

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

**TS Gas Inc,**

**Appellant,**

**v.**

**Case Number: C0211478**

**Retailer Operations Division,**

**Respondent.**

**FINAL AGENCY DECISION**

The USDA, Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) finds that there is sufficient evidence to support the Retailer Operations Division’s decision to deny the application of TS Gas Inc. (TS Gas or Appellant) to participate as an authorized retailer in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Appellant may not reapply for six months from the effective date of the denial decision.

**ISSUE**

The issue accepted for review is whether the Retailer Operations Division took appropriate action, consistent with 7 CFR § 278.1(b)(1) and § 278.1(k)(2) in its administration of the SNAP when it denied the application of TS Gas to participate as an authorized SNAP retailer.

**AUTHORITY**

7 USC § 2023 and the 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**

In a letter dated July 18, 2018, the Retailer Operations Division informed ownership that the application of TS Gas to participate as an authorized retailer in SNAP was denied because Appellant did not meet the eligibility requirements set forth in Section 278.1(b)(1) of the SNAP regulations. Based on the June 19, 2018, FNS store visit, the Retailer Operations Division determined that TS Gas failed to meet Criterion A. Appellant did not offer for sale a variety of foods in sufficient quantities on a continuous basis because it carried too few items in the dairy staple food category. The store also failed to meet Criterion B because the store’s staple food sales did not comprise more than 50 percent of its annual gross retail sales. Lastly, the Retailer

Operations Division determined that the firm did not qualify under the need for access provision of 7 CFR § 278.1(b)(6).

In a letter postmarked July 24, 2018, ownership appealed the Retailer Operations Division's decision and requested an administrative review of this action. The appeal was granted.

### **STANDARD OF REVIEW**

In appeals of adverse actions, the Appellant bears the burden of proving by a clear 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 LAW**

The controlling law in this matter is found in the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008, as amended (7 USC § 2018), and promulgated through regulation under Title 7 CFR Part 278. In particular, 7 CFR § 278.1(k) provides the authority upon which FNS shall deny the authorization of any firm applying for participation in SNAP if it fails to meet established eligibility criteria.

7 CFR § 278.1(k) reads, in relevant part:

FNS shall deny the application of any firm if it determines that ... (2) The firm has failed to meet the eligibility requirements for authorization under Criterion A or Criterion B, as specified in paragraph (b)(1)(i) of this section ....

7 CFR § 271.2 defines a retail food store, in part, as:

An establishment or house-to-house trade route 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 [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, including at least one variety of perishable foods in at least [two\*] 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 inventory or accounting recordkeeping methods that are

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\* As currently implemented. See SNAP Retailer Policy and Management Division Policy Memorandum 2018-04 for additional information regarding the enhanced retailer standards, which were implemented on January 17, 2018. This memorandum can be found on the FNS public website at <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/retailer-eligibility-clarification-of-criterion>

customary or reasonable in the retail food industry as set forth in § 278.1(b)(1) of this chapter....

7 CFR § 271.2 defines staple food, in part, as:

... 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... 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. Commercially processed foods and prepared mixtures with multiple ingredients that do not represent a single staple food category shall only be counted in one staple food category. For example, foods such as cold pizza, macaroni and cheese, multi-ingredient soup, or frozen dinners, shall only be counted as one staple food item and will be included in the staple food category of the main ingredient as determined by FNS. 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)(A) reads, in part,

An establishment...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...including perishable foods in at least [two\*] of the categories (Criterion A); or have more than 50 percent of the total gross retail sales of the establishment...in staple foods (Criterion B).

7 CFR § 278.1(b)(1)(ii) states in part, in order to qualify 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 [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 and at least one variety of perishable foods in at least [two\*] staple food categories.

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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. Such documentation can be achieved through verifying information, when requested by FNS, such as invoices and receipts in order to prove that the firm had ordered and/or received a sufficient amount of required staple foods up to 21 calendar days prior to the date of the store visit...

