

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

A-1 Express LLC,

Appellant,

v.

Case Number: C0216342

Retailer Operations Division,

Respondent.

FINAL AGENCY DECISION

The USDA, Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) finds that there is sufficient evidence to support the decision of the Retailer Operations Division to withdraw the authorization of A-1 Express LLC to participate as a retailer in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). As a result, the Appellant may not reapply for SNAP authorization for a period of six (6) months.

ISSUE

The issue accepted for review is whether the Retailer Operations Division took appropriate action, consistent with Title 7 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) Part 278, when it withdrew the authorization of A-1 Express LLC.

AUTHORITY

7 U.S.C. § 2023 and its 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

As part of a routine reauthorization process, the Appellant submitted an online reauthorization form FNS-252-R, entitled “Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Reauthorization Application for Stores” on October 21, 2018. The Appellant’s reauthorization application reported that the store had more than the minimum required three (3) varieties of staple food, each consisting of at least three (3) stocking units, in all of the four (4) required staple food categories with perishables in all categories.

The Appellant reported that **14 percent** of the firm’s gross retail sales were in staple foods with an additional 14 percent of its gross retail sales in “accessory” food items such as snack foods, candy, ice cream, potato chips, carbonated and non-carbonated beverages, condiments and spices. These accessory foods may be purchased with SNAP benefits, but they are not used to determine store eligibility. The Appellant also reported that 64 percent of its gross retail sales were in non-food items (primarily tobacco, gasoline and alcohol sales). The remaining eight (8) percent were in SNAP ineligible hot, heated and cold prepared foods not intended for home preparation and consumption.

An FNS contractor had previously conducted a store visit on September 24, 2018 to document the firm’s food inventory for the purpose of determining the continued eligibility of A-1 Express LLC to participate in the SNAP. The store visit report and photographs showed that the store failed to meet the SNAP minimum variety and stocking requirements in two (2) of the four (4) required staple food categories namely the Dairy and Meat/Poultry/Fish categories. Therefore, the Retailer Operations Division determined that the store did not meet Criterion A requirements.

As a result, the Retailer Operations Division informed the Appellant by letter dated March 6, 2019 that the authorization of A-1 Express LLC to participate in the SNAP was withdrawn because the firm did not meet the eligibility criteria for stores as mandated by Federal regulations at 7 CFR § 278.1(b)(1). The store did not meet the minimum variety and stocking requirements under Criterion A. In addition, the store failed to meet Criterion B because the store's **staple** food sales did not comprise more than 50 percent of its annual gross retail sales. Lastly, the Retailer Operations Division determined that the firm did not qualify under the need for access provision of 7 CFR § 278.1(b)(6).

In a letter postmarked March 13, 2019, the Appellant requested an administrative review of the Retailer Operation Division’s decision to withdraw the firm’s SNAP authorization. The request for review was granted and implementation of the withdrawal was held in abeyance pending completion of this review.

STANDARD OF REVIEW

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

CONTROLLING LAW AND REGULATIONS

The controlling law in this matter is found in the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008, as amended (7

U.S.C. § 2018), and promulgated through regulation under Title 7 CFR Part 278. In particular, 7 CFR § 278.1(l) provides the authority upon which FNS shall withdraw the SNAP authorization of any firm if it fails to maintain established eligibility criteria.

7 CFR § 278.1(l)(1) reads, in part:

FNS shall withdraw the authorization of any firm authorized to participate in the program for any of the following reasons:

- (i) The firm's continued participation in the program will not further the purposes of the program;
- (ii) The firm fails to meet the specification of paragraph (b), (c), (d), (e), (f), (g), (h), or (i) of this section;
- (iii) The firm fails to meet the requirements for eligibility under Criterion A or B, as specified in paragraph (b)(1)(i) of this section...for the time period specified in paragraph (k)(2) of this section.

