CHAPTER 135
DEALERSHIP PRACTICES

135.01 Short title. This chapter may be cited as the “Wisconsin Fair Dealership Law.”

History: 1973 c. 179; 2021 a. 238 s. 45.

This chapter was enacted for the protection of the interests of the dealer whose economic livelihood may be imperiled by the dealership grantor, whatever its size. Rossum Oil Co. v. Heinman, 72 Wis. 2d 690, 232 N.W.2d 176 (1976).

This chapter covers only agreements entered into after April 5, 1974. Wipperfurth v. U-Haul Co. of Western Wis., Inc., 101 Wis. 2d 586, 304 N.W.2d 767 (1981).

This chapter is constitutional; it may be applied to out-of-state dealers when performed by contract. C.A. Marine Supply Co. v. Brunswick Corp., 575 F.2d 1163. See also Boatland, Inc. v. Brunswick Corp. 558 F.2d 818.

When a dealer did not comply with all the terms of acceptance of a dealership agreement, no contract was formed and this chapter did not apply. Century Hardware Corp. v. Acme United Corp., 467 F. Supp. 350 (1979).


135.02 Definitions. In this chapter:

(1) “Community of interest” means a continuing financial interest between the grantor and grantee in either the operation of the dealership business or the marketing of such goods or services.

(2) “Dealer” means a person who is a grantee of a dealership situated in this state.

(3) “Dealership” means any of the following:

(a) A contract or agreement, either expressed or implied, whether oral or written, between 2 or more persons, by which a person is granted the right to sell or distribute goods, or services, or use a trade name, trademark, service mark, logo, advertising, or other commercial symbol, in which there is a community of interest in the business of offering, selling or distributing goods or services at wholesale, retail, by lease, agreement or otherwise.

(b) A contract or agreement, either expressed or implied, whether oral or written, between 2 or more persons by which a wholesaler, as defined in s. 125.02 (21), is granted the right to sell or distribute intoxicating liquor or use a trade name, trademark, service mark, logo, advertising or other commercial symbol related to intoxicating liquor. This paragraph does not apply to dealerships described in s. 135.066 (5) (a) and (b).

(4) “Good cause” means:

(a) Failure by a dealer to comply substantially with essential and reasonable requirements imposed upon the dealer by the grantor, or sought to be imposed by the grantor, which requirements are not discriminatory as compared with requirements imposed on other similarly situated dealers either by their terms or in the manner of their enforcement; or

(b) Bad faith by the dealer in carrying out the terms of the dealership.

(5) “Grantee” means a person who grants a dealership.

(6) “Person” means a natural person, partnership, joint venture, corporation or other entity.


A cartage agreement between an air freight company and a trucking company did not create a “dealership” under this chapter. Kania v. Airborne Freight Corp., 99 Wis. 2d 746, 300 N.W.2d 63 (1981).

A manufacturer’s representative was not a “dealership.” Foerster, Inc. v. Atlas Metal Parts Co., 105 Wis. 2d 17, 313 N.W.2d 60 (1981).

This chapter applies exclusively to dealerships that do business within the geographic confines of the state. Swan Sales Corp. v. Jos. Schlitz Brewing Co., 126 Wis. 2d 16, 374 N.W.2d 640 (Ct. App. 1985).

Two guideposts for determining the existence of a “community of interest” under sub. (3) are: 1) a shared financial interest in the operation of the dealership or the marketing of a good or service; and 2) the degree of cooperation, coordination of activities, and sharing of common goals in the parties’ relationship. Ziegler Co., Inc. v. Rexnord, Inc., 139 Wis. 2d 593, 407 N.W.2d 873 (1987).

A substantial investment or distribution of property from a typical vendor–vendor relationship; establishing a loss of future profits is not sufficient. Gunderjohn v. Loewe–America, Inc., 179 Wis. 2d 201, 507 N.W.2d 115 (Ct. App. 1993).

Conflicts between an HMO and a wholesaler for the purposes of chiropractic services to HMO members did not establish the chiropractors as dealerships under this chapter. Bakke Chiropractic Clinic v. Physicians Plus Insurance, 215 Wis. 2d 605, 573 N.W.2d 542 (Ct. App. 1997), 97–1169.

