

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

**Bulldog Gas & Mart,**

**Appellant,**

**v.**

**Retailer Operations Division,**

**Respondent.**

**Case Number: C0206213**

**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 six-month disqualification from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) as imposed by the Retailer Operations Division.

**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 imposed a six-month disqualification against Bulldog Gas & Mart.

**AUTHORITY**

7 U.S.C. § 2023 and its implementing regulation at 7 CFR § 279.1 provides 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 conducted an investigation of the compliance of Bulldog Gas & Mart with Federal SNAP law and regulations from November 2018 through May 2019. In a letter dated June 4, 2019, the Retailer Operations Division charged the Appellant store with accepting SNAP benefits in exchange for merchandise which included ineligible non-food items in violation of 7 CFR § 278.2(a). These SNAP violations occurred on three (3) out of five (5) compliance visits. The letter further informed the Appellant that the chargeable violations warranted a disqualification period of six (6) months as provided in 7 CFR § 278.6(e)(5). The Appellant was informed it could respond to the charges within ten (10) calendar days following delivery of the charge letter. The charge letter was delivered to the store via UPS on June 5, 2019.

In response to the charge letter, the Appellant sent an e-mail dated June 10, 2019. The Appellant stated it had a PC-based system designed to prevent the exchange of SNAP ineligible items for SNAP benefits; however, a fairly new employee who had been trained made an unintentional mistake. The employee was disciplined and removed from his position. The Appellant requested a warning letter or hardship civil money penalty (CMP) in lieu of a six-month disqualification.

After considering the Appellant's response and the evidence in the case, the Retailer Operations Division issued a determination letter dated June 28, 2019. The determination letter informed the Appellant it was disqualified from the SNAP for a period of six (6) months in accordance with 7 CFR § 278.6(a) and (e). The determination letter also stated that the Retailer Operations Division considered the Appellant's eligibility for a hardship CMP under 7 CFR § 278.6(f)(1). The Retailer Operations Division determined that the Appellant was not eligible for the hardship CMP in lieu of the six-month disqualification because there were other authorized retail stores in the area selling as large a variety of staple foods at comparable prices.

In a letter postmarked July 3, 2019, the Appellant requested an administrative review of the Retailer Operations Division's determination. The request for review was granted. Upon acceptance of the administrative review request, implementation of the six-month disqualification 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 covered in the Food & Nutrition Act of 2008, as amended, 7 U.S.C. § 2021, and promulgated through regulation under Title 7 CFR Part 278. In particular, 7 CFR § 278.6(a) and (e) establish the authority upon which a disqualification may be imposed against a retail food store or wholesale food concern.

7 CFR § 278.2(a) states, in part:

Coupons may be accepted by an authorized retail food store only from eligible households ... and only in exchange for eligible food.

7 CFR § 271.2 states that the definition of "coupon" includes:

... an electronic benefit transfer card or personal identification number issued pursuant to the provisions of the “Food and Nutrition Act of 2008, as amended, for the purchase of eligible food.

7 CFR § 271.2 states, in part:

Eligible foods means: ... Any food or food product intended for human consumption except alcoholic beverages, tobacco and hot food and hot food products prepared for immediate consumption ....

7 CFR § 278.6(a) states, in part:

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....

7 CFR § 278.6(e) states, in part:

FNS **shall** take action as follows against any firm determined to have violated the Act or regulations ... (5) **Disqualify the firm for 6 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 non-food items** due to carelessness or poor supervision by the firm’s ownership or management. [Emphasis added.]

7 CFR § 278.6(f)(1) states, 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.

### SUMMARY OF THE CHARGES

During an investigation conducted from November 2018 through May 2019, the USDA conducted five (5) compliance visits at Bulldog Gas & Mart. A report of the investigation was provided to the Appellant as an attachment to the charge letter dated June 4, 2019. 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 (3) of the five (5) compliance visits as documented by Exhibits B, C, and D. The chargeable violations in Exhibits B, C, and D involved the sale of nine (9) ineligible non-food items in exchange for SNAP benefits in violation of 7 CFR § 278.2(a). These ineligible items as documented in the investigation report consisted of six (6) scrubbers; two (2) boxes of spoons; and a roll of tissue. These violations were committed by two different clerks. Two other clerks refused to exchange SNAP benefits for non-food items and/or cash as documented in Exhibits A and E.

## APPELLANT'S CONTENTIONS

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

- The store owner(s) have been in the convenience store business for 20 years and has never had any SNAP violations in that time.
- The store has installed a PC-based point-of-sale system so that this unintentional mistake doesn't ever occur.
- The employee 5 U.S.C. § 552 (b)(6) & (b)(7)(C) who violated the SNAP policy was a fairly new employee and new immigrant. Even though he was trained as per the guidelines of the SNAP, he still made an unintentional mistake by selling an ineligible item like cutlery in exchange for SNAP benefits. He has since been disciplined and removed as a sales clerk.
- The store requests a warning letter or a hardship CMP in lieu of a six-month disqualification.

The preceding may represent only a brief summary of the Appellant's contentions presented in this matter. Please be assured, however, in reaching a decision, full attention was given to all contentions presented, including any not specifically recapitulated or specifically referenced herein.

## ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

### Investigation Report

The investigation report documents that the charges of violations are based on the findings of a formal USDA investigation. The transactions cited in the letter of charges were conducted under the direction of a USDA investigator and are thoroughly documented. A complete review of this documentation has yielded no known error or discrepancy. The investigation report is specific and thorough with regard to the dates of the violations, the specific facts related thereto, and is supported by documentation that confirms specific details of the transactions. The investigation report documents by a preponderance of the evidence that personnel at the store exchanged ineligible items for SNAP benefits.