(B) Offer for sale perishable staple food items in at least [two\*] 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; and

(C) [Offer a variety of staple foods which means different types of foods, such as apples, cabbage, tomatoes, and squash in the fruit or vegetable staple food category, or milk, cheese, butter and yogurt in the dairy category. Variety of foods is not to be interpreted as different brands, different nutrient values, different varieties of packaging, or different package sizes. Similar processed food items with varying ingredients such as, but not limited to, sausages, breakfast cereals, milk, sliced breads, and cheeses, and similar unprocessed food items, such as, but not limited to different varieties of apples, cabbage, tomatoes, or squash shall not each be considered as more than one staple food variety for the purpose of determining variety. Multiple ingredient food items...such as...cold pizza, macaroni and cheese, soup, or frozen dinners, shall only be counted as one staple food variety each and will normally be included in the staple food category of the main ingredient as determined by the FNS.\*]

7 CFR § 278.1(b)(1)(iii) states in part:

In order to qualify 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 ....

7 CFR § 278.1(k)(2) states, in part:

Any firm that has been denied authorization on these bases 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 denial.

7 CFR § 278.1(b)(6) states in part:

Need for access. 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

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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. In determining whether an applicant is located in such an area, FNS may consider access factors such as, but not limited to, the distance from the applicant firm to the nearest currently SNAP authorized firm and transportation options. In determining whether to authorize an applicant despite its failure to meet Criterion A and Criterion B, FNS will also consider factors such as, but not limited to, the extent of the applicant firm's stocking deficiencies in meeting Criterion A and Criterion B and whether the store furthers the purposes of the Program. Such considerations will be conducted during the application process ....

### **APPELLANT'S CONTENTIONS**

Appellant made the following summarized contentions in its administrative review request postmarked July 24, 2018, and subsequent correspondence postmarked August 29, 2018, in relevant part:

- The owner took over the store on June 12, 2018.
- Appellant had sufficient stock of SNAP products per the inventory at the time of the takeover.
- More than 50% of their customers have SNAP benefits and his store is located in a neighborhood that has a lot of SNAP users.
- The location was authorized to accept SNAP for more than 10 years.
- Appellant was told that delivery for SNAP products would be on June 16, 2018 which was not received and the reason why product had to be reordered on June 17, 2018.
- Appellant is aware that it needs to keep sufficient inventory of SNAP products and will do that in the future.
- FNS can revisit his store at any time without notification and find the proper stock of SNAP products.
- Appellant is losing 5 U.S.C. § 552 (b)(6) & (b)(7)(C) per day.

In support of its contentions Appellant submitted 51 pages of invoices and a nine page petition signed by customers indicating that they have no transportation to go anywhere else.

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

### **ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS**

The record reflects that ownership submitted an application to participate as a SNAP retailer on May 14, 2018, wherein it estimated that staple foods accounted for one percent of total gross retail sales. The accessory "other" food items also showed an estimate of six percent of the firm's total gross retail sales. The owner estimated 93 percent of sales come from non-food items, including gas, lottery, alcohol, tobacco, and other non-food items. A review of Appellant's food inventory was conducted by FNS contracted staff as a routine part of the

authorization process on June 19, 2018. The record shows that on the day of the store visit, Appellant only had two qualifying varieties of food in the dairy staple food category (milk and cheese).

### **Criterion A**

Federal regulations at 7 CFR § 278.1(b)(1)(ii) state that in order to qualify for SNAP authorization under Criterion A (emphasis added), 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.” This means that retail stores must have qualifying staple food items displayed in a public area on a continuous basis at the time of the store visit in order to qualify for SNAP authorization under Criterion A.

The Retailer Operations Division sent a proof of inventory letter to the Appellant on June 26, 2018, requesting that the store submit any purchase invoices or receipts documenting that the store normally carried **three varieties** of dairy staple food in sufficient stocking units. The letter stated that the invoices/receipts had to be dated no more than 21 days prior to the date of the store visit and not after the store visit. In response, Appellant submitted copies of purchase invoices. However, those invoices showed only the purchase of milk and butter and no third variety of dairy staple food.

