

BACKGROUND

On March 11, 2021, the President signed into law the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (“ARPA”), providing \$1.9 trillion in economic stimulus. *See* H.R. 1319. Among that \$1.9 trillion, Congress appropriated funds to pay up to 120 percent of certain direct or guaranteed USDA farm loans held by “socially disadvantaged farmers or ranchers” (“SDFRs”), and outstanding as of January 1, 2021. *See id.* § 1005. For purposes of Section 1005, Congress gave the term “socially disadvantaged farmer or rancher” the same meaning as in Section 2501(a) of the Food, Agriculture, Conservation, and Trade Act of 1990, codified at 7 U.S.C. § 2279(a). *See id.* § 1005(b)(3). That provision defines an SDFR as “a farmer or rancher who is a member of a socially disadvantaged group,” 7 U.S.C. 2279(a)(5), which is further defined as “a group whose members have been subjected to racial or ethnic prejudice because of their identity as members of a group without regard to their individual qualities,” *id.* § 2279(a)(6).

On April 29, 2021, Plaintiffs, farmers who identify as white, filed suit to challenge the USDA’s implementation of Section 1005 of APRA. *See* Compl., ECF No. 1.¹ Plaintiffs allege that they hold loans with the USDA and would otherwise qualify for loan forgiveness under Section 1005 “except that [they are] white.” Am. Compl. ECF No. 7, ¶ 8; *see also id.* ¶¶ 8-17. They claim that the USDA’s interpretation of “socially disadvantaged farmer or rancher” in Section 1005 to include farmers and ranchers who identify as “Black/African American, American Indian or Alaskan native, Hispanic or Latino, or Asian American or Pacific Islander,” *id.* ¶ 44, “violate[s] the Equal Protection guarantee in the United States Constitution,” *id.* ¶ 48. They ask this Court to declare that the USDA’s interpretation of Section 1005 is unconstitutional, *id.* at 13, ¶ B, and to

¹ Plaintiffs filed an amended complaint on May 19, 2021, adding additional plaintiffs among other things. *See* Am. Compl., ECF No. 7.

enjoin the USDA “from applying racial classifications when determining eligibility for loan modifications and payments under Section 1005 of ARPA,” *id.* ¶ C.

On May 4, 2021, Corey Lea filed a motion for permissive joinder under Rule 20(a), seeking to be joined as a plaintiff in this action. *See* Mot. to Joinder Corey Lea As A Pl. Pursuant to FRCP 20(a)(1)(B) and Cross Claim Against Pls. in Regards to Requested Injunctive Relief (hereinafter “Lea Mot.”), ECF No. 6. Mr. Lea alleges that he is a socially disadvantaged farmer, and he claims that applying the loan forgiveness provision in Section 1005 of ARPA to certain white farmers, as Plaintiffs request, would reduce the amount of money that could go to SDFRs, like him. *See* Lea Mot. ¶¶ 1-2, 6. He also purports to raise a “cross-claim” against Plaintiff for failing to obtain a final agency action as required by the Administrative Procedure Act (“APA”). *See id.* ¶¶ 7-9.

ARGUMENT

Mr. Lea’s motion to join this action as a plaintiff should be denied. As a threshold matter, Mr. Lea’s motion does not even invoke Rule 24, and he has not satisfied the procedural requirements under Rule 24(c). Even if he could pass this threshold, Mr. Lea does not satisfy the requirements for permissive intervention under Rule 24(b) and, in any event, the Court should deny intervention as a discretionary matter.

Mr. Lea’s allegations do not satisfy Rule 24(b)’s requirements because they do not constitute a cognizable “claim” or a “defense” against any of the existing parties in this matter. Rule 24(b)(2). And even if Mr. Lea could satisfy Rule 24(b)’s requirements, multiple factors counsel against permitting his intervention. His connection to this litigation is attenuated, at best, where he does not allege that he has a qualifying loan under Section 1005. His motion provides no indication that he would contribute significantly to any development of the factual or legal issues in this case, which is primarily concerned with the USDA’s regulatory interpretation of SDGs for

purposes of ARPA. His allegations show that his ultimate goal is the same as the Government's—to deny Plaintiffs' requested relief—and thus he has not alleged, much less shown, a conflict with the Government that would overcome the presumption that the Government is adequately representing any interest he may have in this case. And Mr. Lea's litigation history suggests that his intervention here would likely prejudice the parties by continuing to divert their resources from addressing the main action and delaying these proceedings.

I. Standard Of Review

When a third party seeks to join a lawsuit, a motion to intervene is necessary and Rule 24 is the appropriate vehicle. *See Mussat v. IQVIA Inc.*, 2020 WL 5994468, at *1 (N.D. Ill. Oct. 9, 2020) (explaining that “[a] Rule 20(a) joinder motion ‘is filed by a person or entity who is already a party to the proceeding and wishes to add a non-party as a party to the case,’ whereas a ‘Rule 24(b) motion to intervene is used by non-parties to add themselves as parties in the litigation.’”) (quoting *Platinum Cmty. Bank v. Marshall Investments Corp.*, 2008 WL 4866343, at *1 (N.D. Ill. July 29, 2008)).² When a third party files a motion for joinder, it will be treated more properly as one for permissive intervention under Rule 24(b). *See City of Rockford v. Sec’y of Hous. & Urb. Dev.*, 69 F.R.D. 363, 366 (N.D. Ill. 1975) (treating third party's petition for joinder under Rule 20 as one for permissive intervention under Rule 24(b)).

