

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

**Former Owner of PNN Market #96,**

**Appellant,**

**v.**

**Case Number: C0225961**

**Retailer Operations Division,**

**Respondent.**

**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 finding that a Transfer of Ownership Civil Money Penalty (TOCMP) of \$22,000.00 was properly assessed against 5 U.S.C. § 552 (b)(6) & (b)(7)(C), the former owner of PNN Market #96 (Appellant), for selling or transferring a store that has been permanently disqualified from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

**ISSUE**

The issue accepted for review is whether the Retailer Operations Division took appropriate action, consistent with 7 CFR § 278.6(f)(2) in its administration of the SNAP, when it assessed a TOCMP in the amount of \$22,000.00 against PNN Market #96.

**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 case record documents that FNS permanently disqualified PNN Market #96, under the ownership of the Appellant, from the SNAP effective February 7, 2014 for trafficking in SNAP benefits. The permanent Disqualification Letter dated February 6, 2014 stated that if the Appellant/owner sold or transferred the store after its disqualification, it would be subject to and liable for a TOCMP as provided by SNAP regulations at 7 CFR § 278.6(f)(2). As noted in the letter, the amount of the TOCMP is calculated based on the SNAP regulations at 7 CFR § 278.6(g).

On or about April 1, 2019, the Appellant sold PNN Market #96, including all rights in the property including good will, inventory, furniture and computers located at 5 U.S.C. § 552 (b)(6) & (b)(7)(C) (the address of the Appellant firm), to a new store owner for 5 U.S.C. § 552 (b)(6) & (b)(7)(C), and agreed upon by both the Seller and the Buyer as documented by a Final Bill of Sale in the case record. When the new store owner was authorized to participate in the SNAP, the Retailer Operations Division discovered that PNN Market #96 had been sold or otherwise transferred by the former owner/Appellant. As a result, the Retailer Operations Division, in a letter dated February 3, 2020, notified the Appellant that it had assessed a TOCMP in the amount of \$22,000.00 in accordance with the SNAP regulations.

In a letter postmarked February 12, 2020, the Appellant requested an administrative review of the assessment of the TOCMP. FNS granted the Appellant's request for administrative review by letter dated February 21, 2020 and the assessment of the TOCMP was held in abeyance pending completion of this review. In a letter postmarked March 12, 2020, the Appellant submitted additional information in support of the request for administrative review.

### **STANDARD OF REVIEW**

In appeals of adverse actions, the Appellant bears the burden of proving by a preponderance of the evidence, that the administrative actions 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 matter asserted is more likely to be true than not true.

### **CONTROLLING STATUTE AND REGULATIONS**

The controlling statute in this matter is contained in the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008, as amended, 7 U.S.C. § 2021 and Section 278 of Title 7 of the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR).

7 U.S.C. § 2021(e)(1) states, in part:

In the event any retail food store or wholesale food concern that has been disqualified under subsection (a) of this section is sold or the ownership thereof is otherwise transferred to a purchaser or transferee, the person or persons who sell or otherwise transfer ownership of the retail food store or wholesale food concern shall be subjected to a civil penalty in an amount established by the Secretary through regulations to reflect that portion of the disqualification period that has not yet expired. [Emphasis added.]

7 CFR § 278.6(f)(2) reads, in part,

In the event any retail food store . . . which has been disqualified is sold or the ownership thereof is otherwise transferred . . . the person or other legal entity who sells or otherwise transfers ownership . . . shall be subjected to and liable for a civil money penalty . . . If the retail food store or wholesale food concern has been permanently disqualified, the civil money penalty shall be double the penalty for a ten year disqualification period.

7 CFR § 278.6(g) which provides the steps for calculating the TOCMP, states, in part:

- (1) Determine the firm's average monthly redemptions . . . for the 12-month period ending with the month immediately preceding that month during which the firm was charged with violations.
- (2) Multiply the average monthly redemption figure by 10 percent.
- (3) Multiply the [average monthly redemption times 10 percent] by the number of months for which the firm would have been disqualified . . .

Notwithstanding the above, there is an agency limit of \$11,000.00 per violation as the maximum TOCMP amount.

### APPELLANT'S CONTENTIONS

The following may represent only a brief summary of the Appellant's contentions presented in this matter. However, in reaching a decision, full attention and consideration have been given to all contentions presented, including any not fully recapitulated or specifically referenced herein.