In support of its review request, Appellant submitted additional purchase invoices. Most of the invoices were dated after the store visit and therefore is not sufficient evidence that Appellant normally carries sufficient dairy staple food items. The invoices do not support a third variety of dairy staple food.

Appellant explained that it is aware that it needs to keep sufficient inventory of SNAP products and will do that in the future. It is Appellant’s responsibility to meet the requirements of Criterion A on any given day. The SNAP regulations at 7 CFR § 278.1(b)(1)(i)(A) and 7 CFR § 278.1(b)(1)(ii) require retailers to meet eligibility requirements “on a continuous basis.” The purpose of this review is to either validate or to invalidate the earlier determination of the Retailer Operations Division, and that it is limited to what circumstances existed at the time of the denial action. Therefore, Appellant’s contention is not a valid basis to reverse the determination.

### **Criterion B**

In the event of a firm’s failure to meet the requirements of eligibility under Criterion A, federal regulations require that the firm’s eligibility also be evaluated under Criterion B. In order to qualify for authorization under Criterion B, more than 50 percent of a retail store’s total annual gross retail sales must come from the sale of staple foods. Based on the FNS store visit photographs and the application, the Retailer Operations Division determined that Appellant was also ineligible for authorization under Criterion B according to 7 CFR § 278.1(b)(1)(iii). Appellant’s own SNAP application estimates one percent of its gross annual retail sales come from the sale of staple foods. The store visit photographs and report show that there were limited

staple food items. The Retailer Operations Division correctly determined that Appellant was not eligible under Criterion B.

### **Need for Access**

Appellant submitted a petition indicating that many of its customers do live nearby and do not have access to transportation to get to another retailer. SNAP regulations at 7 CFR § 278.1(b)(6) state that FNS will consider whether or not the Appellant firm is located in an area with significantly limited access to food when the firm fails to meet Criterion A or Criterion B as long as it meets all other eligibility requirements. The record indicates that the Retailer Operations Division determined that the Appellant firm did not qualify for SNAP authorization under this provision.

### **Appellant Hardship**

Appellant explains that it is losing 5 U.S.C. § 552 (b)(6) & (b)(7)(C) per day. Economic hardship is a likely consequence whenever a store's SNAP authorization is denied. However, there is no provision in the SNAP regulations for reducing an administrative penalty on the basis of possible economic hardship to the firm resulting from such a penalty. To excuse the Appellant from an assessed administrative penalty based on purported economic hardship to the firm would render the enforcement provisions of the Food and Nutrition Act of 2008 and the enforcement efforts of the USDA virtually meaningless.

Moreover, giving special consideration to economic hardship of the firm would forsake fairness and equity, not only to competing stores and other participating retailers who are complying fully with program regulations, but also to those retailers who have been denied participation in the program in the past for similar deficiencies. Therefore, the Appellant's contention that it will incur economic hardship does not provide any valid basis for dismissing the denial of the Appellant's authorization.

### **Previous Authorization**

Appellant explained that it that the location has been authorized for ten years. It is beyond the scope of this review to evaluate whether Appellant's location was correctly authorized previously or not. Instead, this administrative review is limited to an evaluation of whether or not the Retailer Operations Division acted in accordance with the statute and regulations when it denied the authorization of TS Gas on July 19, 2018. Therefore, Appellant's contention concerning the location's previous authorization is irrelevant to this review.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Retailer Operations Division's decision to deny the SNAP application of TS Gas is sustained. Appellant shall not be eligible to submit a new application for SNAP authorization until six months after July 19, 2018, the effective date of the denial decision.

## **RIGHTS AND REMEDIES**

Applicable rights to a judicial review of this decision are set forth in 7 USC § 2023 and 7 CFR § 279.7. 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'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.

Mary Kate Karagiorgos  
Administrative Review Officer

November 20, 2018