Pursuant to Rule 24(b), a court may permit a movant to intervene if he “has a claim or defense that shares with the main action a common question of law or fact.” Fed. R. Civ. P. 24(b)(1)(B). The motion to intervene must be timely, *see id.* 24(b)(1), and it “must state the grounds for intervention and be accompanied by a pleading that sets out the claim or defense for

² Hereinafter, all alterations, citations, omissions, quotations, and subsequent history are omitted unless otherwise indicated.

which intervention is sought,” *id.* 24(c).³ The movant bears the burden to show that he meets these requirements, and his motion must fail if he does not do so. *See Habitat Educ. Ctr., Inc. v. Bosworth*, 221 F.R.D. 488, 496-97 (E.D. Wis. 2004) (explaining that “the applicant must demonstrate that its claim or defense and the main action have a question of law or fact in common before a court may exercise its discretionary power to grant intervention”); *iWork Software, LLC v. Corp. Exp., Inc.*, 2003 WL 22494851, at *1 (N.D. Ill. Nov. 4, 2003) (“Failure to prove even one required element must result in a denial of the motion to intervene.”).

Even if an applicant meets the requirements for permissive intervention, the court has discretion to deny it. *See Sokaogon Chippewa Cmty. v. Babbitt*, 214 F.3d 941, 949 (7th Cir. 2000) (“Permissive intervention under Rule 24(b) is wholly discretionary.”). In exercising its discretion, Rule 24 requires the court to “consider whether the intervention will unduly delay or prejudice the adjudication of the original parties’ rights.” Rule 24(b)(3); *see also Trump v. Wisconsin Elections Comm’n*, 2020 WL 7230960, at *2 (E.D. Wis. Dec. 8, 2020) (explaining as much). But the court is otherwise free to “consider a wide variety of factors” and retains “ample authority to manage the litigation before it.” *Wisconsin Elections Comm’n*, 2020 WL 7230960, at *2.

II. Mr. Lea Has Not Shown That He Should Be Permitted To Intervene Under Rule 24(b).

As a third party seeking to be added as a plaintiff, Mr. Lea does not invoke Rule 24, much less carry his burden to show that he satisfies its requirements. Nor did he accompany his motion with a pleading setting out the claim or defense for which he seeks to intervene, as he “must” under Rule 24(c)(1). The Court should therefore deny Mr. Lea’s motion based on his failure to meet these threshold requirements. *See, e.g., BPI Energy, Inc. v. Riches*, 2009 WL 260889, at *1 (S.D.

³ Mr. Lea does not allege that he has a conditional right to intervene pursuant to Rule 24(b)(1)(A), and the Government does not dispute timeliness under Rule 24(a)(1).

Ill. Feb. 4, 2009) (denying motion to intervene where the motion was “vague” and “[t]here [were] no accompanying pleadings” as required under Rule 24(c)). Even if Mr. Lea could overcome these threshold deficiencies, the allegations in his motion do not satisfy the other requirements for permissive intervention.

A. Mr. Lea Has Not Shown that He Has A Claim Or Defense that Shares a Common Question of Law or Fact with the Main Action.

Mr. Lea fails to show that he has “a claim or defense that shares with the main action a common question of law or fact,” Rule 24(b)(1)(B), for the fundamental reason he “has no cognizable claim or defense.” *Reich v. Wolfe*, 1997 WL 83303, at *2 (N.D. Ill. Feb. 19, 1997) (denying permissive intervention on that basis). The words “claim or defense” in the context of Rule 24(b)(2) “manifestly refer to the kinds of claims or defenses that can be raised in courts of law as part of an actual or impending lawsuit.” *Amchem Prod., Inc. v. Windsor*, 521 U.S. 591, 623 (1997) (quoting *Diamond v. Charles*, 476 U.S. 54, 76–77 (1986) (O’Connor, J., concurring in part and concurring in judgment)). In other words, a claim or defense requires an “actual, present interest that would permit [the movant] to sue or be sued by [the parties] in an action sharing common questions of law or fact with those at issue in th[e] litigation.” *Diamond*, 476 U.S. at 77 (O’Connor, J., concurring).

Mr. Lea, who seeks to join this action as a plaintiff, has no claim or defense in this sense. He has no “claim” because he is not suing any of the litigants. He has not alleged that the USDA is doing anything unlawful and indeed, seeks to prevent Plaintiff from obtaining his requested relief. *See* Lea Mot. ¶¶ 2, 6. And although he purports to bring a “cross-claim” against Plaintiff for failure to obtain a final agency action, *see id.* at 3, that is not a cognizable claim. A final agency action is a prerequisite to filing suit against a federal agency under the APA. *See Soundboard Assn v. Fed. Trade Comm’n*, 888 F.3d 1261, 1267 (D.C. Cir. 2018). Without it, a litigant no doubt

“lack[s] a cause of action under the APA.” *Id.* But for that reason, lack of a final agency action is a defense—and one that belongs to federal agencies—not an independent basis for a claim by a private litigant.⁴ Likewise, Mr. Lea styles his “cross-claim” against Plaintiff as a failure to exhaust administrative remedies. *See* Lea Mot. at 3. But that is, again, an affirmative defense that could be raised only by Defendant. *See Walker v. Thompson*, 288 F.3d 1005, 1009 (7th Cir. 2002). Mr. Lea may wish the Government to raise the lack of final agency action or failure to exhaust as defenses against Plaintiff, but Mr. Lea does not have the authority to raise defenses on the Government’s behalf, and intervention would not give him that authority. Mr. Lea therefore has no cognizable claim or defense against any of the current litigants and consequently, cannot be permitted to intervene in this case. *See Keith v. Daley*, 764 F.2d 1265, 1272 (7th Cir. 1985) (upholding denial of permissive intervention where district court found that movant had “no direct claim or right in the case”).

