

Fail to Comment at Your Own Risk: Does Exhaustion of Administrative Remedies Have a Place in Judicial Review of Rules?

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The requirement that parties seeking judicial review of agency action first “exhaust” their administrative remedies initially developed as a prudential judicial construct<sup>1</sup> and now is also sometimes reflected in statutes.<sup>2</sup> The classic version of the exhaustion requirement generally requires a party to go through all the stages of an administrative adjudication before going to court. This ensures that the agency action being challenged is the final agency position and that the agency has had the opportunity to bring its expertise to bear and to correct any errors it may have made at an earlier stage. It also allows for the resolution of disputes before they come to court, thus avoiding potentially unnecessary additions to court dockets. I will refer to this as “remedy exhaustion.”

The orthodox application of the remedy exhaustion requirement involves cases where the petitioner for judicial review has eschewed available administrative appeal opportunities. In some cases, a court’s refusal to accept review will simply clear the way for the further administrative proceedings to take place;<sup>3</sup> but in other situations, the foreclosure of judicial relief occurs after “the opportunity to invoke the relevant administrative processes had passed.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In 1938 the Supreme Court referred to it as “the long-settled rule of judicial administration that no one is entitled to judicial relief for a supposed or threatened injury until the prescribed administrative remedy has been exhausted.” *Myers v. Bethlehem Shipbuilding Corp.*, 303 U.S. 41, 50–51 (1938) (employers challenging NLRB’s jurisdiction must complete administrative proceedings before seeking judicial intervention). Later the Supreme Court explained that:

[T]he exhaustion doctrine recognizes the notion, grounded in deference to Congress’ delegation of authority to coordinate branches of Government, that agencies, not the courts, ought to have primary responsibility for the programs that Congress has charged them to administer. Exhaustion concerns apply with particular force when the action under review involves exercise of the agency’s discretionary power or when the agency proceedings in question allow the agency to apply its special expertise.

*McCarthy v. Madigan*, 503 U.S. 140, 145 (1992).

<sup>2</sup> See pages 4-6, *infra*.

<sup>3</sup> As in *Myers*, 303 U.S. 41, 50–51 (1938).

<sup>4</sup> PETER L. STRAUSS, ET AL, *GELLHORN AND BYSE’S ADMINISTRATIVE LAW* 1241 (10th ed. 2003) [hereinafter *GELLHORN & BYSE CASEBOOK*] (discussing *McGee v. United States*, 402 U.S. 479 (1971) (Selective Service inductee denied opportunity to raise conscientious objector defense to criminal conviction because he had not sought personal appearance before the local board and did not take administrative appeal to contest the denial)).

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However, the doctrine has developed a new permutation, covering situations where a petitioner for judicial review did follow all the steps of the administrative appeals process, but had failed to raise in that process the issues now sought to be litigated in court. In those cases, which have been called “issue exhaustion” cases,<sup>5</sup> the thwarted petitioner will likely be out of luck since normally there is no further opportunity to raise the issue at the agency. In that sense, issue exhaustion bears some resemblance to standing-to-sue cases—a particular litigant is deemed unfit to challenge the agency’s action in court. Unlike remedy exhaustion, however, which only applies to agency adjudication, issue exhaustion can theoretically be applied to agency rulemaking. As this article will show, this has started to become a reality—to the potential detriment of the rulemaking process, if applied in an overbroad fashion.

### Development of the Issue Exhaustion Doctrine: It Began with a Statutory Provision Applying to Agency Adjudications—*L.A. Tucker Truck Lines*.

It is common for appeals courts to rule that they will not review issues not brought up first in the lower court. This principle was first analogized to judicial review of agency adjudication by the U.S. Supreme Court in the pre-Administrative Procedure Act (“APA”) case of *Hormel v. Helvering*.<sup>6</sup> Six decades later, in *Sims v. Apfel*,<sup>7</sup> involving review of a Social Security Administration disability decision, the Court hearkened back to *Hormel*, quoting this passage from the earlier case:

Ordinarily an appellate court does not give consideration to issues not raised below. For our procedural scheme contemplates that parties shall come to issue in the trial forum vested with authority to determine questions of fact. This is essential in order that parties may have the opportunity to offer all the evidence they believe relevant to the issues which the trial tribunal is alone competent to decide; it is equally essential in order that litigants may not be surprised on appeal by final decision there of issues upon which they have had no opportunity to introduce evidence. And the basic reasons which support this general principle applicable to trial courts make it equally desirable that parties should have an opportunity to offer evidence on the general issues involved in the less formal proceedings before administrative agencies entrusted with the responsibility of fact finding.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See William Funk, *Exhaustion of Administrative Remedies—New Dimensions Since Darby*, 18 PACE ENVTL. L. REV. 1, 11 (2000) (“‘Issue exhaustion’ is a term that refers to the need to raise an issue with an administrative agency before raising it on judicial review.”). Recently some courts have used the term “waiver” to describe the action of the challenger who had failed to raise the issue during the agency proceeding. See text at notes 121-28. I prefer the term “issue exhaustion” because “waiver” has another common meaning in administrative law more generally (referring to agencies granting a waiver from a generally applicable requirement), and because it makes it sound like more of an strategic action on the part of the petitioner in court.

<sup>6</sup> 312 U.S. 552 (1941).

<sup>7</sup> 530 U.S. 103 (2000).

<sup>8</sup> *Id.* at 109 (quoting *Hormel*, 312 U.S. at 556). See discussion of *Sims*, text at note 25–35, *infra*.

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The Supreme Court went on to apply the issue exhaustion doctrine to review of an agency adjudicative action in 1952 in *United States v. L.A. Tucker Truck Lines, Inc.*,<sup>9</sup> in the context of review of an Interstate Commerce Commission order:

[O]rderly procedure and good administration require that objections to the proceedings of an administrative agency be made while it has opportunity for correction in order to raise issues reviewable by the courts . . . . Simple fairness to those who are engaged in the tasks of administration, and to litigants, requires as a general rule that courts should not topple over administrative decisions unless the administrative body not only has erred but has erred against objection made at the time appropriate under its practice.<sup>10</sup>

In that case a trucker petitioned the ICC for an extension of his route certificate. After a hearing by a hearing examiner, the petition was denied and the Commission affirmed. The trucker requested reconsideration by the full Commission, and then “extraordinary relief,” both of which were denied. The trucker appealed to the three-judge court provided for by statute and raised for the first time the contention that the hearing examiner had been improperly appointed. The lower court allowed this, but the ICC appealed to the Supreme Court.

In reversing, the Supreme Court noted that:

[T]he Appellee did not offer nor did the court require any excuse for its failure to raise the objection upon at least one of its many opportunities during the administrative proceeding. Appellee does not claim to have been misled or in any way hampered in ascertaining the facts about the examiner’s appointment. It did not bestir itself to learn the facts until long after the administrative proceeding was closed and months after the case was at issue in the District Court, at which time the Commission promptly supplied the facts upon which the contention was based and sustained.<sup>11</sup>

It added that “The issue is clearly an afterthought, brought forward at the last possible moment to undo the administrative proceedings without consideration of the merits and can prevail only from technical compulsion irrespective of considerations of practical justice.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> 344 U.S. 33, 37 (1952).

<sup>10</sup> A few years later, the Court made clear that the Administrative Procedure Act (APA) does “not require a different result. That Act purports to strengthen, rather than to weaken, the principle requiring the exhaustion of administrative remedies before permitting court review.” *Fed. Power Comm’n v. Colorado Interstate Gas Co.*, 348 U.S. 492, 499–500 (1955). *But see* *Darby v. Cisneros*, 509 U.S. 137 (1993), discussed below, in which the Court read section 704 of the APA, (5 U.S.C. § 704) to mean that federal courts do not have authority to require plaintiffs to exhaust available administrative remedies before seeking judicial review under the APA, where neither relevant statutes nor agency rules specifically mandate exhaustion as prerequisite to judicial review.

<sup>11</sup> 344 U.S. at 35.

<sup>12</sup> *Id.* at 36.

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While the appeal in that court was done under a statute that did not contain an issue exhaustion provision,<sup>13</sup> the Court noted that “more than a few statutes” did contain such provisions.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, as the Supreme Court noted almost 50 years later in *Sims*, “requirements of administrative issue exhaustion are largely creatures of statute.”<sup>15</sup> Recently the Court clarified that even when a litigant failed to meet a statutory issue exhaustion provision, “we do not regard that lapse as ‘jurisdictional.’”<sup>16</sup>

There are numerous statutes that contain either generic issue exhaustion provisions or those directed at objections to agency orders. See the statutes for the following agencies (arranged by U.S. Code provisions):

- Federal Labor Relations Authority, Unfair Labor Practices, 5 U.S.C. § 7123 (“No objection that has not been urged before the Authority, or its designee, shall be considered by the court, unless the failure or neglect to urge the objection is excused because of extraordinary circumstances.”)
- Department of Justice, Executive Office of Immigration Review, Removal Orders, 8 U.S.C. § 1252(d) (“A court may review a final order of removal only if—(1) the alien has exhausted all administrative remedies available to the alien as of right. . . .”)<sup>17</sup>
- Securities and Exchange Commission (“SEC”), Securities Act of 1933, 15 U.S.C. § 77i(a) (“No objection to the order of the Commission shall be considered by the court unless such objection shall have been urged before the Commission.”)
- SEC, Securities Act of 1934, 15 U.S.C. § 78y(c)(1) (“No objection to an order or rule of the Commission, for which review is sought under this section, may be considered by the

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<sup>13</sup> See *U.S. v. L.A. Tucker Truck Lines*, Statement of Jurisdiction (filed Jan. 28, 1952) (“While most of the cases invoking this doctrine have arisen under statutes which specifically provide that the court can consider on review only matters raised before the agency—a limitation not contained in the Urgent Deficiencies Act, under which this action was brought—the settled policy against unduly protracting litigation requires application of the principle to review of Interstate Commerce Commission orders by statutory three-judge district courts.”)

<sup>14</sup> 344 U.S. at 36.

<sup>15</sup> *Sims*, 530 U.S. at 107. The Court cited *Marine Mammal Conservancy, Inc. v. Dep’t of Agric.*, 134 F.3d 409, 412 (D.C. Cir. 1998). Its statement was a bit more expansive: “The requirement that objections must first be presented to the agency, although sometimes treated as part of the judicially-created exhaustion doctrine, is largely derived from statute.”

<sup>16</sup> *EPA v. EME Homer City Generation, L.P.*, 134 S. Ct 1584, 1602 (2014).

<sup>17</sup> Although this provision appears to reference only remedy exhaustion, numerous circuit courts have interpreted it to mean issue exhaustion as well. See e.g., *Agha v. Holder*, 743 F.3d 609, 616 (8th Cir. 2014) (“Although this provision only refers to administrative ‘remedies,’ we have held ‘that Congress likely intended by enacting § 1252(d)(1) . . . to require that an alien not only pursue all stages of administrative review, but also raise all issues before the agency.’”) (quoting *Frango v. Gonzales*, 437 F.3d 726, 728 (8th Cir. 2006)).

