

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

Economart,

Appellant,

v.

Retailer Operations Division,

Respondent.

Case Number: C0189243

FINAL AGENCY DECISION

It is the decision of the USDA that there is sufficient evidence to support that the Retailer Operations Division properly imposed a permanent disqualification of Economart as an authorized retailer in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

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 permanent disqualification against Economart.

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

The USDA conducted an investigation of the compliance of Economart with Federal SNAP law and regulations from March 2016 through April 2016. The investigation report dated March 19, 2018 documents that personnel at Economart exchanged cash for SNAP benefits during two (2) undercover compliance visits. The buying or selling of SNAP benefits for cash or consideration other than eligible food is trafficking as defined under 7 CFR § 271.2.

As a result of the evidence compiled from this investigation, the Retailer Operations Division charged the Appellant, in a letter dated May 2, 2019, with trafficking in SNAP benefits. The charge letter noted that the penalty for trafficking is permanent disqualification as provided by 7 CFR § 278.6(e)(1). The letter stated the Appellant had the right to respond to the charges within

ten (10) days of receipt. The letter also stated that the Appellant could request a trafficking civil money penalty (CMP) in lieu of a permanent disqualification within 10 days of receipt under the conditions specified in 7 CFR § 278.6(i).

The Appellant replied to the charges in a letter dated May 7, 2019. The Appellant requested a trafficking CMP in lieu of a permanent disqualification. The Appellant also asked for information covered under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). The agency held any further action on the case in abeyance until the Appellant received the agency's official FOIA response dated June 4, 2019. The Retailer Operations Division also sent the Appellant another letter dated September 18, 2019 offering an opportunity to submit any additional contentions or evidence within ten (10) days. The Appellant provided no further response.

After giving consideration to the Appellant's earlier response and the evidence in the case, the Retailer Operations Division informed the Appellant, by letter dated October 2, 2019, that Economart was permanently disqualified from participation in the SNAP. The letter also stated that the Appellant was not eligible for a trafficking CMP as the Appellant did not submit sufficient evidence to demonstrate that the firm had established and implemented an effective compliance policy and program to prevent violations of the SNAP. The permanent disqualification letter was delivered to the Appellant by UPS on received by the Appellant on October 3, 2019.

In a letter postmarked October 4, 2019, the Appellant requested an administrative review of the permanent disqualification determination. The request for administrative review was granted.

STANDARD OF REVIEW

In appeals of adverse actions, an appellant bears the burden of proving by a preponderance of the evidence, that the administrative action 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)(1)(i) establish the authority upon which a permanent disqualification may be imposed against a retail food store or wholesale food concern.

7 U.S.C. § 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 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 § 278.6(e)(1)(i) states:

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

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 § 271.2 defines eligible food, in part, as:

Any food or food product intended for human consumption except alcoholic beverages, tobacco, and hot foods 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, inconsistent redemption data, evidence obtained through a transaction report under an electronic benefit transfer system....

7 CFR § 278.6(i) states, in part:

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.

7 CFR § 278.6(b)(2) states, in part:

(ii) 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 as specified in § 278.6(i), 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).

(iii) 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.

SUMMARY OF CHARGES

During an investigation conducted from March 2016 through April 2016, the USDA conducted four (4) undercover compliance visits at Economart. A report of the investigation was provided to the Appellant as an attachment to the charge letter dated May 2, 2019. The investigation report included Exhibits A through D which provide full details on the results of each compliance visit. The investigation report documents that SNAP violations occurred during all four (4) compliance visits and were committed by the same clerk. During the compliance visits described in Exhibits C and D, this clerk exchanged 5 U.S.C. § 552 (b)(6) & (b)(7)(C) cash 5 U.S.C. § 552 (b)(6) & (b)(7)(C) in SNAP benefits.

APPELLANT'S CONTENTIONS

The Appellant made the following summarized contentions in its original reply to the charge letter and its request for administrative review, in relevant part:

- During the period of March through April 2016, the owner allowed a gentleman who was interested in purchasing the store to run SNAP transactions. The owner was not there to watch over him.
- The Appellant store is appealing the denial of a trafficking CMP in lieu of a permanent disqualification.
- The store owner has been the only one running SNAP transactions since July 2016 and has been following all of the SNAP rules. The store is currently in full compliance.

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. A preponderance of the evidence indicates that personnel at the store exchanged cash for SNAP benefits.

Owner Accountability

Although the owner was 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 uses 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 owners to disclaim accountability for the acts of persons whom the owner chooses 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, the owner signed the SNAP application for Economart on August 25, 2015. That application included a signed certification 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 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.

