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FILED LOS ANGELES SUPERIOR COURT

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SHERRI A. C. J. LES. EXECUTE OF DEPUTY

WANCY NAVARRO

SUPERIOR COURT OF THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA FOR THE COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES

DANIELLE MARRUFO, an individual, ROBERT SCHULTZ, an individual,

Plaintiffs,

VS.

AUTOMOBILE CLUB OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA, a California company; and DOES 1 – 100, inclusive,

Defendants.

Case No.: BC597839

ORDER GRANTING PLAINTIFFS'
MOTION FOR SUMMARY JUDGMENT
AND DENYING DEFENDANT'S
MOTION FOR SUMMARY JUDGMENT

Dept.: SSC 17

I. INTRODUCTION

Plaintiffs Danielle Marrufo and Robert Schultz (Plaintiffs) have or had homeowners' fire insurance policies issued by Defendant Interinsurance Exchange of the Automobile Club (the Exchange). The policies contain a "Wildfire Smoke Endorsement,"

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enacted after the 2009 Station Fire in Los Angeles County. Plaintiffs seek a declaration that this endorsement fails to meet the requirements imposed by Insurance Code §§ 2070 and 2071² and is thus unenforceable. (FAC, ¶¶2, 19.) The Exchange, in contrast, argues that the endorsement is not governed by sections 2070 and 2071 because damage from smoke is not covered by those sections and is permitted "extended coverage" for a peril separate from fire, i.e. wildfire smoke. It further argues that even if governed by those sections it is free to set policy limits for smoke damage claims that differ from policy limits for claims from fire loss.

Having considered the undisputed facts, those limited matters which the Court may judicially notice,³ the pleadings, and the oral argument of counsel on February 22, 2018, and for the reasons that follow, the Court grants judgment in favor of Plaintiffs.

Plaintiffs have not made any claims to the Exchange relative to the Endorsement. They represent a certified class of similarly situated persons. In a related action, Plaintiff Astolfo Gomez brought class action claims against Defendant on behalf of a class of persons who had made claims pursuant to the Wildfire Endorsement, Gomez v. Automobile Club of Southern California (BC564641). The Gomez action contained two theories of liability. The first was that the Wildfire Smoke Endorsement is unenforceable in light of Insurance Code §§ 2070 and 2071. The second was that the endorsement was inadequately disclosed to policy holders. Gomez resulted in a class action settlement approved March 15, 2017. Under the terms of the settlement the second claim in Gomez was settled, with the proviso that the first claim would be resolved in this action, with Gomez class members preserving the right to a potential future payment. The rulings here will necessitate further proceedings in Gomez.

² Except as otherwise noted all statutory references are to Cal. Ins. Code.

³ Rulings on the evidentiary objections and requests for judicial notice are appended.

II. LEGAL STANDARD

Cal. Code Civ. Pro. §437c(a)(1) provides for summary judgment where either an action has no merit or where there is no defense to the action. The parties do not have any material undisputed facts and concur that this matter should be adjudicated by way of cross motions.

The provisions of the Insurance Code applicable here are two:

Section 2070 provides that all fire policies shall be in the form prescribed by statute or, if not, must provide coverage that is "substantially equivalent to or more favorable to the insured" than what is contained in the standard statutory form.

Section 2071 contains the standard form language:

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(Emphasis in original)

Section 2071 requires the insured to give written notice "without unnecessary delay," and "within sixty days after the loss." It requires any "suit" for recovery "within 12 months" after inception of the loss.

It is well established that:

"In California, fire insurance policies are regulated by the Insurance Code." Section 2070 provides: 'All fire polices ... shall be on the standard form, and, except as provided by this article shall not contain additions thereto. No part of the standard form shall be omitted therefrom except that any policy providing coverage against the peril of fire only, or in combination with coverage against other perils, need not comply with the provisions of the standard form of fire insurance policy ...; provided, that coverage with respect to the peril of fire, when viewed in its entirety, is substantially equivalent to or more favorable to the insured than that contained in such standard form fire insurance policy.' (Italics added.) Provisions of the standard form fire policy are set forth in section 2071. Thus, a policy that does not conform to section 2071's standard provisions must provide total fire coverage that is at least 'substantially equivalent' to coverage provided by the standard form. (§ 2070; see Julian v. Hartford Underwriters Ins. Co. (2005) 35 Cal.4th 747, 754, 27 Cal.Rptr.3d 648, 110 P.3d 903 [policy exclusions are unenforceable to the extent they conflict with the Insurance Code].)"