In the request for administrative review and in subsequent correspondence, the Appellant stated the following summarized contentions, in relevant part:

- 5 U.S.C. § 552 (b)(6) & (b)(7)(C). did not sell any share or any part of the ownership to 5 U.S.C. § 552 (b)(6) & (b)(7)(C). 5 U.S.C. § 552 (b)(6) & (b)(7)(C). sold only the merchandise inventory to 5 U.S.C. § 552 (b)(6) & (b)(7)(C). as 5 U.S.C. § 552 (b)(6) & (b)(7)(C). was no longer in business since March, 2019.
- The new operator, 5 U.S.C. § 552 (b)(6) & (b)(7)(C)., entered into a direct lease with the landlord after that date.
- 5 U.S.C. § 552 (b)(6) & (b)(7)(C). had no knowledge of the rising issue or concerns and it did not sell or transfer the ownership to 5 U.S.C. § 552 (b)(6) & (b)(7)(C).—only the merchandise at retail price was sold.
- 5 U.S.C. § 552 (b)(6) & (b)(7)(C). is an independent entity and the Appellant has no interest in their share or any ownership with them.
- The Appellant had rough days since it lost its EBT due to a manager who was operating the business under a Management Agreement and he did something against store policy. Because of his actions, 5 U.S.C. § 552 (b)(6) & (b)(7)(C). is still suffering business from its valuable customers. The Appellant took precautionary steps and fired the manager. The Appellant was already stretching the business due to a bad economy and no SNAP benefits in the last five years.
- The Appellant had no idea that this penalty or fee would be charged.
- The Appellant requests that FNS reconsider its decision to impose a civil money penalty sanction.

## ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

PNN Market #96, under the ownership of the Appellant, was permanently disqualified from the SNAP effective February 7, 2014. Documents in the case file show that the Appellant sold and/or transferred the permanently disqualified store to a new store owner on or about April 1, 2019, and that this was the basis of the Retailer Operations Division's assessment of a \$22,000.00 TOCMP.

### Ownership in Corporation Not Sold

The Appellant contends that 5 U.S.C. § 552 (b)(6) & (b)(7)(C). did not sell any share or any part of the ownership to 5 U.S.C. § 552 (b)(6) & (b)(7)(C). 5 U.S.C. § 552 (b)(6) & (b)(7)(C). sold only the merchandise inventory to 5 U.S.C. § 552 (b)(6) & (b)(7)(C) as 5 U.S.C. § 552 (b)(6) & (b)(7)(C). was no longer in business since March, 2019. The new operator, 5 U.S.C. § 552 (b)(6) & (b)(7)(C), entered into a direct lease with the landlord after that date. 5 U.S.C. § 552 (b)(6) & (b)(7)(C). had no knowledge of the rising issue or concerns and it did not sell or transfer the ownership to 5 U.S.C. § 552 (b)(6) & (b)(7)(C).—only the merchandise at retail price was sold. 5 U.S.C. § 552 (b)(6) & (b)(7)(C). is an independent entity and the Appellant has no interest in their share or any ownership with them.

On or about April 1, 2019, the Appellant sold PNN Market #96, including all rights in the property including good will, inventory, furniture and computers located at 5 U.S.C. § 552 (b)(6) & (b)(7)(C) (the address of the Appellant firm), to a new store owner for 5 U.S.C. § 552 (b)(6) & (b)(7)(C), and agreed upon by both the Seller and the Buyer as documented by a Final Bill of Sale in the case record. While the Appellant may not have sold the corporation, 5 U.S.C. § 552 (b)(6) & (b)(7)(C)., to the new operator of the firm, the property sale noted above indicates a bona fide sale/transfer of ownership.

FNS, in its administration of the SNAP, imposes penalties for Program violations against the “firm,” whose operational definition has been the retail food store together with the specific individuals who are responsible for the management, day-to-day operations, and policy decisions of that store. Thus, there is no “corporate veil” that protects individuals with regards to administrative penalties for SNAP violations. Moreover, 5 U.S.C. § 552 (b)(6) & (b)(7)(C) is the sole officer for the corporation and signed the application to participate as an authorized SNAP retailer as well as the documents that sold the business. In addition, the plain language in subparagraph (e)(1) of Section 12 of the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008, as amended [7 U.S.C. 2021(e)(1)] , is clear that:

*In the event any retail food store or wholesale food concern that has been disqualified under subsection (a) is sold or the ownership thereof is otherwise transferred to a purchaser or transferee, the person or persons who sell or otherwise transfer ownership of the retail food store or wholesale food concern shall be subjected to a civil penalty...*

The language taken from the Act above makes no accommodation to alleviate any individual acting in his role as an officer in a corporation from being assessed a TOCMP. This is especially

the case if that individual is the sole officer in a privately-owned corporation and was directly involved in the sale of the store. Accordingly, this contention is not a valid basis for a waiver or the reduction of the TOCMP under review.

### **Economic Hardship**

The Appellant contends that it had rough days since it lost its EBT due to a manager who was operating the business under a Management Agreement and he did something against store policy. Because of his actions, 5 U.S.C. § 552 (b)(6) & (b)(7)(C). is still suffering business from its valuable customers. The Appellant took precautionary steps and fired the manager. The Appellant was already stretching the business due to a bad economy and no SNAP benefits in the last five years.

While FNS is sympathetic to the store owner's circumstances, neither the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008 nor its implementing regulations allow for factoring in individual circumstances such as profitability or economic hardship when determining whether a TOCMP is warranted because of the sale of a business. There is clear indication in the Retailer Operations Division case file that the Appellant, in fact, sold the former business while it was disqualified. As such, it has been determined that there is enough evidence to support the Retailer Operations Division's determination that this does constitute a sale of a business making subject to the TOCMP as outlined in the Federal regulations at 7 CFR §278.6(f)(2).