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court unless it was urged before the Commission or there was reasonable ground for failure to do so.”<sup>18</sup>

- SEC, Public Utility Holding Company Act of 1935, 15 U.S.C. § 79x(a) (“No objection to the order of the Commission shall be considered by the court unless such objection shall have been urged before the Commission or unless there were reasonable grounds for failure so to do.
- SEC, Investment Companies, 15 U.S.C. § 80a–42(a) (same)
- SEC, Investment Advisers, 15 U.S.C. § 80b–13 (same);
- Small Business Administration, 15 U.S.C. § 687a(e) (“No objection to an order of the Administration shall be considered by the court unless such objection was urged before the Administration or, if it was not so urged, unless there were reasonable grounds for failure to do so.”)
- Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (“FERC”), Natural Gas, 15 U.S.C. § 717r(b) (“No objection to the order of the Commission shall be considered by the court unless such objection shall have been urged before the Commission in the application for rehearing unless there is reasonable ground for failure so to do.”)
- FERC, Natural Gas Policy, 15 U.S.C. § 3416(a)(4) (“No objection to such order of the Commission shall be considered by the court if such objection was not urged before the Commission in the application for rehearing unless there was reasonable ground for the failure to do so.”)
- FERC, Electric Utilities, 16 U.S.C. § 825l(b) (“No objection to the order of the Commission shall be considered by the court unless such objection shall have been urged before the Commission in the application for rehearing unless there is reasonable ground for failure so to do.”)
- Department of the Treasury, Alcohol, 27 U.S.C. § 204(h) (“No objection to the order of the Secretary shall be considered by the court unless such objection shall have been urged before the Secretary or unless there were reasonable grounds for failure so to do.”)
- National Labor Relations Board, Unfair Labor Practices, 29 U.S.C. § 160(e) (“No objection that has not been urged before the Board, its member, agent, or agency, shall be considered by the court, unless the failure or neglect to urge such objection shall be excused because of extraordinary circumstances.”)

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<sup>18</sup> As noted in note 45, *infra*, this is one of only two provisions that I have found that specifically apply issue exhaustion to rulemaking.

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- Department of Labor, Fair Labor Standards Act, 29 U.S.C. § 210(a) (“No objection to the order of the Secretary shall be considered by the court unless such objection shall have been urged before such industry committee or unless there were reasonable grounds for failure so to do.”)
- Social Security Administration, Civil Money Penalties, 42 U.S.C. § 1320a–8(d)(1) (“No objection that has not been urged before the Commissioner of Social Security shall be considered by the court, unless the failure or neglect to urge such objection shall be excused because of extraordinary circumstances.”)
- Department of the Interior, Outer Continental Shelf Leasing Act, 43 U.S.C. § 1349(c)(5) (“Specific objections to the action of the Secretary shall be considered by the court only if the issues upon which such objections are based have been submitted to the Secretary during the administrative proceedings related to the actions involved.”)
- Federal Communications Commission, General, 47 U.S.C. § 405(a) (“The filing of a petition for reconsideration shall not be a condition precedent to judicial review of any such order, decision, report, or action, except where the party seeking such review (1) was not a party to the proceedings resulting in such order, decision, report, or action, or (2) relies on questions of fact or law upon which the Commission, or designated authority within the Commission, has been afforded no opportunity to pass.”)
- National Transportation Safety Board, Aviation Matters, 49 U.S.C. § 1153(b)(4) (“In reviewing an order under this subsection, the court may consider an objection to an order of the Board only if the objection was made in the proceeding conducted by the Board or if there was a reasonable ground for not making the objection in the proceeding.”).

In addition, there are agency regulations that require issue exhaustion within the agency’s appeals system—in other words an appellant cannot raise an issue before the agency head that was not raised before the ALJ.<sup>19</sup> Some agencies have successfully argued that these regulations should also be respected by courts on judicial review. The Supreme Court noted this in *Sims*, when it said:

[I]t is common for an agency’s regulations to require issue exhaustion in administrative appeals. See, e.g., 20 CFR § 802.211(a) (1999) (petition for review to Benefits Review Board must “lis[t] the specific issues to be considered on appeal”). And when regulations do so, courts reviewing agency action regularly ensure against the bypassing of that requirement by refusing to consider unexhausted issues. See, e.g., *South Carolina v. United States Dept. of Labor*, 795 F.2d 375, 378 (C.A.4 1986); *Sears, Roebuck and Co. v. FTC*, 676 F.2d 385, 398, n. 26 (C.A.9 1982). Yet, SSA regulations do not require issue exhaustion.

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<sup>19</sup> See e.g., Department of Labor: 20 C.F.R. §§ 641.900(e), 645.800(c), 667.830(b); Department of Justice (Bureau of Prisons) 28 C.F.R. § 542.15(b)(2); NLRB: 29 C.F.R. § 102.46(b)(2), and OSHA: 29 C.F.R. §§ 1979.110(a), 1981.110(a).

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(Although the question is not before us, we think it likely that the Commissioner could adopt a regulation that did require issue exhaustion.)<sup>20</sup>

While it might seem odd to think that an agency regulation could influence what arguments can be made in court, cases like the ones cited in the above passage have migrated the administrative adjudication rule into the judicial review process. Such rules, not surprisingly, appear to be limited to agency adjudications, where issue exhaustion can be more readily tied to remedy exhaustion. And no such regulation purporting to limit issues raised in judicial review of rules has been found.

### Application of Issue Exhaustion in a Ratemaking Case—*Colorado Interstate*

Three years after the *L.A. Tucker* case, the above FERC natural gas statutory provision (formerly administered by the Federal Power Commission) was applied by the Supreme Court in *Federal Power Commission v. Colorado Interstate Gas Co.*<sup>21</sup> This case involved a ratemaking (within the APA’s definition of rulemaking<sup>22</sup>) of particular applicability in that the order in the case only applied to one company. The Commission’s order had been reversed and remanded by the Tenth Circuit on a ground that that court had raised *sua sponte*, but one that had not been before the Commission at the time of the ratemaking. The Supreme Court, citing the statute (and *L.A. Tucker Truck Lines*) reversed, brushing aside the argument that the statute, on its face, only precluded *a party* from raising an issue in court that had not been presented for rehearing, and did not preclude *a court* from taking up a new issue *sua sponte*: “To allow a Court of Appeals to intervene here on its own motion would seriously undermine the purpose of the explicit requirements of § 19(b) that objections must first come before the Commission.”<sup>22</sup> More importantly, the Court, found support in the APA’s scope-of-judicial-review section (5 U.S.C. § 706(2)(a)), which states that in conducting its review: “To the extent necessary to decision *and when presented*, the reviewing court shall decide all relevant questions of law, interpret constitutional and statutory provisions, and determine the meaning or applicability of the terms of an agency action.”<sup>23</sup>

The *Colorado Interstate* Court did not really examine this APA issue in any depth and I was unable to find any other federal court decision focusing on this phrase, so its importance to this issue is hard to judge. It is not immediately clear why “when presented” would necessarily imply that an issue must have been first presented to an agency before a litigant can “present” it to a court. In addition, even if read this way, the phrase’s application is ambiguous in that it seemingly only applies to the questions of law enumerated in that sentence and not to all the matters covered by Section 706(2).

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<sup>20</sup> *Sims*, 530 U.S. at 108.

<sup>21</sup> 348 U.S. 492 (1955).

<sup>22</sup> *Id.* at 499.

<sup>23</sup> 5 U.S.C. § 706 (emphasis added).

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A variation of the *sua sponte* issue decided in *Colorado Interstate* is presented when the court petitioner has not raised the issue with the agency, but another party has. Because the issue exhaustion doctrine was intended to be protective of the agency, courts have understandably often ruled that it should not be applied to particular challengers in situations where *other* participants in the administrative process had raised the issues, even if the litigant in court had not. For example, the Third Circuit so ruled in an SEC case where the petitioner had not raised the challenge at the administrative level, but other party-intervenors to the administrative adjudication had:

The principal purpose of the [exhaustion] doctrine . . . is to make sure that it is the agency and not the courts which passes first on the contentions of the participants. It was the intention of Congress as evidenced by the statutory plan to give to the agency rather than to the courts the primary responsibility for enforcing and elaborating the regulatory scheme as set up in the law. This purpose is advanced so long as the contentions and exceptions raised on review have been in fact effectively and meaningfully raised before the regulatory agency. This is true regardless of whether the person who appeals the agency decision or some other person aggrieved by the decision happens to have raised the points before the agency.<sup>24</sup>

### Rejection of Issue Exhaustion in a “Non-Adversary” Adjudication—*Sims v. Apfel*.

All of the cases discussed so far have involved challenges to orders issued in administrative adjudications or ratemakings of particular applicability. But in one important case, the Supreme Court declined to apply the issue exhaustion doctrine in the context of a review of an agency adjudication. In *Sims v. Apfel*,<sup>25</sup> in which the government argued that a social security claimant should be barred from raising an issue that she had failed to raise at the Social Security Appeals Council (the agency board that reviews denials of benefits by agency administrative law judges), the Supreme Court declined to apply issue exhaustion. The government had argued “that an issue-exhaustion requirement is ‘an important corollary’ of any requirement of exhaustion of remedies.”<sup>26</sup> But the Court concluded, “We think that this is not necessarily so and that the corollary is particularly unwarranted in this case.”<sup>27</sup>

In reaching this decision, the Court began by noting “that requirements of administrative issue exhaustion are largely creatures of statute.”<sup>28</sup> It then read its precedents, including *L.A. Tucker*,<sup>29</sup> as suggesting that “the desirability of a court imposing a requirement of issue exhaustion depends on the degree to which the analogy to normal adversarial litigation applies in a

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<sup>24</sup> *Hennesey v. SEC*, 285 F.2d 511, 515 (3d Cir. 1961).

<sup>25</sup> 530 U.S. 103 (2000).

<sup>26</sup> *Id.* at 107.

<sup>27</sup> *Id.*

<sup>28</sup> *Id.*

<sup>29</sup> *Supra* note 9.

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particular administrative proceeding.” Finding SSA adjudication to be “informal”<sup>30</sup> and “inquisitorial rather than adversarial,”<sup>31</sup> the Court held that “a judicially created issue-exhaustion requirement is inappropriate. Claimants who exhaust administrative remedies need not also exhaust issues in a request for review by the Appeals Council in order to preserve judicial review of those issues.”<sup>32</sup>

The Court that decided *Sims* was a divided Court. Four Justices dissented and Justice O’Connor supplied the fifth vote by emphasizing SSA’s failure to notify claimants of the issue exhaustion requirement.<sup>33</sup>

Shortly thereafter, Professor Funk wrote:

Outside the Social Security context, it is unlikely that [*Sims*] has any force. Not only do the four dissenters indicate the view that issue exhaustion is the general rule, subject to only the rarest of exceptions, but Justice O’Connor clearly viewed the situation in [*Sims*] as unique. Even Justice Thomas’s opinion, by tying issue exhaustion to an analogy with adversarial litigation in the judicial context, suggests that in the vast range of formal and informal, but adversarial, administrative adjudication, issue exhaustion would be required.<sup>34</sup>

Nevertheless, lower courts applying issue exhaustion in judicial review of adjudications have continued to accentuate the adversarial nature of the agency action below.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> 530 U.S. at 111.

<sup>31</sup> *Id.*

<sup>32</sup> *Id.* at 112. Justice Thomas wrote for the five-Justice majority. Justice O’Connor concurred because the agency had failed to warn claimants that issue preclusion might obtain. Justice Breyer (writing for Chief Justice Rehnquist and Justice Scalia) dissented because he did “not see why the nonadversarial nature of the Social Security Administration internal appellate process makes a difference,” at least for claimants represented by counsel. *Id.* at 117.

<sup>33</sup> *Id.* at 113 (O’Connor, J. concurring in part and concurring in the judgment). She also suggested that “[r]equiring issue exhaustion is particularly inappropriate here, where the regulation and procedures of the Social Security Administration (SSA) affirmatively suggest that specific issues need not be raised before the Appeals Council.” *Id.*

<sup>34</sup> Funk, *supra* note 5 at 15.