B. Even If Mr. Lea Could Establish A Cognizable Claim or Defense, The Court Should Exercise Its Discretion to Deny Intervention.

Even if Mr. Lea could meet the requirements for intervention (he cannot), the Court should exercise its discretion to deny permissive intervention because multiple factors counsel against it. First and foremost, Mr. Lea’s litigation history suggests that his participation in this action is likely to unduly delay its resolution to the continued detriment of the existing parties. Mr. Lea has a long history of filing meritless actions against the USDA. *See Lea v. U.S. Dep’t of Agriculture*, No. 16-cv-00735, Report and Recommendation), ECF No. 33 (M.D. Tenn. Dec. 11, 2017), attached as

⁴ Mr. Lea does not allege that he has a “defense,” nor could he where he will not be required to do, or be restrained from doing, anything as a result of the relief Plaintiff seeks against the Government. *See Caleb Nelson, Intervention*, 106 Va. L. Rev. 271, 274 (2020) (explaining that “a ‘defense’ is a particular type of legal argument that the targets of a claim assert to explain why the court should not grant relief against them”).

Exhibit A. Most of them have already been dismissed. *Pigford v. Vilsack*, 2016 WL 4921378, at *7 (D.D.C. Sept. 15, 2016) (dismissing as “lack[ing] merit,” among other things, Lea motion alleging that he and others had not received a hearing on their discrimination claims and requesting that the court “freeze” implementation of the consent decree); *Lea v. United States*, 120 Fed. Cl. 440 (*Lea III*) (granting defendant’s motion to dismiss); *Lea v. United States*, No. 14–CV–00040–TBR (W.D. Ky. May 29, 2014) (dismissing plaintiff’s complaint for violation of the sanctions against him); *Lea v. United States*, No. 10–CV–00052–JHM (W.D. Ky. Jul. 11, 2013) (granting defendants’ motion to dismiss), *aff’d*, No. 14–5445 (6th Cir. Dec. 18, 2014), *cert. denied*, Case No. 14–8315 (April 6, 2015); *Lea v. United States*, No. 10–CV–00029–JHM (W.D. Ky. Jan. 19, 2011) (granting defendants’ motion to dismiss), *aff’d*, No. 11–5969 (6th Cir. Aug. 7, 2013); *Lea v. Kentucky*, 1:09–CV–0056–TBR (W.D. Ky. April 20, 2010) (granting defendants’ motion to dismiss); *see also* Ex. A at 3 (listing cases). Several on the basis that his claims were “frivolous.” *Lea v. Farmers Nat’l Bank*, No. 3:15–CV–00595 (M.D. Tenn. May 27, 2015) (finding plaintiff’s case “to be legally frivolous by reason of improper venue”); *see also* Ex. A at 3-11. And in at least one instance, the court sanctioned Mr. Lea for filing “frivolous and duplicative lawsuits” and enjoined him and his corporate affiliate from filing any civil lawsuit in that district alleging similar factual or legal claims. *Lea v. United States*, No. 13–CV–00110–JHM (W.D. Ky. Feb. 6, 2014), ECF No. 64, *aff’d*, No. 14–5493 (6th Cir. Dec. 18, 2014), *cert. denied*, Case No. 14–8315 (April 6, 2015) (explaining that Mr. Lea’s “submission of frivolous and duplicative lawsuits serves no legitimate purpose, places a tremendous burden on this Court’s limited resources, and deprives other litigants with meritorious claims of the speedy resolution of their cases”). In dismissing a separate action by Mr. Lea against the USDA, the U.S. Court of Federal Claims explained:

This is *pro se* plaintiff’s third attempt, in a two-year period, to pursue the same claims in the United States Court of Federal Claims, and it should be his last filed in this, or any

other, trial court. During the previous seven years, *pro se* plaintiff Corey Lea has relentlessly and frivolously taxed the limited resources of the federal judiciary by filing numerous, duplicative complaints in this and other federal courts based on the same fundamental set of facts. Although plaintiff may consider this decision another unhappy ending, this decision should send a clear message to Mr. Lea.

Lea v. United States, 126 Fed. Cl. 203, 218 (2016). Mr. Lea should not be permitted to further tax the limited resources of this Court and the current litigants,⁵ as his litigation history suggests his participation would do. This factor thus strongly counsels in favor of denying permissive intervention.

Several other factors recognized in this district also weigh strongly against granting permissive intervention. *See Habitat Educ. Ctr., Inc. v. Bosworth*, 221 F.R.D. 488, 496–97 (E.D. Wis. 2004) (considering the factors discussed below). First, Mr. Lea’s “connection to the case is relatively attenuated.” *Id.* at 496. Mr. Lea alleges that if Plaintiff obtains his requested relief, SDFRs “will receive ... less emergency [debt] relief.” *Lea Mot.* ¶ 6; *see also id.* ¶ 2. But although he alleges that he is an SDFR who is affected by the debt relief in Section 1005, *see id.* ¶ 1, he does not allege that he has a qualified loan that would otherwise entitle him to debt relief. Moreover, Mr. Lea theorizes that if Plaintiffs were to obtain their requested relief, there would be less debt relief available to minority SDFRs under Section 1005. *See Lea Mot.* ¶¶ 2, 6. But Mr. Lea’s theory is based on the incorrect premise that Congress appropriated a fixed amount of money for the loan forgiveness program under Section 1005. It did not. *See ARPA* § 1005(a)(1) (appropriating “such sums as may be necessary, to remain available until expended, for the cost of loan modifications and payments under this section”). Thus, Mr. Lea has not established, as he must, that minority farmers and ranchers would not receive the loan forgiveness provided for in Section

⁵ Mr. Lea filed a similar motion for joinder in another case challenging Section 1005, among other things. *See Mot. to Joinder by Corey Lea, Miller v. Vilsack*, No. 21-595 (N.D. Tex.), ECF No. 7.