A dealership is a contract or agreement establishing a particular sort of commercial relationship that encompasses an extraordinary diverse set of business relationships not limited to the traditional franchise. The focus of the analysis must be on whether the business relationship can be said to be situated in the state after examining a broad set of factors outlined by the court. Baldewein Co. v. Tri–Clover, Inc., 2000 WI 20, 233 Wis. 2d 57, 606 N.W.2d 145, 98–0581. See also Baldewein Co. v. Tri–Clover, Inc., 183 F. Supp. 2d 1116 (2002).

Assuming without deciding that the size of the local economy relative to the cost of the grantor’s inventory of the grantor’s products is a relevant factor in determining the existence of a community of interest, that factor did not demonstrate the existence of a community of interest in this case. Moe v. Benelli U.S.A. Corp., 2007 WI App 254, 306 Wis. 2d 812, 743 N.W.2d 691, 06–1512.

Under sub. (2), a “dealer” is defined in this chapter to mean “a person who is a grantee of a dealership situated in this state.” Sub. (3) defines “dealership” in part as “contract or agreement . . . between 2 or more persons, by which a person is granted the right to sell or distribute goods or services . . . .” Sub. (6) defines “person” as “a natural person, partnership, joint venture, corporation or other entity” and a city is a municipal corporation. Under s. 990.01 (26), “person” includes all partnerships, associations, and bodies politic and corporate. The general term “corporation” preemptively should be read to include more specific types of corporations. Under the facts of this case, the relationships between the defendant city and the golf pro plaintiffs who operated its golf courses constituted “dealerships” under sub. (3). Benson v. City of Madison, 2017 WI 65, 374 Wis. 2d 574, 897 N.W.2d 16, 15–2366.

A wine grantor–dealer relationship is not included within the definition of a dealership in sub. (3) (b). Section 135.066 (2) provides the operative definition of intoxicating liquor for purposes of this chapter, and that definition explicitly excludes wine. Winebow, Inc. v. Capitol–Husting Co., Inc., 2018 WI 60, 381 Wis. 2d 732, 914 N.W.2d 631, 17–1595.

When another protected party transfers a protected interest to a third party; a “community of interest” is destroyed and the party removed from WFDL protection. Lakefield Telephone Co. v. Northern Telecom, Inc., 970 F.2d 392 (1992).

A community of interest exists when a large proportion of a dealer’s revenues are derived from the dealership, or when the alleged dealer has made sizable investments specialized in the grantor’s goods or services. Frieburg Farm Equip. v. Van Dale, Inc., 978 F.2d 395 (1992).

There is no “community of interest” in the sale of services not yet in existence when the availability of the services is dependent on the happening of an uncertain condition. Simon v. Embassy Suites, Inc., 983 F.2d 1404 (1993).

This chapter does not protect a manufacturer’s representative that lacks the unqualified authorization to sell or the authority to commit the manufacturer to a sale. Sales & Marketing Assoc., Inc. v. Huffy Corp., 57 F.3d 602 (1995).

If a grantor is losing substantial money under the dealership relationship, it may constitute “good cause” for changes in the contract, including termination. Morley–Murphy Co. v. Zenith Electronics, Inc., 142 F.3d 373 (1998).

This chapter specifies who may take advantage of its protections through the terms of “dealership” and “dealership” and obviates the need to resort to conflict of laws principles. Investment in the state without in–state sales does not bring a party within the coverage of the chapter. Genesis Corp. v. Caterpillar, Inc., 172 F.3d 971 (1999).

A manufacturer’s right of approval of its distributors’ subdistributors did not create a contractual relationship between the manufacturer and the subdistributor subject to this chapter. Praetke Auto Electric & Battery Co. v. Tecumseh Products Co., 255 F.3d 464 (2001).

The WFDL expresses no concern for the mission or other motivation underlying the sales; in question; it asks only whether sales occur. Nor does the statute draw any

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distinction between for-profit and not-for-profit entities. The stated concern is with fair business relations, and it is beyond dispute that nonprofit corporations can be substantial businesses. It matters not whether the purported dealer would be called a "dealer" in any meaningful sense; what matters is only how the statute defines the term. Girl Scouts of Manitou Council, Inc. v. Girl Scouts of the United States of America, Inc., 549 F.3d 1079 (2008).

Affirmed in part in 646 F.3d 983 (2011).