### Violations Warrant a Six-Month Disqualification

The SNAP regulation at 7 CFR § 278.6(e)(5) states, in part, that "FNS **shall** take action as follows against any firm determined to have violated the Act or regulations ... **Disqualify the firm for 6 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 non-food items due to carelessness or poor supervision** by the firm's ownership or management." [Emphasis added.] The investigation report documents that the number of chargeable violations over multiple transactions in this case equate to carelessness or poor supervision by ownership under agency standards.

Although two (2) clerks refused to exchange non-food items and/or cash for SNAP benefits in Exhibits A and F, this does not ameliorate or mitigate the penalty for the other two (2) clerks that exchanged SNAP benefits for non-food items as documented by Exhibits B, C and D. Therefore, the Retailer Operations Division correctly determined that the violations warranted a six-month disqualification, the least severe penalty allowed by regulation under these circumstances.

### **Warning Letter**

The Appellant requests a warning letter under the circumstances of this case. It is true that, in some limited cases, FNS may send a warning letter in lieu of a disqualification. SNAP regulations at 7 CFR §278.6(e)(7) state that FNS should “send the firm a warning letter if violations are too limited to warrant a disqualification.” The Retailer Operations Division will send a warning letter when investigation findings consist of only one or two sales of inexpensive non-food items. However, the investigation report documents that the chargeable violations in this case consisted of nine (9) inexpensive non-food items over three (3) transactions; therefore, the Retailer Operations Division correctly determined that a warning letter was not appropriate.

### **Owner Responsibility**

The Appellant states that the store owner(s) have been in the convenience store business for 20 years and have never had any SNAP violations in that time. A review of the case record shows that Bulldog Gas & Mart has no prior violations; however, the owners had another store disqualified for six-months in October 2018.

The Appellant also states that the violations were the unintentional mistakes of a single store employee named 5 U.S.C. § 552 (b)(6) & (b)(7)(C). This is not correct. The investigation report shows that the violations were conducted by two (2) different employees; the employee named 5 U.S.C. § 552 (b)(6) & (b)(7)(C) in Exhibit A did not conduct any violations.

Nevertheless, although the store owners were allegedly not involved in the violations, it cannot be accepted as a valid basis for dismissing any of the charges, or for mitigating the impact of those charges. Regardless of whom the owner of a store may utilize to handle store business, the owner 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.

In addition, a store owner signed the SNAP reauthorization application for Bulldog Gas & Mart on February 24, 2016. That reauthorization application included a signed certification that the owner(s) 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 in exchange for cash, otherwise known as trafficking, and other violations including accepting SNAP benefits as repayment on credit accounts or in exchange for ineligible non-food items.

## Corrective Action

The Appellant states that corrective action was taken in the form of disciplining the employee named 5 U.S.C. § 552 (b)(6) & (b)(7)(C) and removing him from sale clerk duties. As noted above, the investigation report does not show that 5 U.S.C. § 552 (b)(6) & (b)(7)(C) committed any violations and that the violations in Exhibits B, C and D were committed by two other employees. Nevertheless, 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 that was the basis of the Retailer Operations Division's action. It is not the authority of this review to consider what subsequent remedial actions may have been taken so that a store may begin to comply with program requirements.

In addition, there are no provisions in the SNAP regulations for a waiver or reduction of an administrative penalty assessment on the basis of alleged or planned corrective actions implemented subsequent to findings of program violations. Therefore, the Appellant's contention that corrective action has taken place does not provide any valid basis for dismissing the charges or for mitigating the penalty imposed.

## HARDSHIP CIVIL MONEY PENALTY

The Appellant contends that local SNAP participants would suffer a hardship if the store is disqualified for six-months. The Retailer Operations Division determined that the Appellant was not eligible for a hardship CMP under 7 CFR § 278.6(f)(1). That regulation 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." [Emphasis added.]

The case record documents that the Retailer Operations Division determined that a six-month disqualification of Bulldog Gas & Mart, a convenience store, would not cause a hardship to SNAP households as there are other comparable or larger SNAP authorized stores in the area. The Retailer Operations Division determined through agency mapping systems that there are 15 SNAP authorized stores located within a one-mile radius of Bulldog Gas & Mart. These SNAP authorized stores include two (2) medium grocery stores located 0.53 and 0.78 miles away from Bulldog Gas & Mart. In addition, there is no evidence that Bulldog Gas & Mart carries any specialty or international foods that cannot be obtained at these other stores. Based on this evidence, a six-month disqualification of Bulldog Gas & Mart would not cause a hardship to SNAP recipients in the area, as opposed to a mere inconvenience; therefore, the Retailer Operations Division decision not to assess a hardship CMP in lieu of a six-month disqualification is sustained as appropriate under 7 CFR § 278.6(f)(1).

## CONCLUSION

It is established that the violations as described in the letter of charges did in fact occur at Bulldog Gas & Mart warranting a disqualification of six (6) months in accordance with 7 CFR § 278.6(e)(5). That regulation states that FNS **shall** “disqualify the firm for 6 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 non-food items due to carelessness or poor supervision by the firm’s ownership or management.” Therefore, the decision to impose a six-month disqualification, **the least severe penalty** allowed by regulation, against Bulldog Gas & Mart, Appellant, is appropriate and the action is sustained.

In accordance with the Act and regulations, the six-month period of disqualification shall become effective thirty (30) days after receipt of this letter. The Appellant may submit a new application for SNAP authorization ten (10) days prior to the expiration of the six-month disqualification period.

## 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, FNS is 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

September 17, 2019