

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF
CALIFORNIA

Mitchell v. Rutaganira

Mitchell · No. 2:24-cv-02294-TLN-CSK · Decided May 30, 2025

SUMMARY

The United States District Court for the Eastern District of California granted Thomas Rutaganira’s motion to remand an action removed by Krista Mitchell. The court held that Mitchell, who was the original state-court plaintiff and a cross-defendant, was not authorized to remove the action, and that the pleadings raised only state-law claims. The court also awarded Rutaganira \$1,785 in attorney’s fees under 28 U.S.C. § 1447(c) and remanded the case to Yolo County Superior Court.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	United States District Court for the Eastern District of California
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Troy L. Nunley
JURISDICTION	United States District Court for the Eastern District of California
DECIDED	May 30, 2025
DOCKET	2:24-cv-02294-TLN-CSK
DISPOSITION	remanded
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Defendant Thomas Rutaganira moved to remand an action removed by Plaintiff Krista Mitchell from California state court. The federal district court granted the motion, remanded the action to Yolo County Superior Court, and awarded Rutaganira \$1,785 in attorney fees under 28 U.S.C. § 1447(c).
STANDARD OF REVIEW	Removal statutes are strictly construed against removal jurisdiction, and the removing party bears the burden of establishing federal jurisdiction. Subject-matter jurisdiction may be considered at any time, and an action lacking such jurisdiction must be remanded.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	unpublished district court order
PARTIES	Krista Mitchell v. Thomas F. Rutaganira

TOPICS

- subject matter jurisdiction
- civil procedure
- attorney fees
- default judgment

PRACTICE AREAS

civil procedure

federal jurisdiction

removal and remand

attorney fees

civil rights

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether a plaintiff who became a cross-defendant could remove the state-court action to federal court.
2. Whether the pleadings presented a federal question sufficient to support federal-question jurisdiction.
3. Whether Rutaganira was entitled to attorney fees and costs under 28 U.S.C. § 1447(c).

HOLDINGS

1. Mitchell was not entitled to remove the action because the right of removal is vested in the defendant or defendants, and a plaintiff who is also a cross-defendant may not remove the action.
2. Federal-question jurisdiction did not exist because Mitchell's complaint and Rutaganira's cross-complaint asserted only state-law claims, and a federal issue raised by a defense, cross-claim, or challenge to a state-court order cannot establish jurisdiction under the well-pleaded complaint rule.
3. Rutaganira was entitled to \$1,785 in attorney fees because Mitchell lacked an objectively reasonable basis for removal.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“Put simply, a plaintiff “cannot remove an action to federal court.”” (Opinion at 1)

“The “presence or absence of federal question jurisdiction is governed by the ‘well-pleaded complaint rule,’ which provides that federal jurisdiction exists only when a federal question is presented on the face of the plaintiff’s properly pleaded complaint.”” (Opinion at 2)

“Absent unusual circumstances, courts may award attorney’s fees under § 1447(c) only where the removing party lacked an objectively reasonable basis for seeking removal.” (Opinion at 3)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Mitchell originally sued in California state court under California law. Rutaganira asserted only state-law cross-claims for breach of contract, breach of the implied covenant of good faith and fair dealing, and negligence. After the state court issued a tentative ruling imposing terminating sanctions against Mitchell and her counsel, Mitchell removed the action, alleging that the ruling violated the Americans with Disabilities Act. The pleadings themselves presented no federal question.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Mitchell filed a state-court complaint alleging unlawful menacing influence under California Civil Code § 1940.2(a)(3). Rutaganira filed a state-law cross-complaint for breach of contract, breach of the implied covenant of good faith and fair dealing, and negligence, after which Mitchell dismissed her complaint. Following a state-court tentative ruling striking Mitchell's answer and imposing terminating sanctions, Mitchell removed the action under 28 U.S.C. § 1446(b)(3), asserting that the ruling discriminated against her based on disability. The federal court held removal improper, granted remand, awarded attorney fees, and closed the case.

DISPOSITION

remanded

REMAND INSTRUCTIONS

The action was remanded to Yolo County Superior Court. The Clerk was directed to close the federal case. Rutaganira was awarded \$1,785 in attorney fees under 28 U.S.C. § 1447(c).

