

Analysis of Proposed Consent Order to Aid Public Comment

In the Matter of CHAMP/MacNeill Engineering Company, Inc. File No. 122 3292

The Federal Trade Commission (“FTC” or “Commission”) has accepted, subject to final approval, an agreement containing a consent order from CHAMP/MacNeill Engineering Company, Inc., a corporation (“respondent”).

The proposed consent order has been placed on the public record for thirty (30) days for receipt of comments by interested persons. Comments received during this period will become part of the public record. After thirty (30) days, the Commission will again review the agreement and the comments received, and will decide whether it should withdraw from the agreement or make final the agreement’s proposed order.

This matter involves respondent’s marketing, sale, and distribution of purportedly biodegradable plastic golf tees to the public. According to the FTC complaint, respondent represented that its plastic products are completely biodegradable (*i.e.*, will completely break down and decompose into elements found in nature within a reasonably short period of time after customary disposal). Respondent further represented that its plastic products are biodegradable in a landfill; are biodegradable in a stated qualified timeframe; and are biodegradable, biodegradable in a landfill, or biodegradable in a stated qualified timeframe as a result of respondent’s use of a plastic additive manufactured by ECM Biofilms, Inc.

The complaint alleges that each of these degradable claims is false and misleading. In addition, the complaint alleges that, although respondent represented (expressly or implicitly) that it could substantiate its degradable claims, respondent did not in fact possess or rely upon a reasonable basis to substantiate these representations of biodegradability. Thus, the complaint alleges that respondent engaged in deceptive practices in violation of Section 5(a) of the FTC Act.

The proposed consent order contains a provision designed to prevent respondent from engaging in similar acts and practices in the future. Part I prohibits respondent from making any representation that a product or package is degradable, unless one of two conditions is met. The first condition is that the entire item will completely decompose into elements found in nature within one year after customary disposal. The second condition is that the representation will be clearly and prominently and in close proximity qualified by either the time to complete decomposition or the rate and extent of decomposition (although this qualification must disclose that the stated rate and extent of decomposition does not mean that the item will continue to decompose). In addition, if the product will not decompose in (or by) a customary disposal facility/method, the representation must be qualified regarding the type of disposal, and the availability of such disposal facility or method to consumers where the item is marketed and sold.

Part I also requires that, at the time of any such representation, respondent must possess and rely upon competent and reliable scientific evidence from a scientific technical protocol (or protocols) that does two things. First, the protocol must assure that the entire product will either completely decompose in one year or the stated timeframe, or that it will decompose at the rate

and to the extent stated in the representation. Second, such protocol must replicate (*i.e.*, simulate) the physical conditions found in a landfill or the disposal facility or method stated in the representation. Part I further prohibits respondent from marketing any products, packages, or services as offering any environmental benefit, unless the representation is true, not misleading, and, at the time it is made, respondent possesses and relies upon competent and reliable evidence that substantiates the representation.

Parts II through V are reporting and compliance provisions. Part II requires respondent to keep (and make available to the Commission on request): copies of advertisements, labeling, packaging and promotional materials containing the representations identified in Part I; materials relied upon in disseminating those representations; evidence that contradicts, qualifies, or calls into question the representation, or the basis relied upon for the representation, specified in Part I; and all acknowledgments of receipt of the order. Part III requires dissemination of the order now and in the future to subsidiaries, principals, officers, directors, and managers, and to all current and future employees, agents, and representatives having decision-making authority relating to the subject matter of the order. Part IV requires notification to the FTC of changes in corporate status. Part V mandates that respondent submit an initial compliance report to the FTC and make available to the FTC subsequent reports. Part VI is a provision “sunsetting” the order after twenty (20) years, with certain exceptions.

The purpose of the analysis is to aid public comment on the proposed order. It is not intended to constitute an official interpretation of the proposed order or to modify its terms in any way.