1005 even if Plaintiff were to obtain the relief he requests.⁶ As such, to the extent Mr. Lea has any connection to this case, it is at best attenuated and insufficient to support permissive intervention.

Second, “there is no indication that [Mr. Lea] can make a significant contribution to the development of the underlying factual and legal issues” in this case. *Habitat Educ. Ctr.*, 221 F.R.D. at 496. The claims at issue in the underlying dispute turn primarily on legal questions involving the USDA’s regulatory interpretation of statutory language. To the extent factual development is involved at all, Mr. Lea has provided no reason to believe that any facts relevant to the dispute reside with him and thus, that consideration too weighs against permissive intervention.⁷

Third, Mr. Lea has not alleged, nor could he show, that the Government is likely to provide inadequate representation. *See Habitat Educ. Ctr.*, 221 F.R.D. at 496-97 (“[W]hen intervention of right is denied because the government is likely to provide adequate representation, the case for permissive intervention is much weakened.”). “[I]f the movant’s interest is identical to that of an existing party, there is a rebuttable presumption of adequate representation that requires a showing of some conflict to warrant intervention.” *Feehan v. Wisconsin Elections Comm’n*, 2020 WL

⁶ Defendant takes no position at this time on the appropriate remedy in the event that this Court were to side with Plaintiffs. Defendant is merely arguing that that Mr. Lea’s connection to this case is at best attenuated.

⁷ Indeed, rather than contributing to the factual development in the case, Mr. Lea appears to be disseminating information for his benefit that could confuse the public. *See* <https://thecowtownfoundation.org/> (encouraging SDFRs with outstanding direct or guaranteed USDA loans to “become a member of [his] foundation so [his] experienced law group can help [them] get full debt write off as provided in the Emergency Debt Relief for People of Color Act of 2021”) (last visited May 25, 2021). As the USDA has explained, borrowers who qualify for loan forgiveness under Section 1005 of ARPA do not need to take any action right now and instead will receive a written notification from FSA explaining the payment process. *See* <https://www.farmers.gov/americanrescueplan/arp-faq>. USDA has also made clear that borrowers need not work with a third party to access this assistance and under no circumstances should pay a fee to a third party in connection with any assistance. *See id.*

7249866, at *5 (E.D. Wis. Dec. 9, 2020). “And if one of the existing parties is a governmental body charged by law with protecting the interests of the movant, the presumption is even stronger and the standard for rebutting the presumption higher.” *Id.*

Here, both factors weigh against permissive intervention. Mr. Lea and the Government “have the same goal,” *id.* at *6: to oppose and seek to deny Plaintiff’s requested relief. *See* Lea Mot. ¶ 6; *see also id.* ¶¶ 7-9 (arguing that Plaintiff did not meet the APA requirement to obtain a final agency action). Mr. Lea has not alleged, much less established, any conflict that would overcome the presumption of adequate representation—in particular where the Government is here charged with defending the laws of the United States. Thus, even if Mr. Lea could satisfy the requirements of Rule 24(b), the Court should exercise its discretion to deny Mr. Lea’s motion to join this action as a plaintiff.

CONCLUSION

For the foregoing reasons, Defendant respectfully requests that the Court deny Mr. Lea’s motion for joinder and his request to join this lawsuit as a plaintiff.

Dated: May 25, 2021

Respectfully submitted,

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Exhibit A

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE MIDDLE DISTRICT OF TENNESSEE
NASHVILLE DIVISION

COREY LEA,

Petitioner,

v.

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF
AGRICULTURE, et al.,

Respondents.

Case No. 3:16-cv-00735

Judge Terrence Berg
Magistrate Judge Newbern

To: The Honorable Terrence G. Berg, District Judge

REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION

The District Court referred this *pro se* Petition for Judicial Review under the Administrative Procedure Act to the undersigned Magistrate Judge pursuant to 28 U.S.C. §§ 636(b)(1)(A) and (B) to dispose or recommended disposition of any pretrial motions and to conduct further proceedings, if necessary, under Rule 72(b) of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure and the Local Rules of Court. (Doc. No. 3.)

Pending before the Court is the Motion to Dismiss of Respondent United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) (Doc. No. 22). Petitioner Corey Lea has responded in opposition. (Doc. No. 24.) For the following reasons, the undersigned RECOMMENDS that the motion to dismiss be GRANTED and that the Petition be DISMISSED.