CASES CITED

- Progressive W. Ins. Co. v. Preciado, 479 F.3d 1014, 1017 (9th Cir. 2007)
- Westwood Apex v. Contreras, 644 F.3d 799, 805 (9th Cir. 2011)
- Gaus v. Miles, Inc., 980 F.2d 564, 566 (9th Cir. 1992) (per curiam)
- Cal. ex rel. Lockyer v. Dynegy, Inc., 375 F.3d 831, 838, as amended, 387 F.3d 966 (9th Cir. 2004), cert. denied, 544 U.S. 974 (2005)
- Caterpillar, Inc. v. Williams, 482 U.S. 386, 386 (1987)
- Vaden v. Discover Bank, 556 U.S. 49 (2009)
- Hunter v. Philip Morris USA, 582 F.3d 1039, 1042-43 (9th Cir. 2009)
- Martin v. Franklin Capital Corp., 546 U.S. 132, 141 (2005)

OPINION

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT 9 EASTERN DISTRICT OF
CALIFORNIA 10 11 KRISTA MITCHELL, No. 2:24-cv-02294-TLN-CSK 12 Plaintiff, 13 v.
ORDER 14 VERONIQUE N. BIKOBA, et al., 15 Defendants. 16 THOMAS F. RUTAGANIRA,
17 Defendant/Cross- 18 Complainant, 19 v. 20 KRISTA MITCHELL, 21 Plaintiff/ Cross-
Defendant. 22 23 This matter is before the Court on Defendant Thomas Rutaganira's
("Defendant") Motion 24 to Remand.

(ECF No. 3.) Plaintiff Krista Mitchell ("Plaintiff") filed an opposition. (ECF No. 4.) 25 Defendant
did not file a reply. For the reasons set forth below, the Court GRANTS Defendant's 26 Motion to
Remand. 27 /// 28 1 On February 1, 2021, Plaintiff filed a complaint in state court alleging
unlawful menacing 2 influence in violation of California Civil Code § 1940.2(a)(3).

(ECF No. 1 at 22–98.) On March 3 23, 2021, Defendant filed a cross-complaint against Plaintiff
alleging claims for: breach of 4 contract; breach of the implied covenant of good faith and fair
dealing; and negligence. (Id. at 5 247–253.)

On April 22, 2021, Plaintiff dismissed her complaint in its entirety. (ECF No. 4 at 2.) 6 On August
21, 2024, the state court issued a tentative ruling striking Plaintiff's answer to 7 Defendant's cross
complaint and issuing terminating sanctions against Plaintiff and her counsel. 8 (ECF No. 1 at 2.)

On August 22, 2024, Plaintiff removed the action to this Court under 28 U.S.C. 9 § 1446(b)(3), contending the tentative ruling discriminated against Plaintiff because of her mental 10 and physical disabilities in violation of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. (Id.)

On 11 September 20, 2024, Defendant filed the instant motion to remand on the grounds that: (1) 12 Plaintiff does not qualify as a “defendant” under 28 U.S.C. § 1446(a) and is not authorized to 13 seek removal; (2) neither the complaint nor the cross-complaint raises substantial federal question 14 that is necessary to resolve either parties’ claim; and (2) a court order’s alleged violation of 15 federal law is insufficient to confer federal question jurisdiction.

(ECF No. 3 at 3–5.) 16 The Court agrees with Defendant. The right to remove a case from state to federal court is 17 vested exclusively with the defendant or defendants. See 28 U.S.C. § 1441(a) (“Except as 18 otherwise expressly provided by Act of Congress, any civil action brought in a State court of 19 which the district courts of the United States have original jurisdiction, may be removed by the 20 defendant or the defendants, to the district court of the United States for the district and division 21 embracing the place where such action is pending.”) (emphasis added).

Put simply, a plaintiff 22 “cannot remove an action to federal court.” *Progressive W. Ins. Co. v. Preciado*, 479 F.3d 1014, 23 1017 (9th Cir. 2007). This general principle applies equally to plaintiffs who become cross- 24 defendants. See *Westwood Apex v. Contreras*, 644 F.3d 799, 805 (9th Cir. 2011) (holding that the 25 “counterclaim defendant who is also a plaintiff to the original state action may not remove the 26 case to federal court”).