Century-National Ins. Co. v. Garcia (2011) 51 Cal.4th 564, 567.

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- 1. all loss from FIRE AND LIGHTNING; and
- 2. accidental direct physical loss from...:
- f. SUDDEN AND ACCIDENTAL DAMAGE FROM SMOKE

We do not cover loss caused by smoke from agricultural smudging or industrial operations.

(Pages 025-026).

In the section captioned, "Your Duties After Loss," the policy provides, "You must, within 60 calendar days after the loss, submit to us your signed, sworn proof of loss." (Page 029).

Plaintiffs do not dispute that these provisions comply with the requirements of Insurance Code §2071. It is also undisputed that the policy contains no definition of either "FIRE" or "SMOKE."

The disputed Wildfire Smoke Endorsement contains the following relevant language:

For purposes of this endorsement and subject to all the provisions of your Homeowners policy, it is agreed that the coverage provided under PART I-PROPERTY COVERAGES of your policy has been changed as follows:

A. DEFINITIONS

Under DEFINITIONS the following definitions are added:

Wildfire – means a fire predominantly fueled by timber, scrub, brush, grass, or any other type of vegetation.

Wildfire smoke – means any smoke, soot, ash, char, odor, dust, particulate or other material (all whether or not settled, airborne, wind-borne or wind-driven) that is produced, discharged, emitted or released by, or otherwise caused by or resulting from, a wildfire.

Wildfire smoke loss – means accidental direct physical loss to property covered under PART I which is caused by wildfire smoke and the loss: a. occurs; and

b. is reported to us;

no later than 90 calendar days following the start date of the wildfire.

B. PART I – PROPERTY COVERAGES

OTHER COVERAGES - PART I

Under OTHER COVERAGES – PART I, provision 15 is added:

15. WILDFIRE SMOKE

We will pay up to \$5,000 for the total of all loss payable under PART I as a result of accidental direct physical loss to property covered under PART I which is caused by wildfire smoke that is not a wildfire smoke loss. The amount payable under this provision includes:

- a. the cost required to repair or replace covered damaged or destroyed property;
- b. the cost of testing the air or property to confirm the absence, presence, or level of any wildfire smoke;
- c. any amount payable under OTHER COVERAGES PART I, provision 1. LOSS OF USE;
- d. any amount payable under OTHER COVERAGES PART I, provision 7. REMOVAL OF DEBRIS AND VOLCANIC ASH.

This coverage does not increase the amount of the limit of liability applicable to the property damaged or destroyed.

(Page 014).

B. The Parties' Agreement Regarding Interpretation

At the commencement of the litigation the parties had differing understandings as to the effect of the Endorsement. At oral argument, however, counsel agreed that under their respective interpretations of the Endorsement an insured whose home was damaged only by wildfire smoke (but not fire) and who reported that loss within 90 days of the "start of the wildfire" would be entitled to coverage up to the policy's full limits. If the insured had no loss from a wildfire itself but reported loss from wildfire smoke *after* 90 days of the start of the fire, the limits of the policy would be \$5,000. Based on that understanding, the

Court now considers whether the Endorsement, functioning in such a fashion, violates sections 2070 and 2071 of the Insurance Code.

C. Wild Fire Smoke Damage Is Covered By Sections 2070 and 2071

The parties disagree as to whether Sections 2070 and 2071 apply to the Endorsement. The Exchange contends that the Endorsement is "extended coverage" that is not governed by section 2071 because wildfire smoke is a peril separate from the peril of "FIRE" as intended by the statute and that, in any event, under the statute it may limit the *amount* of coverage for a particular peril. Plaintiffs contend that smoke is a by-product of fire and is a peril of fire covered by the statutory provisions. This is a question of first impression on which there is little evidence of legislative intent other than the language of the statutes themselves. For the reasons that follow, the Court finds the Plaintiffs' arguments the more persuasive.

1. The Language of the Statute

Read together Insurance Code sections 2070 and 2071 provide that the policy must insure against not only fire itself but the "peril" of fire. Section 2071 requires coverage for "all LOSS BY FIRE." Section 2070 states that a policy that covers: " the *peril* of fire only, or in combination with coverage against other *perils*, need not comply with the provisions of the standard form of fire insurance policy ... provided, that coverage with respect to the *peril* of fire, when viewed in its entirety, is substantially equivalent to or more favorable to the insured than that contained in such standard form fire insurance policy." (§2070, emphasis added.) The question that must thus be answered is: Is smoke from a wildfire a "peril" separate from the fire itself? Or, put another way, when an insurer is required to cover "all loss by fire" does the term "all" include smoke from a fire causing loss?