I. Background

Petitioner Corey Lea brings a petition under the Administrative Procedure Act (APA), 5 U.S.C. § 701, *et seq.*, related to (1) the USDA's "fail[ure] [to] act on [t]he 2008 Farm Bill and the

[foreclosure] moratorium relief it provided in 7 CFR 766.358” for borrowers, and (2) “an accepted discrimination complaint still unresolved [at] the USDA’s Office of Civil Rights.” (Doc. No. 1, PageID# 2, ¶¶ 1–2.) It appears Lea’s claims arise out of a foreclosure on Lea’s property, which Lea believes the USDA should have stopped, and Lea’s status as a “socially disadvantaged farmer and . . . a member of a protected class, African American.” (*Id.* at PageID# 3–4, ¶ 7; PageID# 4, ¶ 8; PageID# 5, ¶ 11–12; PageID# 8, ¶ 20.) He seeks “an expedited formal hearing on the merits before the Department of Agriculture’s Administrative Law Judge and,] if necessary, a judicial review of the ALJ’s decision.” (*Id.* at PageID# 9.)

Factual context is almost entirely absent from Lea’s complaint in this action. However, Lea has brought substantially similar, and sometimes identical, claims in other courts which illuminate the present action. The United States Court of Federal Claims described Lea’s related litigation history as follows in a 2016 order:

This is *pro se* plaintiff Corey Lea’s third action initiated in the United States Court of Federal Claims arising from the same underlying facts filed within a two-year time period. Plaintiff alleges that, in November 2007, the now-dissolved company Corey Lea, Inc. obtained a loan from Farmers National Bank to purchase farm property. This loan was guaranteed by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Farm Service Agency (FSA) through a loan guarantee agreement. As a result, Farmers National Bank held a first mortgage on 90 percent of the property, and the USDA FSA held a second mortgage on 10 percent of the property. Mr. Lea attached the loan guarantee agreement to the complaint filed in the current action, which identifies “COREY LEA, INC.” as the “Borrower,” and “FARMERS NATIONAL BANK” as the “Lender.” (capitalization in original). Although plaintiff did not provide a copy of the second mortgage held by the USDA FSA with his complaint, defendant provided a copy of this second mortgage as an attachment to its motion to dismiss. This second mortgage document identifies the mortgage as “COREY LEA, INCORPORATED.” (capitalization in original).

Subsequently, in December 2007, plaintiff alleges that he secured a loan from Independence Bank to fund the construction of a new house on the property and to refinance the existing loan from Farmers National Bank. According to plaintiff, he requested a loan subordination from the USDA, however, the USDA denied the request after conducting an appraisal of the property and appraising the value of the property at \$18,035.00 less than the amount of debt that plaintiff would incur with

the new loan, if completed. Following this denial, plaintiff filed a complaint with the USDA Office of Civil Rights, which was received by the USDA on May 1, 2008, alleging that the denial of the loan resulted from racial discrimination. It is not clear from the record in [this] case how these allegations were resolved.

In February 2009, Farmers National Bank initiated a foreclosure action on the farm property due to a failure to make payments for five months. Plaintiff alleges that, by July 28, 2009, the office of the USDA FSA responsible for adjudicating plaintiff's discrimination complaint had requested suspension of the foreclosure action. In October 2009, however, Farmers National Bank was granted a Judgment and Order of Sale as to the farm property. Thereafter, plaintiff filed multiple suits in the United States District Court for the Western District of Kentucky, and the United States Court of Federal Claims, "seeking an injunction against the farm's foreclosure as well as damages for the USDA's alleged earlier discrimination."

In addition to [the present] case, which the court refers to as *Lea IV*, plaintiff, Corey Lea, has filed at least eleven separate actions within the federal judiciary system based on the same set of facts, including: *Lea v. United States*, No. 3:16-CV-00735 (M.D. Tenn. April 13, 2016) (ongoing); *Lea v. Farmers Nat'l Bank*, No. 3:15-CV-00595 (M.D. Tenn. May 27, 2015) (finding plaintiff's case "to be legally frivolous by reason of improper venue"); *Lea v. United States*, No. 14-44C, 2014 WL 2101367 (Fed. Cl. May 19, 2014) (*Lea I*), *aff'd in part, vacated in part*, 592 Fed. Appx. 930 (Fed. Cir. 2014) (*Lea II*) (voluntarily dismissed); *Lea v. United States*, 120 Fed. Cl. 440 (*Lea III*) (granting defendant's motion to dismiss); *Lea v. United States*, No. 14-CV-00040-TBR (W.D. Ky. May 29, 2014) (dismissing plaintiff's complaint for violation of the sanctions against him); *Lea v. United States*, No. 13-CV-00110-JHM (W.D. Ky. Feb. 6, 2014) (finding plaintiff's claims frivolous and issuing sanctions enjoining plaintiff from filing related civil claims), *aff'd*, No. 14-5493 (6th Cir. Dec. 18, 2014), *cert. denied*, Case No. 14-8315 (April 6, 2015); *Lea v. United States*, No. 10-CV-00052-JHM (W.D. Ky. Jul. 11, 2013) (granting defendants' motion to dismiss), *aff'd*, No. 14-5445 (6th Cir. Dec. 18, 2014), *cert. denied*, Case No. 14-8315 (April 6, 2015); *Lea v. United States*, 1:11-CV-00094-JHM (W.D. Ky. Aug. 26, 2011) (transferred to Sixth Circuit at plaintiff's request); *Lea v. United States*, No. 10-CV-00029-JHM (W.D. Ky. Jan. 19, 2011) (granting defendants' motion to dismiss), *aff'd*, No. 11-5969 (6th Cir. Aug. 7, 2013); *Lea v. Kentucky*, 1:09-CV-0056-TBR (W.D. Ky. April 20, 2010) (granting defendants' motion to dismiss); *Lea v. Farmers Nat'l Bank*, 1:09-CV-00075-JHM-ERG (W.D. Ky. July 21, 2009) (granting defendants' motion to dismiss and finding that *pro se* plaintiff Corey Lea cannot pursue claim on behalf of corporation, Corey Lea, Inc.).