<sup>35</sup> See e.g., *Agha v. Holder*, 743 F.3d 609, 616 (8th Cir. 2014):

“Where the parties are expected to develop the issues in an adversarial administrative proceeding, . . . the rationale for requiring issue exhaustion is at its greatest.” [quoting *Sims*]. In other words, “[t]he strongest case for imposing an exhaustion requirement exists where the administrative proceedings closely resemble a trial.” (quoting *Frango v. Gonzales*, 437 F.3d 726, 728 (8th Cir. 2006)). Here, the administrative proceedings before both the Immigration Court and the BIA were adversarial, and Agha was represented by counsel. Thus, a court-imposed exhaustion requirement is proper, in addition to the statutory requirement.

For a case refusing to apply issue exhaustion to a non-adversarial adjudication, see *Vaught v. Scottsdale Healthcare Corp. Health Plan*, 546 F.3d 620, 626 (9th Cir. 2008):

Because ERISA and its implementing regulations create an inquisitorial, rather than adversarial process, and because the [plan’s explanation of benefits] does not notify a claimant that issue

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With that in mind, query whether the issue exhaustion doctrine should have a place in rulemaking.

### Exhaustion in Rulemaking

It should be apparent that the remedy exhaustion doctrine, involving the need to go through all the available procedural steps and agency fora, while important in agency adjudication, has no real application to notice-and-comment rulemaking where there is typically a single proceeding that must be completed before there is a rule to challenge. The closely related, APA-based finality requirement<sup>36</sup> clearly rules out challenges to *proposed* rules. On the other hand, the APA's presumption of reviewability and the application of the prudential ripeness doctrine announced in *Abbott Laboratories v. Gardner* in 1966 have served to allow pre-enforcement review of final rules in many situations.<sup>37</sup> Rules can also normally be challenged in court at the enforcement stage too, absent a statutory preclusion,<sup>38</sup> or unless some opportunity existed to challenge them first in an agency adjudicatory forum.<sup>39</sup>

In pre-enforcement challenges to rules, where the ripeness hurdle must be surmounted, it is certainly possible to envision the government raising issue exhaustion concerns. An excellent student note in 1986 by Douglas David Spencer was critical of an emerging trend in this direction.<sup>40</sup> Professor Funk raised the question of issue exhaustion in rulemaking in his 2000 survey of “new dimensions” of the exhaustion doctrine, and found that “courts are hopelessly confused” on the subject.<sup>41</sup> The *Gellhorn & Byse Casebook* in 2003 devoted a thoughtful note to

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exhaustion is required, *Sims* leads us to conclude that Vaught was not required to exhaust his issues or theories in the context of this case. *Accord Wolf v. Nat'l Shopmen Pension Fund*, 728 F.2d 182, 186 (3d Cir.1984) (“Section 502(a) of ERISA does not require either issue or theory exhaustion; it requires only claim exhaustion.”).

<sup>36</sup> 5 U.S.C. § 704.

<sup>37</sup> 387 U.S. 136 (1967). But see the companion case of *Toilet Goods Ass'n v. Gardner*, 387 U.S. 167 (1966), where the Court found a pre-enforcement challenge to another FDA rule to be unripe for review because it could be challenged at the enforcement stage without any potential harm to the challenger in the interim.

<sup>38</sup> See generally Paul R. Verkuil, *Congressional Limitations on Judicial Review of Rules*, 57 TUL. L. REV. 733 (1983). See also, Ronald Levin, *Statutory Time Limits on Judicial Review of Rules: Verkuil Revisited*, 32 CARDOZO L. REV. 2203 (2011).

<sup>39</sup> See *Thunder Basin Coal Co. v. Reich*, 510 U.S. 200 (1994) (mine safety regulation may not be challenged in advance of an administrative enforcement action by the Labor Department because of the opportunity to defend in the comprehensive administrative adjudication system presided over by the Federal Mine Safety and Health Review Commission).

<sup>40</sup> David Douglas Spencer, Note, *The Duty to Participate in Agency Rulemaking*, 54 GEO. WASH. L. REV. 628 (1986). He wrote after another commentator had extolled the virtues of exhaustion generally and had supported denying the right of judicial review to a party who had failed to participate in rulemaking, suggesting that such parties could petition the agency to institute a new rulemaking proceeding and thereby obtain review. See Marcia R. Gelpe, *Exhaustion of Administrative Remedies: Lessons from Environmental Cases*, 53 GEO. WASH. L. REV. 1, 14–15, 34 (1984).

<sup>41</sup> Funk, *supra* note 5 at 18.

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this issue, suggesting that, while issue exhaustion might make sense in some rulemaking challenges, the “cases conspicuously lack discussion of whether, when, why, or how exhaustion doctrine developed in the context of adjudication should be applied to rulemaking.”<sup>42</sup> Gabriel Markoff’s recent useful survey of Clean Air Act rulemaking challenges found that, at least under that Act, which appears to contain one of only two explicit statutory issue exhaustion requirements for rulemaking challenges, the D.C. Circuit has applied it in 80% of the cases in which the government raised it as a defense.<sup>43</sup>

As noted above, there are numerous statutes containing more generic issue exhaustion requirements, or ones applying to agency orders. But there are few statutes that contain explicit statutory issue exhaustion requirement for rulemaking challenges—I have found only two—the Clean Air Act<sup>44</sup> and Securities Act of 1934.<sup>45</sup> And, of course, there are many other agency statutes that lack any such provision. Courts have not done a good job of sorting through these distinctions. As Professor Funk notes, “Unfortunately, some courts have ignored the specific statutory origin for [issue exhaustion] and have applied a similar exhaustion requirement in cases totally unrelated to that statute, while citing cases involving application of that statute.”<sup>46</sup>

The upshot is that, as explained below, courts seem to be increasingly applying issue exhaustion principles to the judicial review of informal rulemaking, even though the doctrine was born in the adjudication context, and even though the Supreme Court has eschewed it in the informal adjudication context of social security disability claims.

As the American Bar Association Administrative Law Section’s “Blackletter Statement” states:

Courts enforce such issue exhaustion more stringently where the parties are expected to develop the issue in an adversarial proceeding than in circumstances in which they review the results of nonadversarial, informal hearings

Some courts have also applied the issue-exhaustion doctrine to the notice-and-comment rulemaking process. Under this approach, a party that fails to raise an objection to a rule during notice and comment may not press that objection on

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<sup>42</sup> GELLHORN AND BYSE’S CASEBOOK, *supra* note 4, at 1246.

<sup>43</sup> Gabriel H. Markoff, Note, *The Invisible Barrier: Issue Exhaustion as a Threat to Pluralism in Administrative Rulemaking*, 90 TEX. L. REV. 1065, 1079–83 (2012).

<sup>44</sup> 42 U.S.C. § 7607(d)(7)(B) (“Only an objection to a rule or procedure which was raised with reasonable specificity during the period for public comment (including any public hearing) may be raised during judicial review.”).

<sup>45</sup> 15 U.S.C. § 78y(c)(1) (“No objection to an order or rule of the Commission, for which review is sought under this section, may be considered by the court unless it was urged before the Commission or there was reasonable ground for failure to do so.”). While not a statute specifically addressing issue exhaustion, the Atomic Energy Act, 42 U.S.C. § 2239, (covering both licensing and issuance of rules governing licensing) in combination with the Hobbs Act, 28 U.S.C. § 2344, has been read to limit judicial review to “parties” in the underlying proceeding, even when that proceeding was a rulemaking. See *Gage v. AEC*, 479 F.2d 1214, 1217–19 (D.C. Cir. 1973), discussed text at notes 54–60, *infra*. In a sense, this is closer to remedy exhaustion because court litigant must first be a party in the agency proceeding.

<sup>46</sup> Funk, *supra* note 5 at 17.

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direct judicial review of the rule unless (1) another party made the objection or (2) the agency’s decision [sic] indicates that it did in fact consider the issue.<sup>47</sup>

### The Relevance of *Darby v. Cisneros*

Does the APA have anything to say about this issue? Section 704, as construed by the Supreme Court in *Darby v. Cisneros*,<sup>48</sup> seems to preclude the application of common law exhaustion principles to agency rulemaking “unless either a statute requires it or an agency has required it by rule and provided that the rule would be inoperative pending its reconsideration.”<sup>49</sup> In *Darby*, in the context of a review of an adjudicative order by the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Supreme Court held that § 704 of the APA superseded the common law prudential (or equitable) doctrine of exhaustion of administrative remedies—at least in the context of APA cases. It found that section precludes exhaustion unless either another statute requires it or the agency has required some form of administrative appeal or reconsideration by rule and provided that meanwhile the agency action would be inoperative pending its reconsideration.

As Professor Funk has commented, “If one applies Section 704 faithfully with the Supreme Court’s guidance in *Darby*, there could be no exhaustion required as a precondition of judicial review of rulemaking unless either a statute requires it (as in Section 405(a) of the Communications Act of 1934) or an agency has required it by rule and provided that the rule would be inoperative pending its reconsideration.”<sup>50</sup>

But if § 704, as construed by *Darby*, applies to rulemaking, what would that mean? That case involved remedy exhaustion, and after *Darby* most agencies made sure they had issued a procedural rule that required parties to file an administrative appeal in agency adjudications before seeking judicial review. To meet the § 704 requirements, that rule also had to provide that the agency action “meanwhile is inoperative.” That does not pose a problem in the adjudication context because agency heads typically want a chance to review first-level decisions before they might be appealed to court. But in the rulemaking context, it is doubtful, even nonsensical, that agencies would want to issue such a procedural rule. Agencies would not want to delay the effectiveness of their hard-earned rule while opponents crafted a petition for reconsideration, potentially with new arguments.

After raising the question, Professor Funk, in describing *Darby* as a remedy exhaustion case arising in the context of administrative adjudication, notes that, “*Darby*, of course, did not address issue exhaustion, and because the question of issue exhaustion only arises when

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<sup>47</sup> AM. BAR ASS’N, SECTION OF ADMIN. L. & REG PRACTICE, A BLACKLETTER STATEMENT OF FEDERAL ADMINISTRATIVE LAW 53–54 (2d ed.) (2013).

<sup>48</sup> 509 U.S. 237 (1993).

<sup>49</sup> Funk, *supra* note 5, at 18 (quoting 5 U.S.C. § 704).

<sup>50</sup> *Id.* See also John F. Duffy, *Administrative Common Law in Judicial Review*, 77 Tex. L. Rev. 113, 162 (1998). (“the reasoning of *Darby*—focusing on the APA’s text and statutory structure—indicates that the [common-law exhaustion doctrine] has no proper place” in APA cases).

