc. #5120 from participating as an authorized retailer in SNAP

is sustained. In accordance with the Food and Nutrition Act, and the regulations, this penalty shall become effective 30 days after receipt of this letter. A new application for participation in SNAP may be submitted ten days prior to the expiration of the six-month disqualification period.

RIGHTS AND REMEDIES

Applicable rights to a judicial review of this decision are set forth in 7 USC § 2023 and 7CFR § 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 owner resides or is 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 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

October 18, 2022