A number of *pro se*, plaintiff Corey Lea's prior complaints have been dismissed and found frivolous. For example, the United States District Court for the Western District of Kentucky specifically issued sanctions against plaintiff for his "submission of frivolous and duplicative lawsuits" and enjoined "Plaintiff Corey Lea" and his corporate affiliate, "Corey Lea, Inc.," from "filing any civil lawsuit in

the United States District Court, Western District of Kentucky alleging or asserting factual or legal claims based upon or arising out of any of the legal or factual claims alleged” in plaintiff’s previous actions. *Lea v. United States*, No. 13–CV–00110–JHM, ECF No. 64 (emphasis in original). The District Court explained:

Plaintiffs repeated filing of civil actions re-hashing the same arguments is improper and harassing and clearly unwarranted. His submission of frivolous and duplicative lawsuits serves no legitimate purpose, places a tremendous burden on this Court’s limited resources, and deprives other litigants with meritorious claims of the speedy resolution of their cases. The similarity of Plaintiff’s actions and the timing evince his bad faith and improper purpose in filing the present action. As such, it is appropriate for this Court to impose sanctions upon Plaintiff.

Id.

Lea v. United States, 126 Fed. Cl. 203, 206–08 (Fed. Cl. 2016).

In May 2015, Lea initiated a separate action in this Court against the USDA, among other defendants, alleging discrimination and a violation of 7 C.F.R § 766.358. Complaint at 4–5, 11, *Lea v. Farmers Nat’l Bank*, No. 3-15-cv-00595 (M.D. Tenn. May 27, 2015), ECF 1. On February 23, 2016, the Court dismissed Lea’s complaint on the grounds of frivolity based on improper venue. *Lea v. Farmers Nat’l Bank*, No. 3:15-cv-00595, 2016 WL 727775, at *1 (M.D. Tenn. Feb. 23, 2016). The Sixth Circuit affirmed that dismissal. *Lea v. Warren County*, No. 16-5329, 2017 WL 4216584, at *1 (6th Cir. May 4, 2017).

Lea filed the instant petition on April 13, 2016. (Doc. No. 1.) In it, Lea states that “the Secretary of the United States Department of Agriculture terminated the financial [assistance] provided to [Lea] in the form of a direct loan and loan guarantee to a local bank.” (Doc. No. 1, PageID# 3, ¶ 5.) Construing his minimal allegations in the light most favorable to him, Lea claims that the USDA failed to protect him from foreclosure by not enforcing the foreclosure moratorium period imposed by the 2008 farm bill legislation, 7 C.F.R. § 766.358, against the private bank that

held his loan.¹ (See Doc. No. 1, PageID# 3–4, ¶ 7.) He cites the USDA’s “long history of racial discrimination” and states that the “Secretary could have prevented the employees of the USDA from conspiring with the private bank to perfect an illegal provision.” (*Id.* at PageID# 5, ¶ 12.) Lea states that he has “an accepted discrimination complaint still unresolved [at] the USDA’s Office of Civil Rights.” (*Id.* at PageID# 2, ¶ 2.) In response to Lea’s request for a hearing on the merits of his complaint, “[t]he ALJ stated she was without jurisdiction to hold . . . the formal hearing on the merits[.]” (*Id.* at PageID# 3, ¶ 6.) Lea asserts that “the USDA has written rules against the constitution by not allowing black farmers to have a formal hearing before the Administrative Law Judge” while “a similar[ly] situated white male farmer” can. (*See id.* ¶ 4.) He asks for “an expedited formal hearing on the merits before the Department of Agriculture’s Administrative Law Judge[and,] if necessary, a judicial review of the ALJ’s decision.” (*Id.* at PageID# 9.)

The USDA filed its motion to dismiss on August 31, 2016. (Doc. No. 22.) In it, the United States assumes that Lea “seeks review of the two (2) most recent related decisions in the [United States Court of Federal Claims] out of the many adverse decisions against [Lea] in that court.” (Doc. No. 23, PageID# 104.) The United States cites decisions from the Court of Federal Claims issued on April 25, 2016 and May 10, 2016. (*Id.*) In those decisions, the Court of Federal Claims found that Lea’s claims “based on alleged takings, tort, and implied-in-fact contract” were collaterally estopped by prior decisions of that court against him and that Lea’s remaining breach

¹ The Food and Energy Conservation Act (or 2008 “Farm Bill”) instituted a moratorium with respect to certain farmer program loans “on all acceleration and foreclosure proceedings instituted by the Department of Agriculture against any farmer or rancher” with a claim of program discrimination against the USDA. 7 U.S.C. § 1981a(b)(1). The Western District of Kentucky found, however, that the bill did not preclude foreclosure due to Lea’s discrimination claim because 7 U.S.C. § 1981a “limited the moratorium solely to those foreclosures ‘instituted by the Department of Agriculture,’” and a private bank, not the USDA, instituted the foreclosure proceedings in Lea’s case. *Lea v. U.S. Dep’t of Agric.*, No. 1:10-cv-00029, 2011 WL 182698, at *3–4 (W.D. Ky. Jan. 19, 2011).

of contract claims were properly brought by Lea’s corporate entity, Corey Lea, Inc., and not Lea personally. (*Id.* at PageID# 105–06.) The United States argues that Lea “does not plead any sufficient facts upon which relief can be granted in his Petition to challenge the decisions made by the Claims Court.” (*Id.* at PageID# 106.)