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exhaustion of administrative remedies is required and satisfied, it is doubtful that *Darby* changes the legal landscape of issue exhaustion.”<sup>51</sup>

I agree that *Darby* should not be read as bearing on issue exhaustion in rulemaking, but no court has really analyzed this question in any detail.<sup>52</sup>

### The Early Application of Issue Exhaustion in Rulemaking Cases by the D.C. Circuit.

Not surprisingly, because issue exhaustion is an outgrowth of remedy exhaustion, which originated in the context of review of administrative adjudications, there appear to be few applications of it in the context of review of agency rulemakings until the 1970s. In that decade, the passage of numerous regulatory statutes with important rulemaking provisions led to an upsurge of rules and challenges to such rules in court, especially in the D.C. Circuit which hears most such cases.<sup>53</sup>

The D.C. Circuit began to raise issue exhaustion in the context of rulemaking in 1973 with two cases, (1) *Gage v. AEC*, involving an Atomic Energy Act rulemaking that was conducted under a quasi-adjudicative procedural statute,<sup>54</sup> and (2) some overlooked dicta in its famous *Portland Cement* opinion involving a challenge to a rule issued by the Environmental Protection Agency (“EPA”) under the Clean Air Act.<sup>55</sup>

*Gage* involved a rulemaking to implement the newly enacted National Environmental Policy Act (“NEPA”)<sup>56</sup> that was conducted under the Atomic Energy Act’s provisions (originally designed for adjudications) that entitled interested persons to become “parties” and have a “hearing” on their objections,<sup>57</sup> and also that allowed direct judicial review (under the Hobbs Act) only by such “parties.”<sup>58</sup> In denying a party who had declined to participate in the rulemaking the right to invoke the court’s jurisdiction, Judge Wilkey recognized that there was some incongruity in using these party designation procedures in rulemaking, but found that it made sense in cases involving direct review of rules to limit judicial review to persons who had participated in the rulemaking, if only to ensure a better record for judicial review:

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<sup>51</sup> *Id.* at 12. Professor Levin also points out that the APA provision being construed in *Darby* was § 704, which is a finality provision, and that issue exhaustion “has no equivalency whatsoever with the ‘final agency action’ principle.” Letter from Ron Levin to author (Feb. 6, 2015) at 2.

<sup>52</sup> See the brief treatment by the court in *National Mining Ass’n v. Department of Labor*, *supra* note 123.

<sup>53</sup> For an illuminating history of rulemaking’s “collision” “with vigorous judicial review” in the D.C. Circuit, see Reuel Schiller, *Rulemaking’s Promise: Administrative Law and Legal Culture in the 1960s and 1970s*, 53 ADMIN. L. REV. 1139, 1141 (2001).

<sup>54</sup> 479 F.2d 1214, 1217–19 (D.C. Cir. 1973).

<sup>55</sup> *Portland Cement Ass’n v. Ruckelshaus*, 486 F.2d 375 (D.C. Cir. 1973).

<sup>56</sup> Pub. L. No. 91–190, § 2, Jan. 1, 1970, 83 Stat. 852, codified at 42 U.S.C. §§ 4321–4347d.

<sup>57</sup> *Gage*, 479 F.2d at 1217 (citing 42 U.S.C. § 2239).

<sup>58</sup> *Id.* at 1218 (citing 28 U.S.C. § 2344).

Unlike requests for review of adjudicative orders, petitions for “direct” review of rule-promulgating orders demand judicial scrutiny of regulations which may well not have been applied in a concrete case. Unlike adjudication, rule-making may proceed in the absence of those who may ultimately have a right to complain of the application of the regulations which result. Unlike those subject to adjudicative orders, persons who may ultimately be affected by regulations may have legitimate grounds for deciding not to join in the formulation of the rules. For example, the ultimate impact, or even the likelihood of enforcement, of proposed rules may be far from clear. Standing aside may not foreclose all opportunity to propose new regulations or to challenge the validity of the promulgated regulations when they are applied to such a person’s detriment in a concrete case; but such abstinence will probably preclude the compilation of a record adequate for judicial review of the specific claims he has reserved. That is what happened in this case—and the effect of this void in the record on our ability to analyze petitioners’ major claim highlights the flaw in their petition for relief from this court.<sup>59</sup>

Thus, Judge Wilkey also recognized that some interested persons may not choose to, or be able to, participate in rulemakings, but nevertheless he was concerned that such non-participation could lead to a record that would be inadequate for judicial review of claims made for the first time in court. Notwithstanding this conclusion, *Gage* is rarely cited in later cases applying issue exhaustion to notice-and-comment rulemaking, probably because the rulemaking procedures used by the AEC were quasi-adjudicative and different from the normal notice-and-comment rulemaking process. Moreover, Judge Wilkey’s concern about the adequacy of the rulemaking record would have little application where the challenge was based on constitutional or procedural arguments or to purely legal statutory challenges.<sup>60</sup> And there is an implication in the passage quoted above that non-participants could raise any issue in challenging a rule at the enforcement stage.

*Portland Cement*, on the other hand, is still one of the most oft-cited rulemaking cases—most famous for Judge Leventhal’s groundbreaking pronouncement that agencies must disclose significant related studies or other relevant information in their possession at the time of the notice of proposed rulemaking.<sup>61</sup> But what is often forgotten is that he followed this principle with a corollary: “Conversely, challenges to standards must be limited to points made by petitioners in agency proceedings. To entertain comments made for the first time before this court would be destructive of a meaningful administrative process.”<sup>62</sup> This principle was not

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<sup>59</sup> *Id.* at 1218–19.

<sup>60</sup> The challengers’ arguments in *Gage* were that the agency’s NEPA regulations did not go far enough in failing to bar all land acquisitions prior to the granting of a permit to construct a nuclear power plant. The court commented that, “[a]n extensive factual record would clearly be required in order to judge whether or not the present regulations implement the policies of NEPA ‘to the fullest extent possible.’” *Id.* at 1219.

<sup>61</sup> *Id.* at 394 (“In order that rule-making proceedings to determine standards be conducted in orderly fashion, information should generally be disclosed as to the basis of a proposed rule at the time of issuance.”).

<sup>62</sup> *Id.*

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enforced against the particular challengers in that case because EPA’s disclosure failings had necessitated a remand anyway, and the court directed EPA to “consider the contentions presented in briefs to this court, though not previously raised, unless EPA explains why they are not material.”<sup>63</sup> Shortly after that case, the Congress amended the Clean Air Act to specifically require persons to raise issues in the agency rulemaking before they can seek judicial review of those issues.<sup>64</sup>

### A Contemporaneous Development—Issue Exhaustion in NEPA Cases

The issue exhaustion doctrine has also frequently arisen in the context of litigation over the adequacy of an agency environmental impact statement (“EIS”) prepared under NEPA. The origin dates back to the language from *Portland Cement* which was quoted approvingly by the Supreme Court in connection with the NEPA aspect of *Vermont Yankee*,<sup>65</sup> which was in turn invoked by the Court in *Dep’t of Transportation v. Public Citizen*,<sup>66</sup> in ruling that a challenger forfeited particular objections to the EIS by failing to raise them in the available public comment process. The issue in *Public Citizen* was whether NEPA and the Clean Air Act required the Department to evaluate the environmental effects of cross-border operations of Mexican-domiciled motor carriers, when promulgating regulations that would allow such operations. The Court disallowed certain challenges to the preliminary EIS [environmental assessment or “EA”] based on issue exhaustion:

What is not properly before us, despite respondents’ argument to the contrary, [. . .] is any challenge to the EA due to its failure properly to consider possible alternatives to the proposed order[. . . .] Persons challenging an agency’s compliance with NEPA must “structure their participation so that it . . . alerts the agency to the [parties’] position and contentions,” in order to allow the agency to give the issue meaningful consideration. [Citing *Vermont Yankee*, 435 U.S. at 553]. None of the respondents identified in their comments any rulemaking alternatives beyond those evaluated in the EA and none urged [the Department] to consider alternatives. Because respondents did not raise these particular objections to the EA, [the Department] was not given the opportunity to examine any proposed alternatives to determine if they were reasonably available.

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<sup>63</sup> *Id.* at 394–95.

<sup>64</sup> See Clean Air Act Amendments of 1977, Pub. L. No. 95–95, 91 Stat. 685, 775, § 305(a) (adding subsection (d)), codified at 42 U.S.C. § 7607(d)(7)(B); for text of provision see *supra* note 42. The SEC provision, covering both orders and rules, also quoted in note 43, *supra*, was enacted in 1975, Pub. L. No. 94–29, 89 Stat. 97, 159 § 20, but I have found no cases involving rulemaking under this provision.

<sup>65</sup> *Vt. Yankee Nuclear Power Corp. v. Nat. Res. Def. Council*, 435 U.S. 519, 553–554 (“Indeed, administrative proceedings should not be a game or a forum to engage in unjustified obstructionism by making cryptic and obscure reference to matters that ‘ought to be’ considered and then, after failing to do more to bring the matter to the agency’s attention, seeking to have that agency determination vacated on the ground that the agency failed to consider matters ‘forcefully presented.’) (citing *Portland Cement*, 486 F.2d at 394).

<sup>66</sup> 541 U.S. 752 (2004).

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Respondents have therefore forfeited any objection to the EA on the ground that it failed adequately to discuss potential alternatives to the proposed action.<sup>67</sup>

The Court did acknowledge that “Admittedly, the agency bears the primary responsibility to ensure that it complies with NEPA, . . . and an EA’s or an EIS’ flaws might be so obvious that there is no need for a commentator to point them out specifically in order to preserve its ability to challenge a proposed action.”<sup>68</sup> The Ninth Circuit has since defined the “so obvious standard” as a variant of the “futility exception” where the agency has “independent knowledge of issues that concern NEPA plaintiffs.”<sup>69</sup> In a more recent NEPA case, that circuit cited its “general rule” that “we will not consider issues not presented before an administrative proceeding at the appropriate time.”<sup>70</sup> But then it went on to add:

However, we have repeatedly held that the exhaustion requirement should be interpreted broadly. Plaintiffs fulfill the requirement if their appeal “provided sufficient notice to the [agency] to afford it the opportunity to rectify the violations that the plaintiffs alleged.” Plaintiffs need not state their claims in precise legal terms, and need only raise an issue “with sufficient clarity to allow the decision maker to understand and rule on the issue raised, but there is no bright-line standard as to when this requirement has been met.”<sup>71</sup>

While it is true that NEPA procedures do call for notice to the public and solicitation of information from the public,<sup>72</sup> the analogy to notice-and-comment rulemaking is somewhat

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<sup>67</sup> *Dep’t of Transportation v. Public Citizen*, 541 U.S. 752, 764–65 (2004).

<sup>68</sup> *Id.* at 765.

<sup>69</sup> *Ilio’ulaokalani Coal. v. Rumsfeld*, 464 F.3d 1083, 1093 (9th Cir. 2006) (quoting *Public Citizen*, 541 U.S. 752, 765 (2004)). In distinguishing *Public Citizen* and allowing the procedural challenge to the EIS in *Ilio’ulaokalani Coalition*, the court characterized the rationale of *Vermont Yankee* and *Public Citizen* as applying “in those instances in which an interested party suggests that certain factors be included in the agency analysis but later refuses the agency’s request for assistance in exploring that party’s contentions.” *Id.* at 1092 (quoting *Kunaknana v. Clark*, 742 F.2d 1145, 1148 (9th Cir.1984)). *But see* *Forest Guardians v. U.S. Forest Serv.*, 495 F.3d 1162, 1171 (10th Cir. 2007) (although “a close question,” finding a comment challenging a U.S. Forest Service EIS insufficient to put the agency on notice of a substantial evidence soil standard claim, because the challenger’s placement of its comment relating to soil erosion in a section of its comment titled “Impacts to Water Quality” and not the section titled “Unstable Soils”); *Silverton Snowmobile Club v. U.S. Forest Serv.*, 433 F.3d 772, 783 (10th Cir. 2006) (indicating that arguments not raised before the agency during its compliance with NEPA’s procedural requirements are waived).

<sup>70</sup> *Nat’l Parks & Conservation Ass’n v. BLM*, 606 F.3d 1058, 1065 (9th Cir.2010) (citing *Marathon Oil Co. v. United States*, 807 F.2d 759, 767–68 (9th Cir.1986)). I note that *Marathon* and the cases it relied on were all cases of agency adjudication.