7 CFR § 271.2 defines a retail food store, in part, as:

An establishment or house-to-house trade route that sells food for home preparation and consumption normally displayed in a public area, and either offers for sale qualifying staple food items on a continuous basis, evidenced by having no fewer than [three*] different varieties of food items in each of the four staple food categories with a minimum depth of stock of three stocking units for each qualifying staple variety, including at least one variety of perishable foods in at least [two*] such categories (Criterion A) as set forth in § 278.1(b)(1) of this chapter, or has more than 50 percent of its total gross retail sales in staple foods (Criterion B) as set forth in § 278.1(b)(1) of this chapter as determined by visual inspection, marketing structure, business licenses, accessibility of food items offered for sale, purchase and sales records, counting of stockkeeping units, or other inventory or accounting recordkeeping methods that are customary or reasonable in the retail food industry as set forth in § 278.1(b)(1) of this chapter....

7 CFR § 271.2 defines staple food, in part, as:

... those food items intended for home preparation and consumption in each of the following four categories: Meat, poultry, or fish; bread or cereals; vegetables or fruits; and dairy products

Hot foods are not eligible for purchase with SNAP benefits and, therefore, do not qualify as staple foods for the purpose of determining eligibility under § 278.1(b)(1) of this chapter. Commercially processed foods and prepared mixtures with multiple ingredients that do not represent a single staple food category shall only be counted in one staple food category. For example, foods such as cold pizza, macaroni and cheese, multi-ingredient soup, or frozen dinners, shall only be counted as one staple food item and will be included in the staple food category of the main ingredient as determined by FNS. **Accessory food items include foods that are generally considered snack foods or desserts such as, but not limited to, chips, ice**

* As currently implemented. See SNAP Retailer Policy and Management Division Policy Memorandum 2018-04 for additional information regarding the enhanced retailer standards, which were implemented on January 17, 2018. This memorandum can be found on the FNS public website at <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/retailer-eligibility-clarification-of-criterion>

cream, crackers, cupcakes, cookies, popcorn, pastries, and candy, and other food items that complement or supplement meals, such as, but not limited to, coffee, tea, cocoa, carbonated and uncarbonated drinks, condiments, spices, salt, and sugar. Items shall not be classified as accessory food exclusively based on packaging size but rather based on the aforementioned definition and as determined by FNS. A food product containing an accessory food item as its main ingredient shall be considered an accessory food item. Accessory food items **shall not** be considered staple foods for purposes of determining the eligibility of any firm. [Emphasis added.]

7 CFR § 278.1(b)(1)(i)(A) reads, in part,

An establishment...will effectuate the purposes of the program if it sells food for home preparation and consumption and meets one of the following criteria: Offer for sale, on a continuous basis, a variety of qualifying foods in each of the four categories of staple foods...including perishable foods in at least [two*] of the categories (Criterion A); or have more than 50 percent of the total gross retail sales of the establishment...in staple foods (Criterion B).

7 CFR § 278.1(b)(1)(ii) states in part:

In order to qualify under [Criterion A] firms shall:

- (A) Offer for sale and normally display in a public area, qualifying staple food items on a continuous basis, evidenced by having, on any given day of operation, no fewer than [three*] different varieties of food items in each of the four staple food categories with a minimum depth of stock of three stocking units for each qualifying staple variety and at least one variety of perishable foods in at least [two*] staple food categories. Documentation to determine if a firm stocks a sufficient amount of required staple foods to offer them for sale on a continuous basis may be required in cases where it is not clear that the firm has made reasonable stocking efforts to meet the stocking requirement. Such documentation can be achieved through verifying information, when requested by FNS, such as invoices and receipts in order to prove that the firm had ordered and/or received a sufficient amount of required staple foods up to 21 calendar days prior to the date of the store visit...
- (B) Offer for sale perishable staple food items in at least [two*] staple food categories. Perishable foods are items which are either frozen staple food items or fresh, unrefrigerated or refrigerated staple food items that will spoil or suffer significant deterioration in quality within 2-3 weeks; and
- (C) [Offer a variety of staple foods which means different types of foods, such as apples, cabbage, tomatoes, and squash in the fruit or vegetable staple food category, or milk, cheese, butter and yogurt in the dairy category. Variety of foods is not to be interpreted as different brands, different nutrient values, different varieties of packaging, or different package sizes. Similar processed food items with varying ingredients such as,

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but not limited to, sausages, breakfast cereals, milk, sliced breads, and cheeses, and similar unprocessed food items, such as, but not limited to different varieties of apples, cabbage, tomatoes, or squash shall not each be considered as more than one staple food variety for the purpose of determining variety. Multiple ingredient food items...such as...cold pizza, macaroni and cheese, soup, or frozen dinners, shall only be counted as one staple food variety each and will normally be included in the staple food category of the main ingredient as determined by the FNS.*]

