

County Keeps Food Stamp Policy, But...

By PAUL BEATTY
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Illegal campers in this county will continue to be ineligible for food stamps, a majority of county supervisors decided Tuesday in an action that appears to be in violation of state-federal regulations.

The issue will go to local Superior Court on Feb.-15 at 9 a.m. according to an order signed by Superior Court Judge Rollie Hall this morning.

Judge Hall was petitioned for a restraining order against the county by Attorney Jonathan McCurdy of Welfare

Education and Legal Assistance Center immediately following the board's action.

Following the petition hearing in the judge's chambers, both McCurdy and Deputy County Counsel Dwight Herr announced the judge had signed a restraining order.

When questioned why the attorney's misunderstood his action, Hall told the press, "Ask the attorneys."

The board's 3-2 vote changed a restriction handed down Jan. 16 that mandated a person "have and address and live in a structure" to more specific wording that

strikes directly at illegal campers.

Denial of food stamps now will be for "any person who is camping or otherwise residing on private or public lands without the permission of the owner."

The board's action by Supervisors Dan Forbus, Pat Liberty and Marilyn Liddicoat overrode a recommendation by county Social Services Director David Singleton, who asked the Jan. 16 policy be rescinded as the state is "indicating that action is inconsistent with state and federal regulations."

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In a letter from state Food Stamp Chief Kathy B. Lewis on Jan. 19, the board was told that local food stamp administrators could only prosecute and enforce regulations on food stamp fraud.

She noted that new federal guidelines to be released in March would explicitly prevent denial on the basis of requirement "a person to live in a structure or have a mailing address."

Liberty contended that the state letter did not "address Santa Cruz County concerns and sets no clear policy."

She said, "It's time the county took a stand on how far we will go in aiding and abetting trespassing and illegal camping violators."

Liberty said such trespassers worry nearby residents and that campers are a threat to forestlands because of campfires.

New federal regulations are expected to specifically include campfires as acceptable cooking facilities.

Supervisor Chris Matthews asked the board "not to attack people through the food stamp program," saying it was a waste of the board's

time and an illegal decision.

"The state has said it (Jan. 16 policy) is an illegal action; rescind it and leave it at that," Matthews said.

He and Supervisor Gary Patton voted against the illegal camper restriction, with Patton saying the board should hold off action until the legal grounds are firmly established.

Liddicoat told him, "The only way I will change my vote is by court order."

Singleton has reported that about 20 persons now on the rolls could be found ineligible under the Jan. 16 policy, and that four new applicants had been denied stamps because of the policy.

Social programmers are saying that the numbers of illegal campers are larger than known, or acknowledged, by the Social Services Department and the numbers will swell when good weather returns.

Persons denied under the policy have the right to a fair hearing and the findings of such hearings are based on the state and federal regulations.

Each hearing costs the state about \$1,500, Singleton said.