

U.S. Department of Labor

Office of Administrative Law Judges
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Issue Date: 25 October 2017

CASE NO.: 2014-STA-55

In the Matter of:

TODD D. HOFFMAN,
Complainant

v.

NOCO ENERGY CORPORATION,
Respondent

Appearances:

Mark R. Walling, Esq.,
For the Complainant

Thomas M. DeSimon, Esq.,
For the Respondent

BEFORE: RICHARD A. MORGAN
Administrative Law Judge

**DECISION AND ORDER APPROVING SETTLEMENT
AND DISMISSING COMPLAINT**

This proceeding arises under Section 31105 of the Surface Transportation Assistance Act (“STAA”) of 1982 (49 U.S.C. § 31105) and the regulations promulgated thereunder at 29 C.F.R. Part 1978 (2013). The parties have signed a Settlement Agreement (“Agreement”) in accordance with 29 C.F.R. § 1978.111(d)(2).¹ The Agreement resolves the controversy arising from the complaint of Todd D. Hoffman (“Complainant”) against NOCO Energy Corporation (“NOCO”)

¹ On August 3, 2007, various amendments to the STAA were signed into law that were included in the Implementing Regulations of the 9/11 Commission Act of 2007. See Pub. L. No. 110-53, § 1536, 121 Stat. 266, 464-467. The STAA amendments generally strengthen protections for employees who complain of potential dangers and “problems, deficiencies, or vulnerabilities” regarding motor carrier equipment.

under the statute. The Settlement Agreement is signed by the Complainant and a “Director” of NOCO, Robert G. Spampata, on behalf of NOCO.

The undersigned had issued a Decision and Order Granting Relief in this matter on June 22, 2015. Upon Petition for Review to the Administrative Review Board (“Board”) the Board issued a Decision and Order of Remand on June 30, 2017, in which it affirmed in part, vacated in part and remanded to the undersigned for further consideration consistent with the Board’s opinion. After remand of the case file to the undersigned, the parties submitted their signed Settlement Agreement for approval, by letter dated September 22, 2017, which was received on September 29, 2017.

The Settlement Agreement provides that Complainant releases Respondent from claims arising under the Surface Transportation Assistance Act as well as under various other laws. This Order Approving Settlement is limited to whether the terms of the settlement are a fair, adequate, and reasonable settlement of Complainant’s allegations that Respondent violated the STAA. *Kidd v. Sharron Motor Lines, Inc.*, 87-STA-2 (Sec’y July 30, 1987); *Poulos v. Ambassador Fuel Oil Co.*, Case No. 86-CAA-1, Sec. Ord., Nov. 2, 1987, slip op. at 2. As was stated in *Poulos v. Ambassador Fuel Oil Co., Inc.*, Case No. 86-CAA-1, Sec. Order, (Nov. 2, 1987):

The Secretary’s authority over the settlement agreement is limited to such statutes as are within [the Secretary’s] jurisdiction and is defined by the applicable statute. *See Aurich v. Consol. Edison Co. of N.Y., Inc.*, Case No. 86-CAA-2, Secretary’s Order Approving Settlement, issued July 29, 1987; *Chase v. Buncombe Co., N.C.*, Case No. 85-SWD-4, Secretary’s Order on Remand, issued November 3, 1986.

I have, therefore, limited my review of this Agreement to determining whether the terms thereof are a fair, adequate, and reasonable settlement of Complainant’s allegation that Respondent has violated the STAA.

Under the STAA and implementing regulations, a proceeding may be terminated on the basis of a settlement provided either the Secretary or the Administrative Law Judge approves the agreement. 49 U.S.C. app. § 2305(c)(2)(A); 29 C.F.R. § 1978.111(d)(2). The parties must submit for review an entire agreement to which each party has consented. *Tankersley v. Triple Crown Servs., Inc.*, 92-STA-8 (Sec’y Feb. 18, 1993). The agreement must be reviewed to determine whether the terms are a fair, adequate, and reasonable settlement of the complaint. *Macktal v. Sec’y of Labor*, 923 F.2d 1150 (5th Cir. 1991); *Thompson v. U.S. Dep’t of Labor*, 885 F.2d 551 (9th Cir. 1989); *Fuchko & Yunker v. Ga. Power Co.*, Case Nos. 89-ERA-9, 10, Sec’y Ord. Mar. 23, 1989, slip op. at 1-2. This Order approving the settlement is final given that parties have joined in the Agreement. *Swischer v. Gerber Childrenswear, Inc.*, 93-STA-1 (Sec’y Jan. 4, 1993).

The parties have also requested “in light of the confidentiality provision of the Settlement Agreement, the terms of the settlement not be disclosed or filed for public view.”

29 C.F.R. §18.85 of the revised rules of practice before the Office of Administrative Law Judges which took effect on June 18, 2015, pertains to privileged, sensitive, or classified material. Under Section 18.85 the administrative law judge, upon the motion of an interested person or on the judge's own, may seal a portion of the record to protect against undue disclosure of privileged, sensitive or classified material. Section 18.85(b)(2) provides that notwithstanding the judge's order, all parts of the record remain subject to statutes and regulations pertaining to public access to agency records.

It has been held in a number of cases, with respect to confidentiality of settlement agreements, that the Freedom of Information Act, 5 U.S.C. section 552, *et seq.* (1988) ("FOIA"), requires federal agencies to disclose requested documents unless they are exempt from disclosure. *Faust v. Chemical Leaman Tank Lines, Inc.*, 92-SWD-2 and 93-STA-15 (ARB 1998). The records in this case are agency records which may be made available for public inspection and copying under the FOIA. I construe the parties' request for confidentiality as a request for pre-disclosure notification rights in accordance with 29 C.F.R. §70.26.² The Agreement itself is not appended to this Order approving the settlement, and will be kept in a separate envelope and marked "PREDISCLOSURE NOTIFICATION MATERIALS" in compliance with 29 C.F.R. §70.26. It will also be noted on the envelope that the predisclosure notification will apply to all requests for disclosure of this document. Therefore, should disclosure be requested, the parties will have the opportunity to state their positions in regard to whether disclosure is proper or warranted by law.

I find that both parties were ably represented by counsel in this matter, and that the provisions of the settlement agreement are fair, adequate, reasonable and not contrary to the public interest. Accordingly, I approve the parties' settlement and grant the parties' motion for dismissal of the complaint with prejudice. The parties shall implement the terms of the approved settlement as specifically stated in their agreement. This Order shall have the same force and effect as one made after a full hearing on the merits.

ORDER

Wherefore, it is ordered that:

1. The Settlement Agreement is **APPROVED**;
2. The Complaint is **DISMISSED WITH PREJUDICE**; and,

²The parties are afforded the right to request that information be treated as confidential business information. See 29 C.F.R. §70.26 (2016). The DOL is then required to take steps to preserve the confidentiality of that information, and must provide the parties with predisclosure notification if a FOIA request is received seeking release of that information. Accordingly, an unredacted copy of the Settlement Agreement in this matter will be placed in an envelope marked "PREDISCLOSURE NOTIFICATION MATERIALS." Consequently, before any information in this unredacted file is disclosed pursuant to a FOIA request, the DOL is required to notify the parties to permit them to file any objections to disclosure. *See* 29 C.F.R. § 70.26 (2016).

3. The Settlement Agreement is designated as confidential business information, under 29 C.F.R. § 70.26, and shall be afforded the protections thereunder, for purposes of a FOIA request. Predisclosure notification will also be provided to the parties in relation to other requests for disclosure as well.

RICHARD A. MORGAN
Administrative Law Judge