

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

Manchester Tobacco Outlet,

Appellant,

v.

Case Number: C0208524

Retailer Operations Division,

Respondent.

FINAL AGENCY DECISION

It is the decision of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), that there is sufficient evidence to support a finding that the Retailer Operations Division (Retailer Operations) properly imposed the withdrawal of the authorization of Manchester Tobacco Outlet (Appellant) to participate as a retail food store 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 owner(s) was requested to complete a FNS-252-R reauthorization application. FNS-contracted personnel conducted an onsite visit February 24, 2018, to ascertain Appellant's continued eligibility to participate in the SNAP.

By letter dated April 16, 2018, the authorization of Appellant to participate in the SNAP was withdrawn because the firm did not meet the eligibility criteria for stores as enunciated in the regulations at 7 CFR § 278.1(b)(1).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 four staple food categories. 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 April 25, 2018. The appeal was granted by letter dated May 3, 2018. Additional receipts were provided by letter postmarked May 21, 2018.

STANDARD OF REVIEW

In an appeal of an adverse action, the Appellant bears the burden of proving by a preponderance of the evidence that the administrative action 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 argument asserted is more likely to be true than not true.

CONTROLLING LAW AND REGULATIONS

The controlling statute 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. The 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 § 278.1(b)(1)(i) imparts program requirements for retail food store participation, which states: “(A) An establishment or house-to-house trade route 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 § 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.”

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)(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) regarding access 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.

- We are keeping the required items in our store.
- During the time of the visit we ran out of goods as delivery was not made from our vendor. It will not happen again.
- This will adversely affect our business.

The owner provided copies of receipts.

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 validate or to invalidate the determination of Retailer Operations. Thus, this review is limited to consideration of the relevant facts and circumstances at the time Retailer Operations rendered its decision. It is not within the scope of this review to consider actions the owner may take to qualify for authorization in the SNAP subsequent to that decision. 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 to be available on a continuous basis in each of the four staple food categories to be eligible to accept SNAP benefits. As such, Appellant failed to meet Criterion A. This is supported by the onsite photographs and one owner's contention whereby it is stated that the store did not have the required items at the time of the onsite inspection.

For review, the owner provided three receipts from Dollar General dated April 20, 2018, May 20 and May 21, 2018, one receipt from Walmart dated April 20, 2018 and two pages of receipts from an unknown vendor dated April 19, 2018. All of these receipts are dated after the store visit and as such are not relevant to the determination under review which was based on a store visit conducted February 24, 2018.

Under Criterion B, a business must have more than 50 percent of its total gross retail sales in staple foods. Appellant's reauthorization application shows that Appellant did not have this percentage. Thus, 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.

Ownership contends that the withdrawal will have a negative financial impact on Appellant's business. It is recognized that some degree of economic hardship is a likely consequence whenever a store is withdrawn from participation as a retail food store. However, there is no provision in the SNAP regulations for waiver of the withdrawal based on possible economic hardship to the firm. To be authorized, the retail food store must meet the regulatory eligibility criteria.

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 an authorized retailer in the SNAP is sustained. In accordance with 7 CFR § 278.1(k)(2) the owner 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

Attention is called to Section 14 of the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008 and to Section 279.7 of the regulations (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.

M. Viens
Administrative Review Officer

June 15, 2018