Plaintiff initiated this action in state court and, before Plaintiff dismissed 27 her complaint, Defendant filed a cross-complaint, thereby making Plaintiff a cross-defendant. 28 Accordingly, Plaintiff was not entitled to remove this action. 1 Moreover, courts “strictly construe the removal statute against removal jurisdiction.” 2 *Gaus v. Miles, Inc.*, 980 F.2d 564, 566 (9th Cir.

1992) (per curiam). “If the district court at any 3 time determines that it lacks subject matter jurisdiction over the removed action, it must remedy 4 the improvident grant of removal by remanding the action to state court.” *Cal. ex rel. Lockyer v. 5 Dynegy, Inc.*, 375 F.3d 831, 838, as amended, 387 F.3d 966 (9th Cir. 2004), cert. denied 544 U.S. 6 974 (2005).

7 Federal question jurisdiction is set forth in 28 U.S.C. § 1331. See 28 U.S.C. § 1331. The 8 “presence or absence of federal question jurisdiction is governed by the ‘well-pleaded complaint 9 rule,’ which provides that federal jurisdiction exists only when a federal question is presented on 10 the face of the plaintiff’s properly pleaded complaint.” *Caterpillar, Inc. v. Williams*, 482 U.S. 11 386, 386 (1987).

Federal question jurisdiction therefore cannot be based on a defense, 12 counterclaim, cross-claim, or third-party claim raising a federal question. See *Vaden v. Discover 13 Bank*, 556 U.S. 49 (2009); *Hunter v. Philip Morris USA*, 582 F.3d 1039, 1042–43 (9th Cir. 2009). 14 Here, Plaintiff’s

complaint contains one claim, unlawful menacing influence pursuant to 15 California Civil Code § 1940.2(a)(3) (ECF No. 1 at 22–98) and Defendant’s cross complaint 16 contains three claims: breach of contract; breach of the implied covenant of good faith and fair 17 dealing; and negligence.

(Id. at 247–253.) The parties’ claims arise exclusively from state law, 18 which Plaintiff does not dispute. Instead, Plaintiff argues the state court’s August 21, 2024 19 tentative ruling violates federal law. However, Plaintiff cites no statute or case law supporting 20 her theory that a plaintiff may seek removal when a court order violates federal law and has failed 21 to uphold her burden of establishing that removal is proper.

See *Gaus*, 980 F.2d at 566. 22 Lastly, Defendant argues he is entitled to attorney fees. (ECF No. 3 at 5.) “An order 23 remanding the case may require payment of just costs and any actual expenses, including attorney 24 fees, incurred as a result of removal.” 28 U.S.C § 1447(c). “Absent unusual circumstances, 25 courts may award attorney’s fees under § 1447(c) only where the removing party lacked an 26 objectively reasonable basis for seeking removal.” *Martin v. Franklin Capital Corp.*, 546 U.S. 27 132, 141 (2005).

28 /// 1 Here, Plaintiff “lacked an objectively reasonable basis for seeking removal.” /d. Plaintiff 2 || 1s not a proper party to seek removal, and her complaint did not contain a federal question. 3 | Moreover, Plaintiff’s motion appears to have been filed in direct response to an adverse ruling 4 | granting Defendant terminating sanctions and entering default judgment against Plaintiff.

As 5 || such, the Court GRANTS Defendant’s request for attorney’s fees under 28 U.S.C. § 1447(c) in 6 || the amount of \$1,785.00. 7 For these reasons, the Court GRANTS Defendant’s request for attorney’s fees under 28 8 | U.S.C. § 1447(c) in the amount of \$1,785.00.

The Court also GRANTS Defendant’s Motion to 9 | Remand (ECF No. 3) and REMANDS this action to Yolo County Superior Court. The Clerk of 10 | the Court is directed to close the case. 11 IT IS SO ORDERED. 12 | Date: May 28, 2025 7, 13 TROY L. NUNLEY 14 CHIEF UNITED STATES DISTRICT JUDGE 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28