For an entity to qualify as a dealership through the use of commercial symbols, more is required than the mere right to use a commercial symbol. Instead, a dealership must use those symbols to such effect that the public associates the dealer with the trademark or prominently display the logo as an implicit guarantee of quality. Such use by a dealership ties its fortunes to the reputation of the grantor, giving the grantor superior bargaining power that the grantee might not use to exploit the dealer.

Sufficiently substantial use of a grantor's corporate symbol typically requires a position that is substantially in the marketplace. PMT Machinery Sales, Inc. v. Yama Seiki USA, Inc., 941 F.3d 325 (2019).

The distinction between a dealer and a manufacturer's representative is discussed. Al Bishop Agency, Inc. v. Lithuania-Division of National Services, Inc., 474 F.2d 828 (1973).


The plaintiff was not a "dealer" since money advanced to the company for fixtures and inventory was refundable. Moore v. Tandy Corp. Radio Shack Div., 631 F. Supp. 1037 (1986).

I, to determine whether under sub. (3) a "community of interest" exists by examining the effect termination has on a division of the plaintiff. United States v. Davis, 756 F. Supp. 1162 (1990).


The "situated in this state" requirement under sub. (2) is satisfied as long as the dealership conducts business in Wisconsin. CSS-Wisconsin Office v. Houston Satellite Systems, Inc., 979 F. Supp. 199 (1997).

There is no "community of interest" under sub. (3) when there is an utter absence of "shared goals" or "coordinated competitive efforts" between the parties. Cajan v. Wisconsin Furniture Co., 817 F. Supp. 1368 (1993).

Even if a person is granted a right to sell a product, the person is not a dealer unless that person actually sells the product. Smith v. Rainsoft, 848 F. Supp. 1413 (1994).


A dealer providing that the party who had drafted the contract and dictated all of its provisions was not a party to the contract was void, and that party was a grantor of a dealership. Pratelle Auto Electric & Battery Co. v. Tecumseh Products, Co., 110 F. Supp. 2d 209 (2000).

Nothing in the text or legislative history of this chapter suggests that the legislature intended to preclude co-ops from being dealers. Sub. (2) defines a dealer as "a person whose business or occupation is the conduct of a business in conjunction with the sale of products to retail customers in this state and the United States."

174-532 Cancellation and alteration of dealerships. (a) To promote the compelling interest of the public in fair business relations between dealers and grantors, and in the continuation of dealings on a fair basis;

(b) To protect dealers against unfair treatment by grantors, who infringe upon dealer's economic power and superior bargaining power in the negotiation of dealings;

(c) To provide dealers with rights and remedies in addition to those existing by contract or common law;

(d) To govern all dealings, including any renewals or amendments, to the full extent consistent with the constitutions of the state and the United States.

The effect of this chapter may not be varied by contract or agreement. Any contract or agreement purporting to do so is void and unenforceable to that extent only.

History: 1977 c. 171.

The choice of law clause in a dealership agreement was unenforceable. Bush v. National School Studios, 139 Wis. 6d 635, 407 N.W.2d 883 (1987).

Federal law required the enforcement of an arbitration clause even though that clause did not provide the relief guaranteed by this chapter, contrary to this section and s. 135.05. Madison Beauty Supply v. Helene Curtis, 167 Wis. 2d 237, 481 N.W.2d 644 (Ct. App. 1992).

A forum-selection clause in a dealership agreement was not freely bargained for and thus was rendered ineffective under sub. (2)(b). Cutter v. Scott & Feiter Co., 510 F. Supp. 905 (1981).


135.03 Cancellation and alteration of dealerships. No grantor, directly or through any officer, agent or employee, may terminate, cancel, fail to renew or substantially change the competitive circumstances of a dealership agreement without cause. The burden of proving good cause is on the grantor.

History: 1973 c. 179; 1977 c. 171.

A grantor may cancel, terminate, or non-renew a dealership if the dealer refuses to accept changes that are essentially reasonable, and not discriminatory, or that fail to substantially comply with the changes constitutes good cause. Ziegler Co., Inc. v. Rexnord, 147 Wis. 2d 308, 433 N.W.2d 8 (1988).


This chapter did not apply to a grantor’s action that was due to business exigencies unrelated to the dealer and was done in a nondiscriminatory manner. Remus v. Amoco Oil Co., 794 F.3d 1238 (1986).