Violations Warrant a Permanent Disqualification

The exchange of cash for SNAP benefits as documented by Exhibits C and D of the investigation report meets the definition of trafficking as defined at 7 CFR § 271.2. Trafficking in SNAP benefits is an extremely serious violation and both 7 U.S.C. §2021(b)(3)(B) and 7 CFR §278.6(e)(1)(i) state that a **first time** violation warrants a permanent disqualification.

Corrective Action

The Appellant states that the store has been in compliance with SNAP rules and regulations since July 2016. 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 violations that was the basis of the Retailer Operations Division’s action. Therefore, the Appellant’s contention that it has been in compliance since July 2016 does not provide any valid basis for dismissing the charges or for mitigating the penalty imposed.

TRAFFICKING CIVIL MONEY PENALTY

The Appellant states that it should qualify for a trafficking CMP in lieu of a permanent disqualification. This review finds that, although the request for a trafficking CMP was made timely, the Appellant did not provide the required supporting documents to establish that it qualified for a trafficking CMP.

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 7 CFR § 278.6(b)(1), the firm **shall not be eligible** for such a penalty.” [Emphasis added.]

The criteria for a trafficking CMP in lieu of disqualification is defined under 7 CFR § 278.6(i) which reads, with emphasis added, in part:

In determining the minimum standards of eligibility of a firm for a civil money penalty in lieu of a permanent disqualification for trafficking, the firm shall, at a minimum, establish by **substantial** evidence its fulfillment of each of the following criteria:

Criterion 1. The firm shall have developed an **effective** compliance policy as specified in §278.6(i)(1); and

Criterion 2. The firm **shall establish** that both its **compliance policy and program were in operation** at the location where the violation(s) occurred **prior to the occurrence of violations** cited in the charge letter sent to the firm; and

Criterion 3. The firm had developed and instituted an **effective** personnel training program as specified in §278.6(i)(2); and

Criterion 4. Firm ownership was not aware of, did not approve, did not benefit from, or was not in any way involved in the conduct or approval of trafficking violations; or it is only the first occasion in which a member of firm management was aware of, approved, benefited from, or was involved in the conduct of any trafficking violations by the firm

Regarding compliance policy standards, 7 CFR 278.6(i)(1) further states, with emphasis added, in part:

As specified in Criterion 1 above, in determining whether a firm has established an effective policy to prevent violations, **FNS shall consider written and dated statements** of firm policy which reflect a commitment to ensure that the firm is operated in a manner consistent with this part 278 of current [SNAP] regulations As required by Criterion 2, **such policy statements shall be considered only if documentation is supplied** which establishes that the policy statements were **provided to the violating employee(s) prior to the commission of the violation**. In addition, in evaluating the effectiveness of the firm's policy and program to ensure FSP compliance and to prevent FSP violations, FNS may consider the following:

(i) Documentation reflecting the development and/or operation of a policy to terminate the employment of any firm employee found violating FSP regulations;

(ii) Documentation of the development and/or continued operation of firm policy and procedures resulting in appropriate corrective action following complaints of FSP violations or irregularities committed by firm personnel;

(iii) Documentation of the development and/or continued operation of procedures for internal review of firm employees' compliance with FSP regulations

Regarding training program standards, 7 CFR 278.6(i)(2) further states, with emphasis in part:

A firm which seeks a civil money penalty in lieu of a permanent disqualification **shall document its training activity** by submitting to FNS its **dated training curricula and records of dates** training sessions were conducted; a **record of dates** of employment of firm personnel; and **contemporaneous documentation** of the participation of the violating employee(s) in initial and any follow-up training held prior to the violation(s).

Although the Appellant had timely requested a trafficking CMP, the Appellant did not timely provide the actual documents required by regulations to support such a request. Therefore, the Retailer Operations Division's decision not to impose a trafficking CMP in lieu of disqualification is sustained as appropriate pursuant to 7 CFR § 278.6(i).

CONCLUSION

Trafficking is defined, in part, in 7 CFR § 271.2, as “the buying, selling, stealing, or otherwise effecting an exchange of SNAP benefits ... for cash or consideration other than eligible food” The SNAP regulation at 7 CFR § 278.6(e)(1)(i) reads, in part, “FNS shall ... disqualify a firm permanently if personnel of the firm have trafficked as defined in § 271.2.” The law and regulations do not provide for a lesser period of disqualification for this violation.

Based on a full review of the evidence in this case, a preponderance of the evidence supports that trafficking violations did occur during a USDA investigation. Based on the analysis above, the decision to impose a permanent disqualification against Economart, Appellant, is **sustained**.

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

March 5, 2020