<sup>71</sup> *Id.* (citations omitted)

<sup>72</sup> Council of Env’tl. Quality regulations, 40 C.F.R. § 1506.6. Note that issue exhaustion issues can readily come up in other natural resources planning contexts, such as approvals of timber sales on national forest land, see *Native Ecosystems Council v. Dombeck*, 304 F.3d 886 (9th Cir. 2002); approval of mines, *Idaho Sporting Cong. v. Rittenhouse*, 305 F.3d 957, 965 (9th Cir. 2002), and review of cancellation of grazing permits, *Buckingham v. Sec’y of the USDA*, 603 F.3d 1073, 1080–81 (9th Cir. 2010). These Ninth Circuit cases are collected in a very thoughtful NEPA issue exhaustion opinion in *Oregon Natural Desert Ass’n v. McDaniel*, 751 F. Supp. 2d 1151 (D. Or. 2011).

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limited, because the comment process is less regularized and the substantive adequacy of agency compliance with NEPA is subject to a more limited scope of review.<sup>73</sup> Nevertheless, because *Public Citizen* was decided after *Sims*, some courts have viewed it as removing *Sims* as an obstacle to applying the issue exhaustion doctrine in the context of EIS challenges.<sup>74</sup>

### General Issue Exhaustion Statutes and Judicially Developed Exceptions—the WATCH Case

As mentioned above, when the D.C. Circuit decided *Gage* and *Portland Cement*, there were already some statutes on the books, such as section 405(a) of the Communications Act, that generally required challengers to agency actions to first raise the issue with the agency in the form of a petition for rehearing.<sup>75</sup> In 1983, Judge Wald thoroughly examined the application of this provision to a licensing challenge in *Washington Ass'n for Television and Children* (“WATCH”) v. FCC.<sup>76</sup> In this case a watchdog group challenged the Federal Communications Commission’s (“FCC”) renewal of licenses of three television stations in Washington, D.C. on the grounds that the stations had failed to provide any regularly scheduled weekday children’s programs, claiming that this was in contravention of the Commission’s policy. More specifically, WATCH raised two issues in its petition to the D.C. Circuit. The first was the agency’s approval of the license renewals without holding a hearing on the stations’ failure to carry regularly scheduled children’s programming, as demanded by the group in its petition to deny. This issue was properly raised with the agency, but the FCC had explained in denying the hearing “that although licensees had a duty to provide weekday children’s programming, they had no duty to provide it on a *regularly scheduled basis*.”<sup>77</sup> The FCC relied on the fact that its policy statement on children’s programming did not require such regular programming (a determination ultimately upheld by the D.C. Circuit).<sup>78</sup> However, the petition for judicial review also asked the court to review a second issue—the “general inadequacy” of the stations’ children’s programming—an argument that had not been presented to the Commission first.<sup>79</sup>

A major issue in this case was whether, although the statutory language admitted of no exceptions, the provision should be treated like other exhaustion cases—subject to exceptions in

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<sup>73</sup> See e.g., *High Sierra Hikers Ass’n*, 436 F. Supp. 2d 1117, 1149 (E.D. Cal. 2006) (“Judicial review of an agency’s EIS under NEPA is extremely limited.”).

<sup>74</sup> See *id.* at 1147 (specifically disagreeing with the pre-*Public Citizen* NEPA review case of *Vermont Public Interest Research Group v. U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service*, 247 F. Supp. 2d 495, 515–17 (D. Vt. 2002), which relied on *Sims* in finding issue exhaustion inapplicable to the non-adversary context of NEPA proceedings. But see the post-*Public Citizen* case of *Sierra Club v. Bosworth*, 352 F. Supp. 2d 909, 926 (D. Minn. 2005), which agreed with *Vermont Public Interest Group*, albeit without citing *Public Citizen*).

<sup>75</sup> See 47 U.S.C. § 405(a), quoted at page 6 *supra*. This provision continues to be regularly enforced, see *FiberTower Spectrum Holdings, LLC v. FCC*, No. 14–1039 slip. op. at 9 (D.C. Cir. Apr. 3, 2015) (“Because FiberTower failed to present its § 309(j)(4)(B) argument to the Commission, the Commission never had an opportunity to pass on it, and FiberTower thereby failed to exhaust its administrative remedies.”).

<sup>76</sup> 712 F.2d 677 (D.C. Cir. 1983).

<sup>77</sup> *Id.* at 679 (emphasis in original).

<sup>78</sup> *Id.* at 684–85.

<sup>79</sup> *Id.* at 681.

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extenuating circumstances. Judge Wald concluded that it should be, although she went on to hold that none of these circumstances were present in this case.

What was especially interesting about her opinion in this case is that she analyzed how section 405(a) had been applied in prior D.C. Circuit cases. In addressing the blanket provision in the Communications Act, the court stated:

[Our] cases assume that § 405 contains implied exceptions without explaining why. We understand these cases, however, as implicitly interpreting § 405 to codify the judicially-created doctrine of exhaustion of administrative remedies, which permits courts some discretion to waive exhaustion. There is no useful legislative history to confirm or refute this interpretation, but it has the merit of requiring the same degree of exhaustion for the FCC as for other agencies. We adopt that interpretation here and thus construe § 405 to incorporate the traditionally recognized exceptions to the exhaustion doctrine.<sup>80</sup>

Judge Wald cited similar general issue exhaustion statutes that also lacked specific exceptions such as the Securities Act of 1933 (15 U.S.C. § 77i(a)), along with others that did allow some exceptions, e.g., Securities Exchange Act of 1934, 15 U.S.C. § 78y(c)(1) (“reasonable ground for failure to do so.”), Fair Labor Standards Act, 29 U.S.C. § 210(a) (same), Public Utility Holding Company Act, 15 U.S.C. § 79x(a) (same), National Labor Relations Act, 29 U.S.C. § 160(e) (“extraordinary circumstances”),<sup>81</sup> and then commented:

The very senselessness of these differences in language suggests that Congress meant, in all these statutes, merely to codify the judicial doctrine of exhaustion of administrative remedies. That would explain Congress’ failure to give careful attention to the nuances of language that might, in another context, connote differences in intended meaning.<sup>82</sup>

She then discussed some of the judicially recognized exceptions to the exhaustion requirement, although ultimately the court found that none of these exceptions applied in this case.<sup>83</sup> Among them are:

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<sup>80</sup> 712 F.2d at 681–82 (footnotes omitted). Indeed as to the legislative history, she says,

The main thrust of the provision may have been to ensure that in the mine run of cases, where issues *had* been raised before the agency, a party could obtain judicial review without first petitioning the Commission for rehearing. Early case law had suggested that a petition for rehearing was sometimes a prerequisite to judicial review.

*Id.* at 681 n.5 (emphasis in original).

<sup>81</sup> *Id.* at 682 n.6. All of these statutes remain on the books.

<sup>82</sup> *Id.*

<sup>83</sup> *Id.*

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- (1) issues, that “by their nature could not have been raised before the agency (e.g., a material change in circumstances or a serious impropriety in the administrative process),”<sup>84</sup>
- (2) where the challenged action is “patently in excess of [the agency’s] authority,”<sup>85</sup>
- (3) where it would have been futile to raise before the agency,<sup>86</sup>
- (4) where the agency has in fact considered the issue,<sup>87</sup>
- (5) where “the obvious result would be a plain miscarriage of justice.”<sup>88</sup>

*WATCH*’s issue exhaustion analysis was applied in the context of a challenge to a licensing order, not to a challenge of the underlying rule, much less of a pre-enforcement challenge to a rule. Indeed most of the dozen cases construing section 405(a) cited by Judge Wald<sup>89</sup> also involved individual licensing or application cases. But there was a sprinkling of FCC rulemaking cases. For example, in *Gross v. FCC*,<sup>90</sup> the court reviewed the constitutionality of a rule banning the transmission of commercial messages by amateur radio stations, but barred petitioners from raising “the sundry other grounds upon which petitioners seek for the first time on the instant petition to review to challenge.”<sup>91</sup> In *American Radio Relay League, Inc. v. FCC*,<sup>92</sup> the court, in reviewing a substantive challenge to a rule limiting the manufacture and sale of certain amplifiers used by citizens band operators, brushed aside in a footnote the challenger’s contention that the Commission did not comply with the APA’s rulemaking procedures because that argument had not been made before the Commission.<sup>93</sup> And finally, *United States v. FCC*<sup>94</sup> involved a challenge to an FCC ratemaking involving AT&T (technically a rulemaking under the APA) brought by other federal agencies who argued in court that the rate of return granted to the company was unsupported. The court upheld the rate, pointing out, after citing section 405(a), that the FCC had sought comments on the rate, and the

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<sup>84</sup> *Id.* at 682 (citing *Greater Boston Television Corp. v. FCC*, 463 F.2d 268, 283-84 (D.C. Cir. 1971) (reviewing cases)).

<sup>85</sup> *Id.* (quoting *Detroit Edison Co. v. NLRB*, 440 U.S. 301, 312 n.10 (1979)). The court also noted a disagreement among the commentators as to whether a party should be required to raise a jurisdictional challenge with the agency first. *Id.* at 682 n.8.

<sup>86</sup> *Id.* at 682. But the court cautioned that “Futility should not lightly be presumed, however.” *Id.* at 682 n.9.

<sup>87</sup> *Id.* at 682 (citing cases where the issue was raised by dissenting commissioners (*Office of Commc’n of the United Church of Christ v. FCC*, 465 F.2d 519, 523–24 (D.C. Cir. 1972)) or by another party (*Buckeye Cablevision, Inc. v. United States*, 438 F.2d 948, 951 (6th Cir. 1971)); *N.Y. State Broadcasters Ass’n v. United States*, 414 F.2d 990, 994 (2d Cir. 1969)). The court then comments: “This exception can be seen as a variant of the futility exception, since it would almost surely be futile for a party to raise an objection already made by someone else.” *Id.* at 682 n.10.

<sup>88</sup> *Id.* at 682 (quoting *Hormel v. Helvering*, 312 U.S. 552, 558 (1941)). These factors are similar to those later propounded by the Supreme Court in *McCarthy v. Madigan*, 503 U.S. 144–148.

<sup>89</sup> *See id.* at 681 n.3 and accompanying text.

<sup>90</sup> 480 F.2d 1288 (2d Cir. 1973).

<sup>91</sup> *Id.* at 1290 n.5.

<sup>92</sup> 617 F.2d 875 (D.C. Cir. 1980).

<sup>93</sup> *Id.* at 879 n.8.

<sup>94</sup> 707 F.2d 610, 619 (D.C. Cir. 1983).

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executive agencies did comment in response to that invitation, but they did not in their response raise any argument even resembling the one made here. Had the government brought what it now contends to be a failure to provide a full explanation to the Commission's attention, the Commission could easily have elaborated to cure any defect.<sup>95</sup>

In another case cited in *WATCH*, where the FCC's *failure to issue* a rule had been challenged by a petition for rehearing, which had been denied, the D.C. Circuit had allowed petitioners to argue for the first time that the FCC had improperly accepted and considered *ex parte* communications in the rulemaking proceedings.<sup>96</sup> The court first chided the petitioner [ACT] for

offer[ing] no justification for its failure to raise the issue of "closed door bargaining" in its petition for rehearing beyond unsupported conclusory assertions that it is "most unlikely" that the Commission would have attempted to cure its "error" had ACT in fact raised the issue in time for the Commission to do so. . . . Such an assertion would be unconvincing in the absence of any concrete indication that reconsideration would have been futile, and, in other circumstances, we would be constrained from entertaining the objection.<sup>97</sup>

Nevertheless, the court allowed the objection to be made:

That objection, however, essentially alleging a denial of administrative due process, raises neither a novel factual issue for which an initial Commission determination is quite clearly both necessary and appropriate, nor a legal issue on which the Commission, and even this court has not already made known its general views to the contrary. Thus, we believe that a thorough airing of the merits of ACT's procedural challenge would not be inappropriate in this case, especially in light of the agency's tentative conclusion of these informal rulemaking proceedings shortly after *ex parte* discussions with regulatee representatives.<sup>98</sup>

This examination of the section 405(a) cases leading up to the D.C. Circuit's decision in *WATCH* shows how the issue exhaustion doctrine had been applied sporadically, but not uniformly—and not as a jurisdictional matter—in rulemaking review cases in the context of an explicit, generally applicable statutory exhaustion provision.