### **Unaware of Fine**

The Appellant contends that it had no idea that this penalty or fee would be charged. The permanent SNAP disqualification letter dated February 6, 2014, stated that if the owner sold or transferred the store after its disqualification, it would be subject to and liable for a TOCMP as provided by SNAP regulations at 7 CFR § 278.6(f)(2)(3) and (4). As noted in the letter, the amount of the TOCMP is calculated based on the SNAP regulations at 7 CFR § 278.6(g). The permanent disqualification letter was delivered to the Appellant on February 7, 2014. Therefore, the Appellant was properly informed that a TOCMP would be assessed if PNN Market #96 was sold or otherwise transferred after it was permanently disqualified from the SNAP.

### **Reconsideration of Imposed Fine**

The Appellant requests that FNS reconsider its decision to impose a civil money penalty sanction. However, as noted previously, 7 CFR §278.6(f)(2) authorizes FNS to assess a TOCMP against the owner of a disqualified retail food store that has been sold or the ownership is otherwise transferred, stating as follows:

“In the event any retail food store or wholesale food concern which has been disqualified is sold or the ownership thereof is otherwise transferred to a purchaser or transferee, the person or other legal entity who sells or otherwise transfers ownership of the retail food store or wholesale food concern shall be subjected to and liable for a civil money penalty in an amount to reflect that portion of the disqualification period that has not expired, to be calculated using the method found at §278.6(g). . .” As such, FNS is required to impose a TOCMP against the owner of a

retail food store in the event that the retail food store that has been disqualified is sold or the ownership thereof is otherwise transferred to a purchaser or transferee.

### **TOCMP Amount**

A review of the case record documents that the Retailer Operations Division correctly calculated the amount of the TOCMP under 7 CFR § 278.6(g). That regulation states that the TOCMP is to be calculated on a formula which includes the SNAP redemption volume of the store during the 12 months prior to the firm being notified of the violations that led to the store's disqualification. Modifications to the TOCMP may occur only when there is an error in calculation or the amount exceeds the agency limit.

As mentioned above, the formula for the computation for the TOCMP is specific per 7 CFR §278.6(g) and does not allow for any reductions. However, the regulations do provide that an installment plan be allowed for paying the TOCMP over the period of disqualification. The regulations, 7 CFR §278.6(h), state the following:

A firm has 15 days from the date the FNS Retailer Operations Division notifies the firm in writing in which to pay the civil money penalty or to notify the Retailer Operations Division in writing of its intent to pay in installments as specified by the Retailer Operations Division ... The civil money penalty must be paid in full by the end of the period for which the firm would have been disqualified (emphasis added). FNS shall:

- (1) Disqualify the firm for the period determined to be appropriate under paragraph (e) of this section if the firm refuses to pay any of the civil money penalty;
- (2) Disqualify the firm for a period corresponding to the unpaid part of the civil money penalty if the firm does not pay the civil money penalty in full or in installments as specified by the FNS Retailer Operations Division ...

The Retailer Operations Division correctly determined that, using the methodology described in 7 CFR § 278.6(g), the initial calculated amount of the TOCMP was \$356,640.00. However, the initial calculated TOCMP of \$356,640.00 is above the agency limit, which is \$11,000.00 per violation. The January 6, 2014 Charge Letter identified two (2) patterns of trafficking based on EBT redemption data. Therefore, the TOCMP was correctly assessed at \$22,000.00 which is the agency limit per violation multiplied by the number of trafficking patterns (\$11,000.00 x 2 trafficking patterns).

The FNS Financial Management Accounting Division can be contacted at 1-703-605-0483 to discuss payment options or other related topics.

### **Summary**

The regulations at 7 CFR § 278.6(f) require FNS to assess a TOCMP against the former owner of a disqualified store that has been sold or otherwise transferred to a new owner. Moreover, the regulations at 7 CFR § 278.6(g) outline how to calculate the amount of the TOCMP utilizing the

aforementioned formula. As such, there is no discretion in the calculation of the TOCMP amount.

### **CONCLUSION**

A review of the evidence in this case indicates by a preponderance of the evidence that PNN Market #96, formerly owned by the Appellant, was sold on or about April 1, 2019 after it had been permanently disqualified effective February 7, 2014. Therefore, the SNAP regulation at 7 CFR § 278.6(f)(2) applies to this transfer of ownership. A review of the calculations shows that the amount of the TOCMP assessed by the Retailer Operations Division was correct and proper and the decision in this case is hereby sustained. In accordance with the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008, and the regulations thereunder, this penalty shall become effective thirty (30) days after receipt of this letter.

### **RIGHTS AND REMEDIES**

Section 14 of the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008 (7 U.S.C. § 2023) and Title 7, Code of 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 the Appellant resides 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 (FOIA), 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.

LORIE L. CONNEEN  
ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW OFFICER

April 8, 2020