II. Legal Standard

Rule 8(a)(2) of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure states that a pleading must contain a “short and plain statement of the claim showing that the pleader is entitled to relief.” Fed. R. Civ. P. 8(a)(2). Such a statement ensures that defendants receive “fair notice of what the . . . claim is and the grounds upon which it rests.” *Bell Atl. Corp. v. Twombly*, 550 U.S. 544, 555 (2007) (quoting *Conley v. Gibson*, 355 U.S. 41, 47 (1957)). “To survive a motion to dismiss, a complaint must contain sufficient factual matter, accepted as true, to ‘state a claim to relief that is plausible on its face.’” *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 556 U.S. 662, 678 (2009) (quoting *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 570). In deciding whether the plaintiff has set forth a “plausible” claim, the court must accept as true the factual allegations (but not legal conclusions) in the complaint. *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 678.

Pro se complaints, no matter how “inartfully pleaded,” are held to “less stringent standards than formal pleadings drafted by lawyers.” *Erickson v. Pardus*, 551 U.S. 89, 94 (2007) (quoting *Estelle v. Gamble*, 429 U.S. 97, 106 (1976)). Where a plaintiff proceeds *in forma pauperis*, “the court shall dismiss the case at any time if the court determines that the action or appeal fails to state a claim on which relief may be granted . . .” 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B)(ii). The court shall also dismiss any action it finds to be frivolous or maliciously filed. *Id.* § 1915(e)(2)(B)(i).

III. Analysis

As a threshold matter, the undersigned notes that the United States’ motion to dismiss is based upon a faulty assumption that Lea’s current petition challenges the April 25, 2016 and May

10, 2016 decisions of the Court of Federal Claims. (*See* Doc. No. 23, PageID# 104.) Lea’s petition in this Court was filed on April 13, 2016, and thus could not be in response to those later-filed decisions. (*See* Doc. No. 1.) Because the United States offers no other basis for its motion, it does not provide grounds for the dismissal of Lea’s complaint. However, because Lea proceeds *in forma pauperis* in this action, the Court has an independent obligation to determine “at any time” whether the complaint is frivolous, maliciously filed, or fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted. 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(e)(2)(B)(i)–1915(e)(2)(B)(ii). The undersigned will therefore evaluate Lea’s complaint under that statute.

A. Venue

This Court has previously found, and the Sixth Circuit has affirmed, that the Middle District of Tennessee is not the proper venue for an action stemming from the foreclosure of Lea’s property. *Lea v. Farmers Nat’l Bank (Lea I)*, No. 3:15-CV-00595, 2016 WL 727775, at *1 (M.D. Tenn. Feb. 23, 2016); *Lea v. Warren County (Lea II)*, No. 16-5329, 2017 WL 4216584, at *2 (6th Cir. May 4, 2017). Although the United States does not challenge venue in this case, the Court must consider sua sponte whether a lack of venue renders this matter legally frivolous under the *in forma pauperis* statute, as the Sixth Circuit found Lea’s prior action to be. *Lea II*, 2017 WL 4216584, at *2. The undersigned finds that it does.

In an action brought against an agency or officer of the United States, venue is proper in the district in which a defendant resides, a “substantial part of the events or omissions giving rise to the claim occurred, or a substantial part of the property that is the subject of the action is situated,” or “the plaintiff resides if no real property is involved in the action.” 28 U.S.C. § 1391(e)(1). It appears that Lea’s claims here again center on the property located in the Western District of Kentucky and the USDA’s actions surrounding its foreclosure. (Doc. No. 1, PageID#

4, ¶ 7; Doc. No. 24-1, PageID# 168.) Although Lea frames this action as a challenge to the administrative law judge’s failure to hold a hearing on the merits of his civil rights complaint, and not as a direct challenge to the foreclosure of his property, the foreclosure and the events surrounding it still constitute the heart of Lea’s claims. As the Sixth Circuit found, “the subject property was located in Kentucky, it was sold in Kentucky, litigation regarding the property had already been brought in Kentucky courts, and Lea himself resided in Kentucky during the time of the foreclosure and the sale of the subject property.” *Lea II*, 2017 WL 4216584, at *2. Thus, a “substantial part of the events or omissions giving rise” to Lea’s claims occurred in the Western District of Kentucky, where the real property that is the subject of this action is situated. 28 U.S.C. § 1391(e)(1). Venue is proper in that district and not the Middle District of Tennessee.

Upon finding a case to be improperly filed in its district, a court “shall dismiss, or if it be in the interest of justice, transfer such case to any district or division in which it could have been brought.” 28 U.S.C. § 1406(a). Lea’s case would find proper venue in the Western District of Kentucky. However, it appears that Lea has been “permanently enjoined from filing any civil lawsuit in the United States District Court, Western District of Kentucky alleging or asserting factual or legal claims based upon or arising out of [the foreclosure].” *Lea v. U.S. Dep’t of Agric.*, No. 114CV-40-R, 2014 WL 2435903, at *1 (W.D. Ky. May 29, 2014).² Because Lea must “seek leave and written permission to file [an action in the Western District of Kentucky] and certify under oath or affirmation that the action involves new matters in accordance with the sanctions entered against him” before filing any new action in that district, the undersigned finds that