"The term 'perils' or 'risks' in traditional property insurance parlance 'refers to fortuitous, active, physical forces such as lightning, wind, and explosion, which bring about the loss." Croskey, Heeseman, Ehrlich & Klee, CAL. PRAC. GUIDE: INSURANCE LITIGATION (The Rutter Group 2017) 6:275, citing *Garvey v. State Farm Fire & Cas. Co.* (1989) 48 Cal. 3d 395, 406. In some technical contexts "peril" may mean "cause of

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loss." However, there is no indication that the Legislature meant "peril" in a technical way when it adopted the statute. See Doheny W. Homeowners' Ass'n v. Am. Guar. & Liab. Ins. Co. (1997) 60 Cal.App.4th 400, 405, fn. 4 (citing Croskey and noting that although "peril" may in some technical or special contexts mean "cause of loss," the ordinary meaning is "fortuitous, active, physical forces.")

Wildfire smoke is not an active force on its own. It occurs because of the wildfire. It thus appears from the language of the statutes and the ordinary definition of "peril" that when a carrier is required by the Legislature to insure against "all" loss "by fire" that included is the requirement to cover damage from smoke caused by any accidental fire other than those caused by particular sources detailed in the statute ("(a) enemy attack by armed forces, including action taken by military, naval or air forces in resisting an actual or an immediately impending enemy attack; (b) invasion; (c) insurrection; (d) rebellion; (e) revolution; (f) civil war; (g) usurped power; (h) order of any civil authority except acts of destruction at the time of and for the purpose of preventing the spread of fire, provided that the fire did not originate from any of the perils excluded by this policy; (i) neglect of the insured to use all reasonable means to save and preserve the property at and after a loss, or when the property is endangered by fire in neighboring premises;" Ins. Code, § 2071).

2. The Exchange's Authorities Are Not Persuasive

The Exchange cites Insurance Code §10091 (governing FAIR plan policies) and Insurance Code §9095 (governing fraternal fire insurers) as evidence of the Legislature's understanding that smoke damage is distinct from standard fire coverage and is part of

⁵ That the policies exclude coverage for cover loss caused by smoke from agricultural smudging or industrial operations does not change the analysis. These exclusions relate to smoke from fires intentionally set and, in the case of the smudging operation, intended to cause smoke so as to raise the air temperature to prevent crop loss.

"extended" coverage that is not subject to section 2070 and that "loss by Fire" was not intended by the Legislature to include smoke from a fire.

Section 10091 defines "Basic property insurance" to mean insurance against "direct loss . . . from perils insured under the standard fire policy and extended coverage endorsement and vandalism and malicious mischief." While this section makes clear that the Legislature distinguishes between perils insured under the standard fire policy and other perils insured against under extended coverage endorsements, the language does not illuminate whether smoke caused by a fire constitutes a peril insured against under the standard policy or is a separate peril that may be covered by extended coverage endorsements.

Insurance Code §9095, applicable to certain fraternal associations, provides that if the association has issued a policy against fire, it may endorse the policy to extend coverage to include, "windstorm, cyclone, tornado and hail, explosion, riot, riot attending a strike, aircraft, vehicles and smoke." In this context it does appear that the Legislature considered "smoke" to be a peril distinct from "fire." However, there is no indication that the same considerations apply to fire policies issued by insurers subject to Sections 2070 and 2071.

Likewise, Cal. Code Regs., tit. 10, §2670.13 is a regulation adopted by the *Insurance Commissioner* to implement the provisions of section 779.36 of the Insurance Code regarding rates that may be charged for certain credit insurance. It does not reflect *legislative* intent. The regulation provides that where a carrier issues "dual interest" credit property insurance on a closed end plan of indebtedness for personal property purchased by the certificate holder and insuring the interests of both the lender whose loan is secured by the personal property and the certificate holder (borrower), the perils insured against include coverage for "direct loss or damage...by fire and lightning... as well as... extended coverage covering...smoke."

