

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT OF
CALIFORNIA

Brenda Dee Baker Riojas v. Commissioner of Social Security

Baker Riojas · No. 1:24-cv-0688-HBK · Decided August 21, 2025

SUMMARY

The United States District Court for the Eastern District of California reviews a partially favorable Social Security disability determination concerning Brenda Dee Baker Riojas. The court concludes that the administrative law judge did not provide specific and legitimate, substantially supported reasons for discounting certain medical opinion evidence, and remands the case to the Commissioner for further administrative proceedings.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	United States District Court for the Eastern District of California
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Helena M. Barch-Kuchta
JURISDICTION	United States District Court for the Eastern District of California
DECIDED	August 21, 2025
DOCKET	1:24-cv-0688-HBK
DISPOSITION	reversed_and_remanded
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Plaintiff sought judicial review under 42 U.S.C. §§ 405(g) and 1383(c) (3) of the Commissioner's partially favorable decision on her applications for supplemental security income and disability insurance benefits. The parties filed cross-motions for summary judgment without oral argument.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	The court reviews the Commissioner's decision under 42 U.S.C. § 405(g) and may disturb it only if it is unsupported by substantial evidence or based on legal error. Substantial evidence is relevant evidence a reasonable mind might accept as adequate, and the record must be considered as a whole. The court may not substitute its judgment for the Commissioner's and must disregard harmless error.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Unpublished, nonprecedential district-court order
PARTIES	Brenda Dee Baker Riojas v. Commissioner of Social Security

TOPICS

judicial review of agency action

agency adjudication

administrative law

disability definition

PRACTICE AREAS

Social Security disability

administrative law

judicial review of agency action

medical opinion evidence

summary judgment

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether the ALJ properly evaluated the medical opinions of Robert Graham, Craig R. MacClean, and Peter Mendelsohn.
2. Whether the ALJ properly evaluated the records of Diego Allende and Abel Quesada.
3. Whether the case should be remanded for payment of benefits or for further administrative proceedings.

HOLDINGS

1. The ALJ failed to provide specific and legitimate reasons supported by substantial evidence for assigning only some weight to Dr. Graham's opinions.
2. The ALJ failed to properly consider Dr. MacClean's October 2009 and August 2010 opinions concerning Plaintiff's lifting, neck, and left-upper-extremity limitations.
3. The ALJ's consideration of Dr. Mendelsohn's opinion required reconsideration on remand because the ALJ failed to adequately explain why the examination findings did not support the stated postural limitations.
4. The ALJ did not err by failing to provide specific reasons for rejecting the records of Dr. Allende and Dr. Quesada because those records did not themselves assess specific functional limitations.
5. The proper remedy was reversal and remand for further administrative proceedings rather than an immediate award of benefits.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“the Court “review[s] the ALJ's decision based on the reasoning and factual findings offered by the ALJ—not post hoc rationalizations that attempt to intuit what the adjudicator may have been thinking.”” (Discussion § VII.A.1)

“where “no useful purpose would be served by further administrative proceedings, or where the record has been thoroughly developed,”” (Discussion § VII.B)

“only “rare circumstances that result in a direct award of benefits”” (Discussion § VII.B)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Plaintiff alleged disability beginning March 15, 2008, based on physical and mental impairments including spinal degenerative disease, pain, upper-extremity limitations, migraines, anxiety, and depression. She had no past relevant work and testified that her ability to use her arms and legs worsened over time, particularly after

2017 neck surgery. The ALJ found her disabled beginning December 8, 2014, but relied on a light-work residual functional capacity before that date and discounted several medical opinions supporting greater limitations.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Plaintiff filed applications in 2009, received multiple unfavorable administrative decisions, and obtained several Appeals Council remands and one prior district-court remand. The most recent ALJ decision, issued March 25, 2024, found Plaintiff disabled beginning December 8, 2014, but not before that date. The court granted Plaintiff's motion in part, denied the Commissioner's cross-motion, reversed the Commissioner's decision, and remanded for further administrative proceedings under sentence four of 42 U.S.C. § 405(g).

DISPOSITION

reversed_and_remanded

REMAND INSTRUCTIONS

The ALJ must reevaluate the medical opinions of Robert Graham, Craig R. MacClean, and Peter Mendelsohn, consider all relevant medical evidence and progress reports, conduct a new sequential analysis, reassess Plaintiff's RFC, and, if necessary, obtain additional vocational-expert testimony incorporating all limitations credited by the ALJ.

CASES CITED

- Hill v. Astrue, 698 F.3d 1153, 1158-59 (9th Cir. 2012)
- Tommasetti v. Astrue, 533 F.3d 1035, 1038, 1041 (9th Cir. 2008)
- Shinseki v. Sanders, 556 U.S. 396, 409-10 (2009)
- Tackett v. Apfel, 180 F.3d 1094, 1098 (9th Cir. 1999)
- Beltran v. Astrue, 700 F.3d 386, 389 (9th Cir. 2012)
- Holohan v. Massanari, 246 F.3d 1195, 1201-02, 1207 (9th Cir. 2001)
- Bayliss v. Barnhart, 427 F.3d 1211, 1216 (9th Cir. 2005)
- Lester v. Chater, 81 F.3d 821, 830-31 (9th Cir. 1995)
- Bray v. Commissioner of Social Security Administration, 554 F.3d 1219, 1226-28 (9th Cir. 2009)
- Batson v. Commissioner of Social Security Administration, 359 F.3d 1190, 1195 (9th Cir. 2004)
- Orn v. Astrue, 495 F.3d 625, 631, 638 (9th Cir. 2007)
- Ghanim v. Colvin, 763 F.3d 1154, 1164 (9th Cir. 2014)
- Reddick v. Chater, 157 F.3d 715, 725 (9th Cir. 1998)
- Brown-Hunter v. Colvin, 806 F.3d 487, 495 (9th Cir. 2015)
- Morgan v. Commissioner of Social Security Administration, 169 F.3d 595, 603 (9th Cir. 1999)
- Chaudhry v. Astrue, 688 F.3d 661, 672 (9th Cir. 2012)
- W.M. Lyles Co. v. Workmen's Compensation Appeals Board, 3 Cal. App. 3d 132, 136 (1969)
- Holmes v. Astrue, 2011 WL 2837698, at *4 (C.D. Cal. July 15, 2011)

- Booth v. Barnhart, 181 F. Supp. 2d 1099, 1105 (C.D. Cal. 2022)
- Turner v. Commissioner of Social Security Administration, 613 F.3d 1217, 1223 (9th Cir. 2010)
- Carmickle v. Commissioner of Social Security Administration, 533 F.3d 1155, 1161 n.2 (9th Cir. 2008)
- McAllister v. Sullivan, 888 F.2d 599, 603 (9th Cir. 1989)
- Varney v. Secretary of Health & Human Services, 859 F.2d 1396, 1399, 1401 (9th Cir. 1988)
- Terry v. Sullivan, 903 F.2d 1273, 1280 (9th Cir. 1990)
- Garrison v. Colvin, 759 F.3d 995, 1020-21 (9th Cir. 2014)
- Revels v. Berryhill, 874 F.3d 648, 668 (9th Cir. 2017)
- Benecke v. Barnhart, 379 F.3d 587, 595-96 (9th Cir. 2004)
- Harman v. Apfel, 211 F.3d 1172, 1179-80 (9th Cir. 2000)
- Marshall M. v. Commissioner of Social Security Administration, 2024 WL 2317386, at *9 (D. Or. May 22, 2024)
- Leon v. Berryhill, 880 F.3d 1041, 1047 (9th Cir. 2018)

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