7 CFR § 278.1(b)(1)(iii) states in part:

In order to qualify under [Criterion B] firms must have more than 50 percent of their total gross retail sales in staple food sales. Total gross retail sales must include all retail sales of a firm, including food and non-food merchandise, as well as services, such as rental fees, professional fees, and entertainment/sports/games income

7 CFR § 278.1(k)(2) states, in part:

Any firm that has been denied authorization on these bases shall not be eligible to submit a new application for authorization in the program for a minimum period of six months from the effective date of the denial.

7 CFR § 278.1(b)(6) states in part:

Need for access. FNS will consider whether the applicant firm is located in an area with significantly limited access to food when the applicant firm fails to meet Criterion A per paragraph (b)(1)(ii) or Criterion B per paragraph (b)(1)(iii) of this section so long as the applicant firm meets all other SNAP authorization requirements. In determining whether an applicant is located in such an area, FNS may consider access factors such as, but not limited to, the distance from the applicant firm to the nearest currently SNAP authorized firm and transportation options. In determining whether to authorize an applicant despite its failure to meet Criterion A and Criterion B, FNS will also consider factors such as, but not limited to, the extent of the applicant firm's stocking deficiencies in meeting Criterion A and Criterion B and whether the store furthers the purposes of the Program. Such considerations will be conducted during the application process

APPELLANT'S CONTENTIONS

The Appellant made the following summarized contentions in its request for administrative review, in relevant part:

* As currently implemented. See SNAP Retailer Policy and Management Division Policy Memorandum 2018-04 for additional information regarding the enhanced retailer standards, which were implemented on January 17, 2018. This memorandum can be found on the FNS public website at <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/retailer-eligibility-clarification-of-criterion>

- The store is eligible under Criterion A. On the day of the store visit, Monday, September 24, 2018, the store was only temporarily low on food stock. The store gets deliveries on Tuesday and Friday. Receipts from September 2018 shows that the store normally carries staple food in all required categories.
- The store has since doubled its inventory purchases to maintain continuous eligibility under SNAP Criterion A. Store pictures from January, March and April document that the store is well stocked. The store has also provided purchase invoices/receipts from after the store visit to document its current food inventory.
- The store has never had a single violation that would disqualify the store.
- The store will suffer a huge financial hardship if it is withdrawn from the SNAP and will likely go into bankruptcy.
- Withdrawing SNAP eligibility for the store will negatively affect the neighborhood low income families tremendously.

The preceding may represent only a brief summary of the Appellant's contentions 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 herein.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Criterion A

Under new regulations that went into effect on January 17, 2018, to meet Criterion A, a firm must carry no fewer than three (3) different varieties of staple food in each of the four (4) staple food categories with a minimum depth of three (3) stocking units for each qualifying staple food variety. There also must be at least one (1) variety of perishable foods in at least two (2) staple food categories. In addition, the SNAP regulations at 7 CFR § 278.1(b)(1)(i)(A) and 7 CFR § 278.1(b)(1)(ii) require retailers to meet Criterion A eligibility requirements on a **continuous** basis.

The Retailer Operations Division determined that A-1 Express LLC was not eligible under Criterion A on the day of the store visit because it carried **only a single variety** in the Dairy category (15 stocking units of milk); and **only two (2) varieties** in the Meat/Poultry/Fish category (20+ stocking units of beef/veal products and 10 stocking units of chicken products).

The Appellant provided numerous invoices/receipts in an attempt to show that the store normally carries the minimum variety and depth of stock in all required staple food categories. Federal regulations at 7 CFR § 278.1(b)(1)(ii)(A) states that such evidence is acceptable as long as the receipts are dated within the 21 days prior to the store visit and not on or after the day of store visit. A review of these invoices/receipts show that only two (2) receipts were dated within the 21 days prior to the store visit. However, neither of the receipts documented the purchase of at least three varieties of staple food in sufficient stocking units in the Dairy and Meat/Poultry/Fish categories. All other receipts/invoices were dated after the store visit and could not be accepted.