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<sup>95</sup> *Id.*

<sup>96</sup> *Action for Children's Television v. FCC*, 564 F.2d 458 (D.C. Cir. 1977).

<sup>97</sup> *Id.* at 469.

<sup>98</sup> *Id.* The court rejected that procedural challenge, thereby limiting the scope of its earlier decision prohibiting *ex parte* communications in informal rulemaking, *Home Box Office, Inc. v. FCC*, 567 F.2d 9 (D.C. Cir. 1977). It is likely that the court bent over backwards to allow this challenge so as to have an opportunity to limit the scope of *Home Box Office*.

The Increasing Application to Rulemaking Cases

In recent years the issue exhaustion doctrine has grown to cover more and more rulemakings, even where there is no such statutory provision, albeit with some inconsistently applied exceptions. My concern is, while the doctrine has an appropriate place in some rulemaking challenges, that if it becomes as fully entrenched as it appears to be becoming, it could serve as a significant barrier to judicial review of rules, or at least a trap for the unwary. In addition, it may lead the “wary” to feel the need to file “shotgun” comments on rules to preserve their right to seek judicial review.

It is difficult to know how often courts have, without commenting, allowed issues raised in review petitions to be decided even where the challenger had not raised the same issues in rulemaking comments. To some extent, this may depend on whether the government raises this issue as a defense. But as the government succeeds more often in disposing of issues by raising issue exhaustion questions in rulemaking cases, one can expect the government to be more vigilant about raising it. And there are numerous examples of successful defenses on this ground. As Markoff documents, the EPA has succeeded 80% of the time since 1993 in raising the Clean Air Act issue exhaustion provision as a defense in rulemaking cases.<sup>99</sup>

While the post-1977 Clean Air Act cases are unique because they involve the only litigated statutory provision that explicitly covers rulemaking challenges, the D.C. Circuit also decides numerous other rulemaking-review cases involving rules issued by other agencies (or by the EPA) under other statutes that lack the type of provision found in the Clean Air Act. In one case involving a notice-and-comment proceeding (technically a rulemaking of particular applicability) to add hazardous waste sites to the Superfund National Priorities List under the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (“CERCLA”), one of the challengers sought to contend in court for the first time that EPA lacked authority to aggregate sites for NPL listing purposes.<sup>100</sup> The court, per Judge Mikva, disallowed that argument, citing *WATCH*.<sup>101</sup>

Two years later, in *Ohio v. EPA*,<sup>102</sup> the court examined, and mostly upheld, a broader-based EPA rulemaking to amend the National Contingency Plan [NCP] to conform it with CERCLA. A group of states made a number of arguments that the rule was contrary to language in CERCLA, one of which was disallowed because they had not first made the argument to the agency. But in this case, the court made clear that it was so ruling because “[n]either the States *nor any other party* raised” the issue.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> See Markoff, *supra* note 43.

<sup>100</sup> *Linemaster Switch Corp. v. EPA*, 938 F.2d 1299 (D.C. Cir. 1991).

<sup>101</sup> *Id.* at 1308.

<sup>102</sup> 997 F.2d 1520 (D.C. Cir. 1993).

<sup>103</sup> *Id.* at 1529 (emphasis supplied). For similar conclusions, see *City of Portland, Or. v. EPA*, 507 F.3d 706, 710 (D.C. Cir. 2007) (“Because neither [amicus] Walla Walla nor any other party raised this argument before the Agency during the rulemaking process, however, it is waived, and we will not consider it.”) and *Military Toxics Project v. EPA*, 146 F.3d 948, 956–57 (D.C. Cir. 1998) (“We need not reach this challenge on the merits, however, because as the EPA also points out neither the MTP nor anyone else commented during the rulemaking process that

This “any other party” codicil was recognized a year later in *Natural Resources Defense Council v. EPA*,<sup>104</sup> when the court’s description of the *Ohio* case contained this blurb: “(court may excuse one party’s failure to raise an issue in administrative forum where another party pressed and agency in fact considered identical issue).”<sup>105</sup> In that case, NRDC challenged an EPA rule issued under the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (“RCRA”), in which the agency did not include used oils on its listing of covered hazardous wastes, instead explaining that it relied on other federal regulations to prevent any harm from used oil disposal. In court, NRDC wanted to argue that EPA’s reliance on other federal regulations was forbidden by the statutory and regulatory command that EPA list substances that pose a substantial threat when “*improperly managed*.”<sup>106</sup> The court noted that, “Petitioners do not deny that they failed to raise their ‘improper management’ argument before the agency. Instead, they contend that their raising ‘various technical, policy, and legal’ objections to the EPA’s proposed non-listing was sufficient to preserve their right to press their statutory construction argument in court.”<sup>107</sup>

Rejecting that argument, Judge Sentelle, writing for the court, concluded that if it were sufficient for parties to argue that they had made other “technical, policy, or legal” arguments before the agency,

a party could never waive a legal claim as long as the party in fact appeared and argued something before the agency. While there are surely limits on the level of congruity required between a party’s arguments before an administrative agency and the court, respect for agencies’ proper role in the *Chevron* framework requires that the court be particularly careful to ensure that challenges to an agency’s interpretation of its governing statute are first raised in the administrative forum.<sup>108</sup>

This case also illustrates how difficult it can be for a reviewing court to determine if the petitioner had in fact made a similar argument in the rulemaking proceeding. As the court noted:

At oral argument, counsel suggested that petitioners’ comments had at least implied that EPA’s proposal to rely on other federal regulations would be inconsistent with the agency’s duty to consider the “improper management” of used oil. We asked counsel to supply the court with the full text of petitioners’ comments. After examining these comments, however, we are still unable to

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the Rule as drafted would permit the DOD unilaterally to free itself from the strictures imposed by the RCRA. The MTP has thus waived the argument and may not raise it for the first time upon appeal.”).

<sup>104</sup> 25 F.3d 1063 (D.C. Cir. 1994).

<sup>105</sup> *Id.* at 1074.

<sup>106</sup> *Id.* at 1075 (italics in original).

<sup>107</sup> *Id.* at 1074.

<sup>108</sup> *Id.*

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discern any place in which petitioners could fairly be said to have raised this issue of statutory and regulatory construction.<sup>109</sup>

In a non-EPA environmental case, *National Ass'n of Manufacturers v. U.S. Department of the Interior*,<sup>110</sup> NAM also was tripped up by this doctrine. It attempted to argue that models within the Department's CERCLA natural resource damage [NRD] rule were arbitrary and capricious because they failed to evaluate restoration alternatives in terms of the effect they might have on natural resource "services." But the court rejected this line of argument because "NAM failed to raise this argument in the rulemaking proceedings below, and we find no reason to excuse NAM's failure to exhaust its administrative remedies."<sup>111</sup>

In response, NAM made a number of points, including that "the relationship between services and restoration was 'a general point applicable to any NRD assessment,' it 'had been emphasized repeatedly in prior rulemakings,' . . . 'other documents in the record highlighted the services concept,' [and therefore] DOI was given a 'fair opportunity' to consider the issue below."<sup>112</sup>

Taking a hard line, Judge Henderson rejected that argument, "The fact that, buried in hundreds of pages of technical comments NAM submitted, some mention is made of the resource services concept and its relation to compensable values (rather than restoration alternatives) is insufficient to preserve the issue for review on appeal."<sup>113</sup>

These environmental cases demonstrate the potency of the issue exhaustion doctrine (sometimes referred to as a "waiver" rule) and also provide some basis for the judicial attitude that gives rise to it. As the court stated in *Ohio v. EPA*:

[T]he waiver doctrine is also concerned with notions of agency autonomy and judicial efficiency. The doctrine promotes agency autonomy by according the agency an opportunity to discover and correct its own errors before judicial review occurs. Judicial efficiency is served because issues that are raised before the agency might be resolved without the need for judicial intervention. The efficiency concern is especially germane to this challenge to the NCP, involving an extremely complex rulemaking in which a multitude of issues might be raised for the first time before this court in the absence of the waiver doctrine.<sup>114</sup>

The doctrine has also been justified as sparing the agency from the burden of having to respond to vague comments. As Judge Randolph wrote in a Clean Air Act case:

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<sup>109</sup> *Id.* at 1074 n.7.

<sup>110</sup> 134 F.3d 1095 (D.C. Cir. 1998).

<sup>111</sup> *Id.* at 1111.

<sup>112</sup> *Id.*

<sup>113</sup> *Id.*

<sup>114</sup> 997 F.2d 1520, 1528–29 (D.C. Cir. 1991).

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A citation to the section of the rule or a description of it may be all that is needed. If a comment lacking even that low level of specificity sufficed, the agency would be subjected to verbal traps. Whenever the agency failed to detect an obscure criticism of one aspect of its proposal, the petitioner could claim not only that it had complied with Section 307 but also that the agency acted arbitrarily because it never responded to the comment. Rulemaking proceedings and the legal doctrines that have grown up around them are intricate and cumbersome enough. Agency officials should not have to wade through reams of documents searching for “‘implied’ challenges.”<sup>115</sup>

This argument has some appeal, especially in complex rulemakings such as those involved in CERCLA cases, where expedition is of particular concern and the overall program to prioritize the clean-up of particular toxic waste sites should not be hamstrung by challenges at every decision point.<sup>116</sup> On the other hand, while the doctrine might spare the courts from new arguments and the agencies from vague comments, it might also stimulate more specific “shotgun” comments to the agency as a defense mechanism.<sup>117</sup> Nor does the doctrine seem well suited for certain challenges. It seems less necessary or even useful for challenging parties to raise constitutional, procedural, or statutory authority questions to the agency before raising them in court. A rulemaking record is less necessary in such cases and it is more likely that it would be futile to make such arguments to the agency. Finally, even in fact-based challenges, the doctrine should not be applied in cases where the agency has adequate notice or knowledge of the factual issues raised by the challenger.

### What about *Sims v. Apfel*?

Policy arguments aside, one might have thought that the Supreme Court’s refusal to apply the doctrine to Social Security “informal” adjudication in the 2000 decision of *Sims v. Apfel*, might have arrested this trend of applying it to the more informal and non-adversarial rulemaking context.

In 2004, the Ninth Circuit addressed this issue saying, “[t]he Court’s decision [in *Sims*] turned on the unique nature of Social Security benefit proceedings and offers no guidance relevant to rulemaking.”<sup>118</sup> It then went on to apply issue exhaustion in a rulemaking context. However more recently it did apply the *Sims* rationale to a Surface Transportation Board (“STB”) exemption proceeding (which it denominated a rulemaking), on the grounds that “the STB’s

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<sup>115</sup> *Natural Res. Def. Council v. EPA*, 559 F.3d 561, 564 (D.C. Cir. 2009).

<sup>116</sup> See generally, Lucia Ann Silecchia, *Note, Judicial Review of CERCLA Cleanup Procedures: Striking a Balance to Prevent Irreparable Harm*, 20 HARV. ENVTL. L. REV. 339 (1996)

<sup>117</sup> Markoff also argues that doctrine might result in a less “diverse, pluralistic array of parties represented” in post-rulemaking settlement discussions taking place in the judicial review phase because less well-financed interests are less able to participate in rulemakings. Markoff, *supra* note 43, at 1083–85. But without gainsaying that such settlement discussions are a key aspect of ultimate rule implementation, wouldn’t this concern more give such groups a greater incentive to file extensive comments more proactively in order not to lose their seat at the negotiating table?