Economic duress may serve as a basis for a claim of constructive termination of a dealership. JPM, Inc. v. John Deere, 906 F.2d 370 (1990).

A grantor’s substantial loss of money through a dealership may constitute "good cause" for changes in the contract, including termination. Morley-Murphy Co., 423 F.3d 564 (2008).

This chapter is applicable to nonprofit grantors. Girl Scouts of Manitou Council, Inc. v. Girl Scouts of the United States of America, 646 F.3d 983 (2011).

A dealer was held not to be in a dealer’s “competitive circumstances.” Van v. Mobil Oil Corp., 515 F. Supp. 487 (1981).

This section did not apply when a grantor withdrew in a nondiscriminatory fashion from product market on a large geographic scale. Team Electronics v. Apple Computer, 546 F. Supp. 1245 (1982).

Franchises failed to meet their burden of proof that their competitive circumstances would be substantially changed by a new agreement. Bresteller’s 33 Flavors Franchising Corp. v. Wokosin, 591 F. Supp. 1533 (1984).


When parties continue their relations after the term of a dealership contract has expired, the contract has been renewed for another period of the same length. Pratelle Auto Electric & Battery Co. v. Tecumseh Products, Co., 110 F. Supp. 2d 899 (2000).

Reversed on other grounds. 255 F.3d 460 (2001).

Plaintiffs could proceed under this chapter if they could adduce evidence either that defendant made a change in the competitive circumstances of their dealership agreements that had a discriminatory effect on them or that defendant’s actions were intended to eliminate them or all of its dealers from the state. It is critical that plaintiff-dealers show an intent to terminate on the part of the grantor. Although it would not be enough to show that the grantor made bad management decisions; it might be enough to show that the plaintiff-dealers did not make their management decisions were a cover for an intent to slough off the dealers and take over the markets they had developed. Carter & Merryman, Inc. v. Supervalu, Inc., 787 F. Supp. 1088 (1992).

Assignment of a second distributor in Wisconsin did not breach the agreement or cause a substantial change in the competitive circumstances of the nonexclusive dealers agreements in violation of this section. However, the defendant’s assignment of a second distributorship was a violation of s. 135.04 because it caused a substantial change in the competitive circumstances of the plaintiff’s truck trailer distributor. Morvec v. v. Al Bishop Agency, Inc., 571 F. Supp. 2d 992 (2008).

When an action becomes so egregious as to amount to constructive termination of the dealership this section is violated. Constructive termination of a dealership agreement when the grantor takes actions that amount to a complete and effective end to the continuing meaningful aspects of the dealership relationship, regardless of whether the formal contractual relationship between the parties continues in force. Girl Scouts of Manitou Council, Inc. v. Girl Scouts of the United States of America, 700 F. Supp. 2d 1055 (2011).


"Good cause" is not limited to the statutory definition of the term under s. 135.02 (4), the grantor’s own circumstances constitute good cause for reasonable, essential, and nondiscriminatory changes in the way it does business with dealers. To show good cause for making a substantial change in the competitive circumstances of a dealership agreement, the grantor must establish: 1) an objectively ascertainable need for change; 2) a proportionate response to that need; and 3) a nondiscriminatory action. This chapter does not affect this requirement between for-profit entities, and, as such, the court cannot judicially craft a lower threshold for when for-profit organizations wish to substantially change the competitive circumstances of a dealership agreement. Girl Scouts of Manitou Council, Inc. v. Girl Scouts of the United States of America, 700 F. Supp. 2d 1055 (2011).


nonrenewal or substantial change in competitive circumstances. The notice shall state all the reasons for termination, cancellation, nonrenewal or substantial change in competitive circumstances and shall provide that the dealer has 60 days in which to rectify any claimed deficiency. If the deficiency is rectified within 60 days the notice shall be void. The notice provisions of this section shall not apply if the reason for termination, cancellation or nonrenewal is insolvency, the occurrence of an assignment for the benefit of creditors or bankruptcy. If the reason for termination, cancellation, nonrenewal or substantial change in competitive circumstances is nonpayment of sums due to the dealer under the dealership, the dealer shall be entitled to written notice of such default, and shall have 10 days in which to remedy such default from the date of delivery or posting of such notice.

