

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

Corner Market,

Appellant,

v.

Case Number: C0210615

Retailer Operations Division,

Respondent.

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 Retailer Operations Division (Retailer Operations) to withdraw the authorization of Corner Market (Appellant) to participate as an authorized retailer in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

ISSUE

The issue accepted for review is whether Retailer Operations took appropriate action, consistent with 7 CFR §278.1(b)(1), in its administration of the SNAP when it withdrew the authorization of Appellant to participate as a SNAP retailer.

AUTHORITY

7 U.S.C. §2023 and its implementing regulations at 7 CFR §279.1 provide that a food retailer 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

FNS regulations require that stores be reauthorized on a set schedule. As part of this process, the owners were requested to complete a FNS-252-R reauthorization application. FNS-contracted personnel conducted an onsite visit April 11, 2018, to ascertain Appellant's continued eligibility to participate as a SNAP retail food store.

By letter dated June 22, 2018, the authorization of Appellant to participate in the SNAP was withdrawn, because the firm did not meet the eligibility criteria for stores as enunciated in the regulations at 7 CFR §278.1(b)(1). Retailer Operations' letter informed the owners that Appellant failed to meet Criterion A, because it did not offer for sale a variety of foods in

sufficient quantities on a continuous basis and was found to carry too few items in the staple food categories. Specifically, Appellant did not meet the dairy products eligibility criteria. The letter also states that the firm failed to meet Criterion B. A business must have more than 50% of its total gross retail sales in staple foods to be eligible for authorization under Criterion B.

One owner requested an administrative review by letter dated June 28, 2018. The appeal was granted by letter dated July 11, 2018.

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 Section 14(a)(5) of the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008, as amended, and 7 U.S.C. §2018. SNAP regulations at 7 CFR Part 279 have been promulgated pursuant to the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008.

7 CFR §271.2 states that Retail Food Store means: “An establishment 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 seven 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 three 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 accounting recordkeeping methods that are customary or reasonable in the retail food industry as set forth in §278.1(b)(1) of this chapter. Entities that have more than 50 percent of their total gross retail sales in: Food cooked or heated on-site by the retailer before or after purchase; and hot and/or cold prepared foods not intended for home preparation and consumption, including prepared foods that are consumed on the premises or sold for carry-out are not eligible for SNAP participation as retail food stores under §278.1(b)(1) of this chapter. Establishments that include separate businesses that operate under one roof and share the following commonalities: Ownership, sale of similar foods, and shared inventory, are considered to be a single firm when determining eligibility to participate in SNAP as retail food stores.”

7 CFR §271.2 states: “Staple food, means 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. The meat, poultry, or fish staple food category also includes up to three types of plant-based protein sources (i.e., nuts/seeds, beans, and peas) as

well as varieties of plant-based meat analogues (e.g., tofu). The dairy products staple food category also includes varieties of plant-based dairy alternative staple food items such as, but not limited to, almond milk and soy yogurt. 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. Accessory food items include foods that are generally considered snack foods or desserts such as, but not limited to, chips, ice 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.”

7 CFR §278.1(b)(1)(i) imparts program requirements for retail food store participation which states: “(A) An establishment shall normally be considered to have food business of a nature and extent that 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 as defined in §271.2 of this chapter, including perishable foods in at least three of the categories (Criterion A); or have more than 50 percent of the total gross retail sales of the establishment or route in staple foods (Criterion B).”

7 CFR §278.1(b)(1)(ii) provides that in order for a retail store to qualify for authorization 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 seven 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 three 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.” 7 CFR §278.1(b)(1)(ii)(A) of the SNAP regulations as currently implemented define continuous basis as offering for sale 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 on any given day of operation.

7 CFR §278.1(b)(1)(ii)(B) provides that in order to qualify under Criterion A firms shall: “Offer for sale perishable staple food items in at least three 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.

7 CFR §278.1 (b)(1)(iii) provides that in order for firms to qualify for authorization 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. However, a fee directly connected to the processing of staple foods, such as raw

meat, poultry, or fish by the service provider, may be calculated as staple food sales under Criterion B.”