<sup>118</sup> *Universal Health Servs., Inc. v. Thompson*, 363 F.3d 1013, 1020 (9th Cir. 2004).

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procedures were informal and provided no notice to interested parties that to later challenge the STB's decision one must submit comments during the exemption process. In other cases, the STB, or its predecessor the ICC, explicitly requested public comment on exemptions."<sup>119</sup>

The D.C. Circuit was presented with this argument in 2005 in the case of *Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety v. Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration* involving a challenge to a safety rule applying to trucking and bus companies.<sup>120</sup> The petitioner in the case raised several issues that it had not made in its comments to the agency in support of its claim that the agency had acted arbitrarily and capriciously. The government maintained that the petitioner had "waived" these arguments, but petitioner cited *Sims* for the proposition that in this kind of informal rulemaking proceeding, "there can be no 'waiver.'"<sup>121</sup>

Judge Edwards for the unanimous panel agreed that "*Sims* indicates that this administrative-waiver doctrine does not represent an ironclad rule. And, as a general matter, a party's presentation of issues during a rulemaking proceeding is not a *jurisdictional* prerequisite to judicial review."<sup>122</sup> He acknowledged that petitioner's argument that "Rulemakings are classic examples of non-adversarial administrative proceedings" was "not unreasonable, because there appears to be no statute or regulation compelling exhaustion in advance of judicial review, and no argument has been made analogizing the agency's rulemaking to adjudication."<sup>123</sup>

However, he pointed to three D.C. Circuit cases, post-dating *Sims*, that had continued to apply the rule in rulemaking-review cases. In two of those cases the court failed to address *Sims*.<sup>124</sup> But in the third case, *National Mining Ass'n v. Department of Labor*,<sup>125</sup> involving a challenge to the Department of Labor's regulations under the Black Lung Benefits Act, the court, in a one-line dismissive conclusion, found *Sims* "inapplicable, for it addresses issue exhaustion, not issue waiver."<sup>126</sup> That case also dealt summarily, dismissing its impact on the issue exhaustion doctrine as "wholly inapposite" because it "addresses exhaustion of remedies, not waiver of claims."<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> *Alaska Survival v. Surface Transp. Bd.*, 705 F.3d 1073, (9th Cir. 2013).

<sup>120</sup> 429 F.3d 1136 (D.C. Cir. 2005).

<sup>121</sup> *Id.* at 1148.

<sup>122</sup> *Id.* (emphasis in original).

<sup>123</sup> *Id.* at 1149.

<sup>124</sup> *Id.* (citing *Appalachian Power Co. v. EPA*, 251 F.3d 1026 (D.C. Cir. 2001) and *Nat'l Wildlife Fed'n v. EPA*, 286 F.3d 554 (D.C. Cir. 2002)). However, both cases cited only pre-*Sims* precedent.

<sup>125</sup> 292 F.3d 849 (D.C. Cir. 2002).

<sup>126</sup> *Id.* at 874. It similarly found *Darby* "wholly inapposite" because it "addresses exhaustion of remedies, not waiver of claims." *Id.* (citing *Nat'l Wildlife Fed'n*, 286 F.3d at 562).

<sup>127</sup> *Id.* at 874 (citing *Nat'l Wildlife Fed'n v. EPA*, 286 F.3d 554, 562 (D.C. Cir. 2002)).

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To his credit, Judge Edwards blanched at this distinction: “The distinction between ‘issue exhaustion’ and ‘issue waiver’ is illusive, to say the least. Indeed, both terms appear in the case law without apparent distinction, and they are sometimes treated as if synonymous.”<sup>128</sup>

In the end, Judge Edwards accepted *National Mining Association’s* conclusion anyway, for two reasons:

First, the courts are not authorized to second-guess agency rulemaking decisions; rather, the role of the court is to determine whether the agency’s decision is arbitrary and capricious for want of reasoned decisionmaking . . . . Therefore, it is unsurprising that parties rarely are allowed to seek “review” of a substantive claim that has never even been presented to the agency for its consideration. Second, as noted above, “[s]imple fairness . . . requires as a general rule that courts should not topple over administrative decisions unless the administrative body . . . has erred against objection made at the time appropriate under its practice.” *L.A. Tucker Truck Lines*.<sup>129</sup>

The court’s reference to “simple fairness” makes a legitimate point, but does not go very far in identifying the specific circumstances when issue exhaustion is most appropriate, especially in a challenge to a rulemaking. However, Judge Edwards’ first argument that arbitrary-and-capricious challenges should implicate application of doctrine is helpful, and points to the possibility of applying the issue exhaustion doctrine differently in rulemaking cases depending upon the type of challenge being made in court. This idea is discussed further below.

### Other Circuits

Several other circuits have now joined the D.C. Circuit in applying the issue exhaustion doctrine in rulemaking cases, most of them, but not all in environmental cases. Conspicuously, after originally strongly rejecting the doctrine, the Fifth Circuit seems to be having second thoughts. In its 1981 decision in *City of Seabrook, Texas v. EPA*,<sup>130</sup> the court squarely rejected EPA’s claim that a petitioner’s failure to object to a conditional State Implementation Plan (“SIP”) approval during the notice-and-comment procedure prevented it from challenging the action in court:

The rule urged by EPA would require everyone who wishes to protect himself from arbitrary agency action not only to become a faithful reader of the notices of proposed rulemaking published each day in the *Federal Register*, but a psychic able to predict the possible changes that could be made in the proposal when the rule is finally promulgated. This is a fate this court will impose on no one.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> 429 F.3d 1149 (footnote omitted).

<sup>129</sup> *Id.* at 1149 (second ellipsis in original; citations omitted).

<sup>130</sup> 659 F.2d 1349 (5th Cir.1981).

<sup>131</sup> *Id.* at 1360–61 (footnote omitted).

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Moreover, the court drew a strong distinction between applying the issue exhaustion doctrine in rulemaking and doing so in cases such as *L.A. Tucker Truck Lines*, which involved appeals by a party to an essentially adversarial administrative proceeding, where a hearing was held and evidence was received.<sup>132</sup>

The Fifth Circuit explicitly reaffirmed the *Seabrook* decision in 1988, in *American Forest & Paper Ass'n v. EPA*,<sup>133</sup> but in a 1998 case the court went the other way. In *Texas Oil & Gas Ass'n v. United States EPA*,<sup>134</sup> a challenge to EPA new source performance standards under the Clean Water Act, in a footnote, and without even acknowledging the circuit precedents, the court applied issue exhaustion to several challenges, invoking only the same *L.A. Tucker Truck Lines* case that had been explicitly disavowed in the *Seabrook* case.<sup>135</sup> Then in 2003, in *BCCA Appeal Group v. EPA*,<sup>136</sup> another panel with an unusual make-up<sup>137</sup> distinguished *Seabrook* and *American Forest & Paper Ass'n* and followed *Texas Oil and Gas*. In so doing, this panel recognized the conflict, but after citing a number of other cases, none of which involved rulemaking, it said only, “Because the present case is distinguishable from *Seabrook* on the law and the facts, the court need not resolve the conflict in the circuit at this time. Rather, the court finds *Texas Oil & Gas* controlling here.”<sup>138</sup> The Fifth Circuit’s departure from its earlier view, thus, is quite unsatisfying.

The Ninth Circuit has applied issue exhaustion in the context of an HHS Medicare reimbursement ratemaking proceeding<sup>139</sup> and an EPA rulemaking approving fuel standards set by a revised Nevada SIP.<sup>140</sup> However, more definitively, in a case considering challenges to a Bonneville Power Administration (“BPA”) settlement with investor-owned utilities, the court noted:

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<sup>132</sup> *Id.* at 1361 n.17.

<sup>133</sup> *Am. Forest & Paper Ass'n v. EPA*, 137 F.3d 291, 295 (5th Cir. 1998).

<sup>134</sup> 161 F.3d 923 (5th Cir. 1998).

<sup>135</sup> 161 F.3d at 933 n. 7.

<sup>136</sup> 355 F.3d 817 (5th Cir. 2003).

<sup>137</sup> Apparently this was a panel of two, consisting of Judge Davis and a Court of International Trade Judge sitting by designation.

<sup>138</sup> 355 F.3d at 829 n.10. Judge Stephen Williams has recently recounted this set of Fifth Circuit cases in an interesting concurring opinion. *Koretoff v. Vilsack*, 707 F.3d 394, 399 n.1 (D.C. Cir. 2013) (Williams, J., concurring) (describing the conflict as “apparently not resolved,” while acknowledging that “*Seabrook’s* . . . fate has wobbled”). Judge Williams’ views on the doctrine’s application to rulemaking cases, expressed in that concurrence, are discussed text at notes 178–97, *infra*.

<sup>139</sup> *Universal Health Servs., Inc. v. Thompson*, 363 F.3d 1013, 1020 n.3 (9th Cir. 2004).

<sup>140</sup> *Exxon Mobil Corp. v. EPA*, 217 F.3d 1246 (9th Cir. 2000). Note that the only circuit precedent cited in this case involved the review of a Department of Labor formal adjudication. *Id.* at 1249 (citing *Johnson v. Director, Office of Workers' Comp. Programs*, 183 F.3d 1169, 1171 (9th Cir.1999)).

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[I]n general, we will not invoke the waiver rule in our review of a notice-and-comment proceeding if an agency has had an opportunity to consider the issue. This is true even if the issue was considered sua sponte by the agency or was raised by someone other than the petitioning party . . . . We have also recognized that, so long as a statute does not require exhaustion, we may excuse waiver in exceptional circumstances.<sup>141</sup>

It explained:

BPA sought broad public participation and invited comments in these proceedings. If we required each participant in a notice-and-comment proceeding to raise every issue or be barred from seeking judicial review of the agency's action, we would be sanctioning the unnecessary multiplication of comments and proceedings before the administrative agency. That would serve neither the agency nor the parties.<sup>142</sup>

The Third Circuit, in an opinion by then-Judge Alito, applied the issue exhaustion doctrine to a challenge to an EPA rule that denied Pennsylvania's request to re-designate part of the state from a nonattainment area to attainment status for ozone, pursuant to the Clean Air Act. Although this was technically a rulemaking, it primarily involved the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania as the principal "party." After first stating that "generally, federal appellate courts do not consider an issue that has not been passed on by the agency . . . whose action is being reviewed,"<sup>143</sup> the court engaged in a long analysis to determine that Pennsylvania had insufficiently raised the question in its comments of whether EPA had acted in a timely manner on its re-designation submittal.<sup>144</sup> The court's basis for the application of this doctrine was surprisingly thin. It quoted from a footnote in a case that concerned a state seeking review of a final decision by the Secretary of Education that made an argument for the first time in its brief.<sup>145</sup>

Even so, Judge Alito allowed the argument to be made:

This is a rule of discretion, rather than jurisdiction, however, and our practice has been to hear issues not raised in earlier proceedings when special circumstances warrant an exception to the general rule. . . . Since New Jersey raises an issue of

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<sup>141</sup> *Portland General Elec. Co. v. Bonneville Power Admin.*, 501 F.3d 1009, 1024 (9th Cir. 2007).

<sup>142</sup> *Id.* at 1024 n.13.