The language for credit insurance is not the same as the language for fire insurance and the concerns of the Legislature regarding the proper coverages under a fire insurance policy are not shown to be the same as those for credit insurance. Moreover, the fact that the Insurance Commissioner referenced "direct loss by fire" and treated a loss by smoke covered by "extended coverage" provisions suggests that when the Legislature requires coverage for "all loss by fire" (as opposed to "direct" loss), that it intended loss caused by smoke to be included in the coverage and not part of "extended coverage."

3. Rate Approval by the Department of Insurance is Not Dispositive

Defendant points out that its Wildfire Smoke Endorsement, and that of other insurers, was approved by the California Department of Insurance. The short answer to this argument is that the Insurance Commissioner's approval of a rate does not govern the trial court's determination of whether the policy conforms to the requirements of the Insurance Code. Frenzer v. Mutual Benefit Health & Acc. Ass'n (1938) 27 Cal.App.2d 406, 414; Rand v. American Nat. Ins. Co. (2010) 717 F.Supp.2d 948, 955.

4. Conclusion

The Court recognizes that wildfires are prevalent in California and that claims for smoke loss from same may be more difficult to evaluate than claims for damage from fire itself (See Dec. of Daly). The Court nonetheless concludes that the Legislature intended, under a plain English reading of the term "ALL LOSS BY FIRE" and the usual meaning of the word "peril," to include smoke loss in the coverages to be provided under section 2071. Should carriers desire to limit their exposure to such claims their remedy lies with the Legislature.

D. The Endorsement Violates Section 2071

The Exchange contends that under Section 2071 it has the right to set policy limits, including different policy limits for different kinds of losses, citing *St. Cyr v. California FAIR Plan Assn.* (2014) 223 Cal.App.4th 786. *St. Cyr* confirms that Section 2071 requires payment of policy limits and not actual cash value of lost property. The statute, however,

prescribes a *single* policy limit for loss by fire. It does not permit a separate limit for some losses by fire (the "sublimit") and a more generous limit for others. Thus, to the extent the endorsement provides only \$5,000 in coverage for a wildfire smoke loss for claims reported more than 90 days after the start of a wildfire it violates the statute.

Further, the requirement that the claim must be reported within 90 days of the "start of the wildfire" rather than 60 days "after the loss," as required by section 2071 (insured to give written notice "without unnecessary delay," and "within sixty days *after the loss*")(emphasis added), is not permitted.

As discussed at oral argument, the Court takes judicial notice, pursuant to Cal. Evid. Code §§ 452(g) and (h), that wildfires in California often begin many miles from where they end and burn for many weeks before they are extinguished. By way of example only, the Station Fire, which preceded the Exchange's Endorsement, began August 26, 2009 and was not contained until October 16, 2009, burning some 160,577 acres in the process. (http://cdfdata.fire.ca.gov/pub/cdf/images/incidentstatsevents_178.pdf) The recent Thomas Fire began December 4, 2017 in Ventura County, burned over 281,000 acres, and was not contained until at least January 12, 2018.

https://inciweb.nwcg.gov/incident/article/5670/42432/. In both fires, those who suffered wildfire smoke damage during the last days of the fire (more than 30 days after it commenced) would, under the Exchange's endorsement, be required to report any loss within ninety days after commencement of the fire, even if their losses were not incurred until well after the fire commenced, or suffer a diminution in the amount of their coverage. The statute does not permit this.

E. The Rule of Lenity Does Not Bear On the Analysis

Defendant alternatively argues that the Court should apply the rule of lenity. (Defendant's Reply at 12:16-13:5.) The rule of lenity essentially holds that penal statutes are to be construed and applied as favorably to the defendant as the language of the statute and the circumstances reasonably permit. Walsh v. Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control (1963) 59 Cal.2d 757, 765. The basis for the rule is to prevent courts from

enlarging penal statutes. Id. at 764. "[S]tatutes which impose a new and unusual liability which partakes of the nature of a penalty must be strictly construed in favor of the persons sought to be subjected to their operation. However, the intent of the Legislature prevails over the strict letter of the statute and the letter will, if possible, be read to conform to the spirit of the act and to effectuate the purpose of the law." *Tos v. Mayfair Packing Co.* (1984) 160 Cal.App.3d 67, 75, internal quotes and citations omitted.