7 CFR §278.1(b)(6) states: “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.”

7 CFR §278.1(l)(1) Withdrawing authorization reads: “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 specifications 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; or, for co-located wholesale/retail firms, the firm fails to meet the requirements of paragraph (b)(1)(vi) of this section, for the time period specified in paragraph (k)(2) of this section.”

7 CFR §278.1(k)(2) requires that firms withdrawn for failure to meet program eligibility criteria “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 withdrawal.”

APPELLANT’S CONTENTIONS

All contentions have been considered in rendering this decision.

- I understand from the notice you sent, there were some areas I need to improve on and I would like to work with you and your team to ensure I have everything I need to be able to participate in SNAP.
- Residents of Altamont rely very much on the services we provide through SNAP.
- My store is the only full fledged convenience store that serves the towns of Altamont, Beersheba Springs, and Skymont.
- Citizens of the three towns will be disappointed and will be forced to find another location which may be out of their way, to reap the benefits of SNAP.
- I am willing to make all necessary adjustments that are required and ensure continuous supply of these items going forward.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The reauthorization process is to ensure that authorized retailers continue to meet the eligibility criteria for SNAP authorization. The purpose of this review is to either validate or to invalidate the determination made by Retailer Operations. This review is limited to the facts at the time Retailer Operations rendered its decision. It is not within the scope of this review to consider actions the owners may take to qualify for authorization in the SNAP subsequent to that determination. The authorization of a store to participate in the SNAP must be in accord with the Act and the applicable regulations; those requirements cannot be waived.

The determination regarding whether Appellant is eligible to continue to participate as an authorized SNAP retailer includes consideration of whether or not the store is an eligible firm under paragraph 7 CFR §278.1(b)(1) cited herein. The SNAP regulations at §278.1(b)(1)(ii) are clear that under Criterion A, a firm shall “offer for sale 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.” Retailer Operations determined that Appellant did not maintain sufficient stock of staple foods in sufficient quantities be available on a continuous basis in each of the four staple food categories to be eligible to accept SNAP benefits, specifically it lacked dairy staple food product varieties. As such, Appellant failed to meet Criterion A. This is supported by the onsite photographs and the inventory. Under Criterion B, a business must have more than 50 percent of its total gross retail sales in staple foods. Retailer Operations determined that Appellant failed to meet Criterion B. No evidence was provided that Appellant met the eligibility criteria for reauthorization at the time the withdrawal decision was made.

There are no provisions in the SNAP regulations for authorization on the basis of possible after-the-fact corrective actions implemented subsequent to a finding of ineligibility. It is not the authority of this review to consider what remedial actions may be undertaken so that a store might begin to comply with program eligibility requirements after it has been determined to not meet the regulatory eligibility criteria.

NO NEED FOR ACCESS

Appellant has requested another chance because the store is located in an area where many people use SNAP. SNAP regulation 7 CFR §278.6(f)(1) provides for civil money penalties in lieu of disqualification in cases where disqualification would cause hardship to SNAP households because of the unavailability of a comparable participating retail food store in the area to meet their needs. However, 7 CFR §278.6(f)(1) only applies to firms that are “selling a substantial variety of staple food items.”

As Appellant failed to meet Criterion A and B, Retailer Operations did consider whether Appellant is located in an area with significantly limited access to food as required under SNAP regulation 7 CFR §278.1(b)(6). In determining whether Appellant is located in such an area, Retailer Operations considered factors such as the distance from Applicant to the nearest currently SNAP-authorized firm and the extent of Appellant’s stocking deficiencies in meeting Criterion A and Criterion B. Retailer Operations determined Appellant did not qualify for SNAP authorization under 7 CFR §278.1(b)(6).

CONCLUSION

Based on a review of all of the evidence in this matter, the decision by Retailer Operations to withdraw the authorization of Appellant to participate as a retailer in the SNAP is sustained. In accordance with 7 CFR §278.1(k)(2) the owners will not be eligible to reapply for participation as a retail food store in the SNAP for a minimum period of six months from the effective date of the withdrawal. Questions regarding the application process can be handled by contacting 877-823-4369.

RIGHTS AND REMEDIES

Your attention is called to Section 14 of the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008 and to 7 CFR §279.7 with respect to applicable rights 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 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.

Kim Dameron
Administrative Review Officer

August 21, 2018