² Lea filed his first action in this Court shortly after he was enjoined from proceeding in the Western District of Kentucky. *See* Complaint, *Lea v. Farmers Nat’l Bank*, No. 3:15-cv-00595 (M.D. Tenn. May 27, 2015), ECF 1.

transferring this matter would not serve the interest of justice and that dismissal is the appropriate result. *Id.*

B. Failure to State a Claim Under the Administrative Procedures Act

Even if venue were proper in this district, Lea's petition does not state a claim upon which relief may be granted because the petition's few facts do not allege that Lea has suffered a legal wrong within the meaning of the Administrative Procedures Act (APA). To state a claim under the APA, a petitioner must plead that "the challenged agency action caused them to suffer a 'legal wrong' or 'adversely affected or aggrieved' them 'within the meaning of a relevant statute.'" *Herr v. U.S. Forest Serv.*, 803 F.3d 809, 818 (6th Cir. 2015) (quoting 5 U.S.C. § 702). Second, the petitioner must plead that a statute has subjected the challenged agency action to review, or that the challenged action is a "final" one "for which there is no other adequate remedy in a court." *Berry v. U.S. Dep't of Labor*, 832 F.3d 627, 632 (6th Cir. 2016) (quoting 5 U.S.C. § 704). An action is "final" when it marks "the consummation of the agency's decisionmaking process" and determines "rights or obligations." *Bennett v. Spear*, 520 U.S. 154, 177–78 (1997) (internal quotations omitted).

Lea first pleads that "[t]he agency and the secretary failed to enforce its own rules and regulations and an Act of Congress that provided moratorium relief against foreclosure until a hearing on the merits by the Administrative Law Judge." (Doc. No. 1, PageID# 6, ¶ 15.) This claim fails because the Western District of Kentucky has held, and the Sixth Circuit has affirmed, that the plain language of the statute Lea references provided a moratorium only on foreclosures "instituted by the Department of Agriculture," 7 U.S.C. § 1981a(b)(1), and Lea concedes that a "private bank" initiated his foreclosure. *Lea v. U.S. Dep't of Agric.*, No. 1:10-CV-00029, 2011 WL 182698, at *4 (W.D. Ky. Jan. 19, 2011), *aff'd*, Order at 5–6, *Lea v. U.S. Dep't of Agric.*, No. 11-

5969 (6th Cir. Aug. 7, 2013), ECF 95; (Doc. No. 1, PageID# 4, ¶ 7). Lea has not alleged a legal wrong under the APA; moreover, any claim he might have raised has already been determined.

Further, Lea does not include any facts to show what harm he has suffered because he did not have a hearing on the merits before the ALJ or what contracts USDA failed to enforce. (*See* Doc. No. 1, PageID# 7, ¶ 17.) Although Rule 8 does not demand that a plaintiff make “detailed factual allegations,” *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 555, Lea’s unsupported assertion that denial of the hearing “caused harm” is exactly the sort of “unadorned, the-defendant-unlawfully-harmed-me accusation” that the Supreme Court has found does not adequately state a claim. *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 678; (Doc. No. 1, PageID# 7, ¶ 17). Dismissal is therefore appropriate under § 1915(e)(2)(B)(ii).

Finally, although Lea brings his claims under a different cause of action than that alleged in prior suits, he seeks relief for the same injuries that have been litigated many times over. Lea’s numerous cases in the Western District of Kentucky and the Court of Federal Claims—all arising from the same facts—make dismissal of Lea’s case as frivolous appropriate under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B)(i). *See Holder v. City of Cleveland*, 287 F. App’x 468, 471 (6th Cir. 2008) (“Where two successive suits seek recovery for the same injury, a judgment on the merits operates as a bar to the later suit, even though a different legal theory of recovery is advanced in the second suit.” (quoting *Cemer v. Marathon Oil Co.*, 583 F.2d 830, 832 (6th Cir. 1978) (per curiam)); *Taylor v. Reynolds*, 22 F. App’x 537, 538 (6th Cir. 2001) (affirming dismissal of action as frivolous because claim preclusion barred “all claims by the parties or their privies based on the same cause of action, as to every matter actually litigated as well as every theory of recovery that could have been presented”). Lea has found a new bottle, but the wine is old. The similarity of Lea’s many actions and the timing of his filing in this Court show that this lawsuit does not have a proper

purpose and must be dismissed as frivolous under § 1915(e)(2)(B)(i) and for failure to state a claim under § 1915(e)(2)(B)(ii).

IV. Recommendation

In light of the foregoing, the Magistrate Judge RECOMMENDS that Defendants' Motion to Dismiss (Doc. No. 22) be GRANTED and that the Petition be DISMISSED. The Magistrate Judge further RECOMMENDS that Lea's additional pending motions be DENIED AS MOOT. (Doc. Nos. 25, 31, 32.)

Any party has fourteen (14) days after being served with this Report and Recommendation in which to file any written objections to it with the District Court. Any party opposing said objections shall have fourteen (14) days after being served with a copy thereof in which to file any responses to said objections. Fed. R. Civ. P. 72(b)(2). Failure to file specific objections within fourteen (14) days of receipt of this Report and Recommendation can constitute a waiver of further appeal of the matters disposed of therein. *Thomas v. Arn*, 474 U.S. 140, 155 (1985); *Cowherd v. Million*, 380 F.3d 909, 912 (6th Cir. 2004).

Entered this 8th day of December, 2017.


ALISTAIR E. NEWBERN
United States Magistrate Judge