History: 1973 c. 179.

A grantor must give a 90-day notice when termination is for nonpayment of sums due. White Hen Pantry v. Butke, 100 Wis. 2d 169, 301 N.W.2d 216 (1981).

The notice provision of this section applies to substantial changes of circumstances of a dealership, not a dealership agreement. Actions that substantially change competitive circumstances are controlled by the grantor and are allowed by the dealership agreement require the statutory notice. Jungbluth v. Hometown, Inc., 201 Wis. 2d 230, 548 N.W.2d 519 (1996), 94–1523.

Steps that the grantor requires the dealer to take in order to rectify a deficiency must be reasonable. A. Bishop Agency Inc. v. Lithuania, 474 F. Supp. 828 (1979).


The insolvency exception to the notice requirement did not apply to insolvency that was not known to the grantor at the time of termination. Bruno Wine & Spirits v. Guimarra Vineyards, 573 F. Supp. 337 (1983).

Assignment of a second distributor in Wisconsin did not breach the agreement or cause a substantial change in the competitive circumstances of the nonexclusive dealer–grantor agreement in violation of s. 135.03. However, the defendant’s assignment of a second distributorship was a violation of this section because it caused a substantial change in the competitive circumstances of the plaintiff’s truck blower distributorship and the defendant failed to provide the plaintiff with 90 days’ written notice. Wisconsin Compressed Air Corp. v. Gardner Denver, Inc., 571 F. Supp. 2d 992 (2008).

135.045 Repurchase of inventories. If a dealership is terminated by the grantor, the grantor, at the option of the dealer, shall repurchase all inventories sold by the grantor to the dealer for resale under the dealership agreement at the fair wholesale market value. This section applies only to merchandise with a name, trademark, label or other mark on it which identifies the grantor.

History: 1977 c. 171.


135.05 Application to arbitration agreements. This chapter shall not apply to provisions for the binding arbitration of disputes contained in a dealership agreement concerning the items covered in s. 135.03, if the criteria for determining whether good cause existed for a termination, cancellation, nonrenewal or substantial change of competitive circumstances, and the relief provided is no less than that provided for in this chapter.

History: 1977 c. 179; 1993 a. 482.

Federal law required enforcement of an arbitration clause even though that clause did not provide the relief guaranteed by this chapter, contrary to this section and s. 135.025, Madison Beauty Supply v. Helene Curtis, 167 Wis. 2d 237, 481 N.W.2d 644 (Ct. App. 1992).

135.06 Action for damages and injunctive relief. If any grantor violates this chapter, a dealer may bring an action against such grantor in any court of competent jurisdiction for damages sustained by the dealer as a consequence of the grantor’s violation, together with the actual costs of the action, including reasonable attorney fees, and the dealer also may be granted injunctive relief against unlawful termination, cancellation, nonrenewal or substantial change of competitive circumstances.

History: 1973 c. 179; 1993 a. 482.

In an action for termination of a dealership upon written notice not complying with this section, the grantor agrees to a statutory limitation of attorney fees. The measure of damages is discussed. C.A. May Marine Supply Co. v. Brunswick Corp., 649 F.2d 1049 (1981).

A cause of action accrued when a defective notice under s. 135.04 was given, not when the dealership was actually terminated. Hammill v. Richel Mfg. Corp., 719 F.2d 252 (1983).

This section does not restrict recovery of damages with respect to inventory on hand at the time of termination to “fair wholesale market value.” Kralie Pharmacy v. Walgreen Co., 761 F.2d 345 (1985).

Attorney fees were properly included under this section. Bright v. Land O’ Lakes, Inc., 844 F.2d 436 (1988).


An arbitration award that did not award attorney fees was enforceable. Parties may agree to bear their own legal expenses when resolving differences; what the parties may do, an arbitrator as their mutual agent may also do. George Watts & Son, Inc. v. Tiffany & Co., 248 F.3d 577 (2001).


135.065 Temporary injunctions. In any action brought by a dealer against a grantor under this chapter, any violation of this chapter by the grantor is deemed an irreparable injury to the dealer for determining if a temporary injunction should be issued.

History: 1977 c. 171.

Four factors considered in granting preliminary injunction are discussed. The loss of a well constituted irreparable harm. Reinders Bros. v. Ram Bird Eastern Sales Corp., 627 F.2d 44 (1980).