The Appellant states that, on the day of the store visit, Monday, September 24, 2018, the store was only temporarily low on food stock as the store gets its deliveries on Tuesdays and Fridays. The Appellant's claim that the store was only temporarily low on stock is not an acceptable excuse as the regulations state that Criterion A eligibility requirements must be met on a **continuous basis** and do not provide for any exceptions.

The Retailer Operations Division determined that A-1 Express LLC was not eligible under Criterion A on the day of the store visit because it carried **only a single variety** in the Dairy category (15 stocking units of milk); and only two (2) **varieties** in the Meat/Poultry/Fish category (20+ stocking units of beef/veal products and 10 stocking units of chicken products). A review of the store visit report and photographs support this determination. The Appellant offered no contentions that successfully rebut the determination of the Retailer Operations Division. Therefore, a preponderance of the evidence supports that A-1 Express LLC is not eligible under Criterion A.

Criterion B

The Retailer Operations Division determined that the Appellant store did not meet Criterion B because the store's **staple** food sales did not comprise more than 50 percent of its gross retail sales. This is confirmed by the Appellant's own reauthorization application which shows its staple food sales at only **14 percent** of its gross retail sales. There is nothing in the case record which would indicate that this percentage of staple food sales to gross retail sales is inaccurate. In fact, the store's gross retail sales are mostly in non-food items such as tobacco, gasoline and alcohol sales. Based on a preponderance of the evidence, the Retailer Operations Division properly determined that the Appellant store was ineligible under Criterion B.

Need for Access

The Appellant states that the SNAP community will suffer if the store is withdrawn and provided statements of support from some of its customers. SNAP regulations at 7 CFR § 278.1(b)(6) state that FNS will consider whether or not the Appellant firm is located in an area with significantly limited access to food when the firm fails to meet Criterion A or Criterion B as long as it meets all other eligibility requirements. This Need for Access evaluation also considers other factors, such as distance to the nearest SNAP-authorized firm, transportation options, the extent of the Appellant's stocking deficiencies, and whether or not the Appellant firm furthers the purposes of the program.

The case record indicates that the Retailer Operations Division conducted a Need for Access evaluation and appropriately determined that the Appellant firm did not qualify for SNAP authorization under this provision. After a review of all available evidence, this review agrees that authorization under the Need for Access provision is not appropriate in this case.

Hardship to the Firm

The Appellant contends that the involuntary withdrawal will create a hardship for the firm as it relies upon the SNAP for its business and it may have to declare bankruptcy. With regard to this contention, it is recognized that some degree of economic hardship is a likely consequence whenever a store is withdrawn from participation in the SNAP. However, there is no provision in the SNAP regulations that would allow an otherwise ineligible firm to be reauthorized for the SNAP on the basis of possible economic hardship to either the owners personally or the firm. To allow an otherwise ineligible firm to be reauthorized for the SNAP based on a purported economic hardship would render virtually meaningless the eligibility provisions of the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008.

Basis of Determination

The Appellant states that the store has never had a single violation during its time as a SNAP authorized store. However, this contention is not relevant to the issue of whether the store meets the SNAP eligibility criteria and provides no grounds for reversing the decision of the Retailer Operations Division.

The Appellant has provided additional photographs of the store and its food inventory and requests reconsideration. Regarding this contention, it is important to clarify for the record that the purpose of this review is to either validate or to invalidate the earlier determination of the Retailer Operations Division. This review is limited to what circumstances existed at the time of the store visit which forms the basis of the Retailer Operations Division's action. The store may reapply for the SNAP six (6) months from the effective date of the withdrawal and any updated food inventory will be taken into consideration at that time.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis above, the decision by the Retailer Operations Division to withdraw the SNAP authorization of A-1 Express LLC is sustained. The regulations clearly state the criteria that a store must meet in order to be authorized for the SNAP. There are no exceptions to these requirements. In accordance with 7 CFR § 278.1(k)(2), the Appellant shall not be eligible to submit a new application for SNAP authorization for a period of six (6) months from the effective date of the withdrawal.

RIGHTS AND REMEDIES

Section 14 of the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008 (7 U.S.C. § 2023) and Title 7, Code of Federal Regulations, Part 279.7 (7 CFR § 279.7) addresses your right to a judicial review of this determination. Please note that 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 you

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.

RONALD C. GWINN
Administrative Review Officer

April 25, 2019