This rule potentially applies in the insurance context, as noted in *Interinsurance Exchange of Automobile Club v. Superior Court* (2007) 148 Cal.App.4th 1218, 1237, FN 15, as Insurance Code §2083 makes it a misdemeanor for an insurer to issue a fire policy that varies from the standard form of policy. The Court here makes no ruling expanding any provision of the Penal Code. The rule is thus inapplicable.

IV. CONCLUSION

In requiring that the carrier insure against "ALL LOSS BY FIRE" and there being no indication that the term "peril" as used in section 2070 was intended to have other than a non-technical meaning, the Legislature appears to have intended that smoke from a fire be included in the coverages in Section 2071's standard form. The endorsement at issue, by limiting coverage to \$5,000 for smoke loss reported more than ninety days after the commencement of a wildfire, potentially provides the insured with less coverage than that required by section 2071. Judgment, accordingly, shall be entered for Plaintiffs.

Counsel for Plaintiffs shall prepare a judgment in this action consistent with this ruling and lodge it on or before June 1, 2018.

The Court sets a further status conference for <u>line 27</u> 2018 at 9:00 a.m. to discuss further steps in this action and the related *Gomez* action. Counsel shall file a joint status report 5 court days in advance of that hearing.

6 Dated: 5/10/18

MAREN E. NELSON
JUDGE OF THE SUPERIOR COURT

Evidentiary Objections

Plaintiffs' objection to the Declaration of Clark A. Keller (attaching a copy of the Department of Insurance's approval of Exchange's application for approval of the Wildfire Smoke Endorsement) and of Jared K LeBeau (supporting Defendant's Request for Judicial Notice of the California Department of Insurance's approval of similar wildfire smoke endorsements by other insurers): Overruled. Although certain statements therein may be hearsay, page and line references were not given.

Defendants' request for judicial notice of the documents authenticated by LeBeau is granted pursuant to Evidence Code §452(c). The documents represent official acts of the Department of Insurance.

Defendant's Supplemental Request for Judicial Notice and Supplemental Declaration of LeBeau were filed February 2, 2018. This is additional evidence of CDI approval of a wildfire smoke endorsement. For the same reasons, judicial notice of the acts of CDI is granted.

Plaintiffs' Request for Judicial Notice of two demurrer rulings is denied. The rulings on demurrers are not relevant to the issues before the Court.

Documents Considered

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Filed July 21, 2017 by Plaintiffs

- Plaintiffs' Notice of Motion and Motion for Summary Judgment
- 20 | Plaintiffs' Separate Statement
 - Plaintiffs' Request for Judicial Notice
- 21 Declaration of Shant A. Karnikian
- 22 | Plaintiffs' Compendium of Non-California Authorities

Filed July 21, 2017 by Defendant

- 24 Defendant's Notice of Motion and Motion for Summary Judgment
 - Brief in Support of Defendant's Motion for Summary Judgment
- 25 Defendant's Separate Statement
- 26 Declaration of Clark Keeler
 - Declaration of John Brooks
- 27 Declaration of Mary Vidal
- 28 Declaration of Jared LeBeau
 - Defendant's Request for Judicial Notice

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1	Filed August 10, 2017 by Defendant
2	Brief in Opposition to Plaintiff's Motion for Summary Judgment
3	Defendant's Response to Plaintiffs' Separate Statement Declaration of Brian P. Daly
4	Defendant's Opposition to Plaintiffs' Request for Judicial Notice
5	Filed August 10, 2017 by Plaintiffs
6	Plaintiffs' Opposition to Defendant's Motion for Summary Judgment
7	Plaintiffs' Response to Defendant's Separate Statement Plaintiffs' Request for Judicial Notice
8	Plaintiffs' Objections to Defendant's Evidence
9	Plaintiffs' Objections to Defendant's Request for Judicial Notice
	Plaintiffs' Compendium of Non-California Authority
10	Filed September 7, 2017 by Plaintiffs
11	Plaintiffs' Reply Brief in Support of Motion for Summary Judgment
12	Filed September 7, 2017 by Defendant
13	Reply Brief in Support of Defendant's Motion for Summary Judgment
14	Defendant's Response to Plaintiffs' Objections to Defendant's Evidence
15	Defendant's Opposition to Plaintiffs' Request for Judicial Notice Defendant's Response to Plaintiffs' Objections to Defendant's Request for Judicial Notice
16	Defendant's Request for Judicial Notice re Its Reply
17	Filed February 2, 2018 by Defendant Defendant's Supplemental Request for Judicial Notice
18	Supplemental Declaration of Jared LeBeau
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