The court did not abuse its discretion in granting a preliminary injunction notwithstanding the arguable likelihood that the defendant would ultimately prevail at trial. Menominee Rubber Co. v. Guild, Inc., 657 F.2d 164 (1981).

Although the plaintiff showed irreparable harm, the failure to show a reasonable likelihood of success on the merits precluded a preliminary injunction. Milwaukee Rentals, Inc. v. Budget Rent A Car Corp., 496 F. Supp. 253 (1980).

A presumption of irreparable harm exists in favor of a dealer when a violation is shown. For the presumption to apply, a dealership relationship must be shown to exist. Price Engineering Co., Inc. v. Vickes, Inc., 774 F. Supp. 1160 (1991).

If a plaintiff establishes the likelihood of a violation of this chapter, the statute creates a rebuttable presumption of irreparable harm. The effect of the statute is to transfer from the plaintiff to the defendant the burden of going forward with evidence on the question of irreparable injury. If neither party presents evidence on the issue, the rebuttable presumption created by the statute requires finding in favor of the dealer. If, however, the grantor presents evidence of the absence of irreparable injury, the presumption is no longer relevant, and the dealer must come forward with evidence showing the grantor’s evidence.

135.066 Intoxicating liquor dealerships. (1) LEGISLATIVE FINDINGS. The legislature finds that a balanced and healthy 3-tier system for distributing intoxicating liquor is in the best interest of this state and its citizens; that the 3-tier system for distributing intoxicating liquor has existed since the 1930’s; that a balanced and healthy 3-tier system ensures a level system between the manufacturer and wholesale tiers; that a wholesale tier consisting of numerous healthy competitors is necessary for a balanced and healthy 3-tier system; that the number of intoxicating liquor wholesalers in this state is in significant decline; that the regulation of all intoxicating liquor dealerships, regardless of whether they were entered into, is necessary to promote and maintain a wholesale tier consisting of numerous healthy competitors; and that the maintenance and promotion of the 3-tier system will promote the public health, safety and welfare. The legislature further finds that a stable and healthy wholesale tier provides an efficient and effective means for tax collection. The legislature further finds that dealerships between intoxicating liquor wholesalers and manufacturers have been subject to state regulation since the enactment of the 21st Amendment to the U.S. Constitution and that the parties to those dealership agreements expect changes to state legislation regarding those dealership agreements.

(2) DEFINITION. “Intoxicating liquor” has the meaning given in s. 125.02 (8) minus wine.

(3) NONAPPLICABILITY. This section does not apply to any of the following dealerships:

(a) Dealerships in which a grantor, including any affiliate, division or subsidiary of the grantor, has never produced more than 200,000 gallons of intoxicating liquor in any year.

(b) Dealerships in which the dealer’s net revenues from the sale of all of the grantor’s brands of intoxicating liquor constitute less than 5 percent of the dealer’s total net revenues from the sale of intoxicating liquor.
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of intoxicating liquor during the dealer’s most recent fiscal year preceding a grantor’s cancellation or alteration of a dealership.

(6) SEVERABILITY. The provisions of this section are severable as provided in s. 990.001 (11).

History: 1999 a. 9; 2021 a. 238 ss. 44, 45.

A wine grantor−dealer relationship is not included within the definition of a dealership in s. 135.02 (3) (b). Sub. (2) provides the operative definition of intoxicating liquor for purposes of this chapter, and that definition explicitly excludes wine. Winebow, Inc. v. Capitol−Husting Co., Inc., 2018 WI 60, 381 Wis. 2d 732, 914 N.W.2d 631, 17−1595.

135.07 Nonapplicability. This chapter does not apply:

(1) To a dealership to which a motor vehicle dealer or motor vehicle distributor or wholesaler as defined in s. 218.0101 is a party in such capacity.

(2) To the insurance business.

(3) Where goods or services are marketed by a dealership on a door to door basis.


When a “dealer” under this chapter is also a “franchisee” under ch. 553, the commissioner of securities may deny, suspend, or revoke the franchisor’s registration or revoke its exemption if the franchisor has contracted to violate or avoid the provisions of this chapter. This chapter expresses public policy and its provisions may not be waived. 66 Atty. Gen. 11.