<sup>143</sup> *Sw. Pa. Growth Alliance v. Browner*, 121 F.3d 106, 112 (3d Cir. 1997) (quoting *State of N.J., Dep't of Educ. v. Hufstedler*, 724 F.2d 34, 36 n.1 (3d Cir. 1983) *rev'd on other grounds sub nom. Bennett v. New Jersey*, 470 U.S. 632 (1985)).

<sup>144</sup> *See Sw. Pa. Growth Alliance*, 121 F.3d 111–112.

<sup>145</sup> *Hufstedler* at 724 F.2d 34, 36 n.1, states: "New Jersey raises this argument for the first time in its brief upon remand. Generally, federal appellate courts do not consider issues that have not been passed on by the agency or district court whose action is being reviewed." It cites *Singleton v. Wulff*, 428 U.S. 106, 120 (1976), but *Singleton* merely states, "it is the general rule, of course, that a federal appellate court does not consider an issue not passed upon below." Moreover, no agency action was at issue in *Singleton*.

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national importance, which is singularly within the competence of appellate courts and is not predicated on complex factual determinations, we will consider the State's argument as to the retroactivity of the 1978 ESEA amendments.<sup>146</sup>

The Fourth Circuit, has not specifically applied the issue exhaustion doctrine in a rulemaking review case, but has recognized the principle.<sup>147</sup> The Sixth Circuit has applied it in the context of an EPA rulemaking to disapprove Michigan's revisions to its SIP under the Clean Air Act—technically a rulemaking proceeding, but not one covered by the Act's issue exhaustion provision.<sup>148</sup> However, in a later case, it indicated it was not prepared to apply this rule broadly to all rulemaking cases:

There are cases involving environmental law determinations that fall on the rulemaking side of the rulemaking/adjudication dichotomy for certain purposes holding that a party challenging a rule can waive an issue by not making a comment on point during the comment period [citing the *Michigan* case among others]. However, all of these cases nonetheless contain some characteristics of adjudications, and should not be applied broadly.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> *Hufstедler*, 724 F.2d 34, 36 n.1 (citations omitted).

<sup>147</sup> 1000 Friends of Md. v. Browner, 265 F.3d 216, 228 (4th Cir. 2001). This case involved an EPA approval of a revised motor vehicle emissions budget ("MVEB") for the Baltimore area submitted by Maryland to meet the attainment criteria applying to its State Implementation Plan under the Clean Air Act. The environmental group challenged the approval on the ground that additional modeling was needed. EPA raised the issue exhaustion defense. The court, after ruling that, for jurisdictional purposes, the case did not involve a rulemaking challenge, *id.* at 224, said that the issue exhaustion rule (which it characterizes as the "waiver rule") has been rather routinely applied in cases similar to this one. *Id.* at 228 n.7 (citing *Mich. Dep't of Env'tl. Quality v. Browner*, 230 F.3d 181, 183 n.1 (6th Cir. 1996); *Military Toxics Project v. EPA*, 146 F.3d 948, 956–57 (D.C. Cir. 1998); *Natural Res. Def. Council v. EPA*, 25 F.3d 1063, 1073–74 (D.C. Cir. 1994)). But then the court concluded that "the comments made by the Petitioner sufficiently raised the question of whether additional modeling was required."

While the Petitioner's comments do not include a separately delineated section devoted to a claim that the revised MVEB cannot be approved without additional modeling and perhaps are phrased somewhat generally, the comments nonetheless refer (at least implicitly) to photochemical grid modeling three times, twice mentioning the process by name. Although the Petitioner stated in its comments that the modeling question would be "addressed more comprehensively" in other comments directed to another EPA action, this statement does not, as the EPA contends, suggest that the Petitioner was expressly declining to raise the issue in this action. Instead, the statement merely placed the EPA on notice that the issue would *also* be raised in connection with the other action. We therefore conclude that the Petitioner's comments sufficiently raised the question of whether additional modeling was required before the revised MVEB could be deemed adequate, and we now proceed to address the merits of this question.

*Id.* at 228.

<sup>148</sup> *Mich. Dep't of Env'tl. Quality*, 230 F.3d at 183 n.1 ("Petitioners also argued that the EPA approved similar rules in other states and the EPA's rulemaking violates the Regulatory Flexibility Act, 5 U.S.C. §§ 601–612 (2000). However, petitioners failed to sufficiently raise these issues during the comment period and thus have waived them for purposes of appellate review.).

<sup>149</sup> *Citizens Coal Council v. EPA*, 447 F.3d 879, 904 n.25 (6th Cir. 2006) (en banc).

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In two recent cases, involving the EPA Clean Air Act provision and the FCC provision involved in the *WATCH* case, discussed above, the Tenth Circuit has applied issue exhaustion in rulemaking. In *In re FCC 11-161*,<sup>150</sup> challengers to an FCC rulemaking were deemed to have waived challenges to aspects of the rule that were not raised with sufficient specificity in their petition for reconsideration.<sup>151</sup> And in *Oklahoma v. United States EPA*,<sup>152</sup> the court reached the same result in an action challenging EPA's rejection of the state's SIP and the issuance of a Federal Implementation Plan to limit the emissions of sulfur dioxide. The court rejected three of the petitioners' arbitrary-and-capricious arguments because they were not raised with "reasonable specificity" during the public comment period.<sup>153</sup>

### Possible Limits to Applying the Doctrine in Rulemaking Cases

Despite this increasing acceptance of the doctrine among the circuits, there have been some limits.

#### *Futility Exception*

At least one district court has recognized and applied a futility exception. In *Comite De Apoyo A Los Trabajadores Agricolas v. Solis*,<sup>154</sup> the court held that the agency cannot complain that challenger had failed to comment on an issue when the agency rejected similar comments from others as outside the scope of the rulemaking. And even in a Clean Air Act case, the D.C. Circuit allowed challenges by petitioners who failed to raise a particular issue in the rulemaking when the application of the rule to the challengers was not clear and the agency had denied a petition for reconsideration.<sup>155</sup> In that case, the per curiam court wrote:

While we certainly require some degree of foresight on the part of commenters, we do not require telepathy. We should be especially reluctant to require advocates for affected industries and groups to anticipate every contingency. To hold otherwise would encourage strategic vagueness on the part of agencies and overly defensive, excessive commentary on the part of interested parties seeking to preserve all possible options for appeal. Neither response well serves the administrative process.<sup>156</sup>

#### *The "Agency is Already on Notice" Exception*

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<sup>150</sup> 753 F.3d 1015 (10th Cir. 2014).

<sup>151</sup> *Id.* at 1063–64.

<sup>152</sup> 723 F.3d 1201 (10th Cir. 2013).

<sup>153</sup> *Id.* at 1214–15, 1220–22.

<sup>154</sup> No. 09–240, 2010 WL 3431761, at \*18 (E.D. Pa. 2010).

<sup>155</sup> *Portland Cement Ass'n v. EPA*, 665 F.3d 177, 186 (D.C. Cir. 2011).

<sup>156</sup> *Id.*

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In the long-running litigation over EPA’s authority to curtail air pollution in upwind states, the D.C. Circuit twice overturned EPA rules. In 2008 the court overturned (but did not vacate) the EPA’s Clean Air Interstate Rule (“CAIR”) in *North Carolina v. EPA*.<sup>157</sup> One of the key bases for its overturning of the rule was that “EPA may not use cost to increase an upwind State’s obligation under the good neighbor provision—that is, to force an upwind State to ‘exceed the mark.’”<sup>158</sup> After remand, the EPA produced its Cross-State Air Pollution Rule which used modeling to produce annual emission budgets for each upwind state. Industry and state petitioners challenged the rule, suggesting that the agency had improperly determined which states would “contribute significantly” to downwind states’ non-attainment of air quality standards, and the court agreed.<sup>159</sup> More specifically the court found that EPA lacked the statutory authority for its conclusion that “an upwind State that exceeded the significance threshold at even one downwind State’s receptor was drawn wholesale into the Rule’s second stage—cost-based emissions reductions.”<sup>160</sup> Judge Rogers dissented arguing, among other things, that the petitioners had not made that argument in the underlying rulemaking, in violation of the Clean Air Act’s issue exhaustion provision.<sup>161</sup> For the majority, Judge Kavanaugh explained that EPA was on notice due to the court’s earlier *North Carolina* opinion: “In sum, EPA knew from the beginning that it was required to comply with *North Carolina*, including that part of the Court’s holding on which petitioners rely here.”<sup>162</sup> He added the additional ground that “EPA considered—and rejected—precisely the same argument in [the] CAIR [rulemaking].”<sup>163</sup>

The Supreme Court reversed the D.C. Circuit and upheld the rule on the merits, but only briefly addressed the issue exhaustion claim.<sup>164</sup> First the court held that the Clean Air Act provision, although “mandatory” was not “jurisdictional.”<sup>165</sup> It then shrugged off the need to decide this issue because EPA had not “pursued [this] argument vigorously before the D.C. Circuit.”<sup>166</sup> It did this, despite an unacknowledged amicus brief by a group of law professors devoted entirely

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<sup>157</sup> 531 F.3d 896 (D.C. Cir. 2008) (per curiam). The court later issued a ruling that it would not vacate the rule “for EPA to conduct further proceedings consistent with our prior opinion” 550 F.3d 1176, 1178.

<sup>158</sup> 531 F.3d at 390–91.

<sup>159</sup> *EME Homer City Generation LLP v. EPA*, 696 F.3d 7 (D.C. Cir 2012), *rev’d* *EPA v. EME Homer City Generation LLP*, 134 S. Ct. 1584 (2014).

<sup>160</sup> 696 F.3d at 23.

<sup>161</sup> *Id.* at 52–54 (Rogers, J., dissenting).

<sup>162</sup> *Id.* at 24 n.18.

<sup>163</sup> *Id.*

<sup>164</sup> *EPA v. EME Homer City Generation LLP*, 134 S. Ct. 1584, 1602–03 (2014).

<sup>165</sup> *Id.* at 1602.

<sup>166</sup> *Id.* at 1603. The Court acknowledged that “Had EPA pursued the “reasonable specificity” argument vigorously before the D.C. Circuit, we would be obligated to address the merits of the argument.” *Id.* It should be noted that the two dissenting Justices specifically “agree[d] with the majority’s analysis turning aside EPA’s threshold objections to judicial review.” *Id.* at 1610 n.1 (Scalia J. dissenting).

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to urging the Court to invoke the issue exhaustion argument against the respondents in the case.<sup>167</sup>

### *The Agency's Response to a Comment Showed Awareness of the Issue*

In *NRDC v. EPA*,<sup>168</sup> a challenge to an EPA rule under the RCRA, which has no statutory exhaustion provision, the court found that the petitioners comments did not properly raise the question of EPA's statutory authority to adopt a "comparable fuel exclusion" from coverage by the Act, but "[n]onetheless, EPA's response to [a commenter's] comment suggests that EPA understood [that comment] to challenge EPA's statutory authority to exclude comparable fuels in the first place and affirms its authority to do so. . . . Thus, the issue was expressly addressed by EPA and is properly before the court."<sup>169</sup>

### *Agency Has Duty to Examine Key Assumptions as Part of Its Affirmative Burden of Promulgating and Explaining a Non-Arbitrary, Non-Capricious Rule*

In *NRDC v. EPA*, the court applied an alternative ground for not applying issue exhaustion to petitioners. It stated, "Moreover, even if a party may be deemed not to have raised a particular argument before the agency, EPA retains a duty to examine key assumptions as part of its affirmative burden of promulgating and explaining a nonarbitrary, non-capricious rule and therefore EPA must justify that assumption even if no one objects to it during the comment period."<sup>170</sup>

### *Lack of Notice to Commenter that Issue Needed to be Raised in the Comments—Logical Outgrowth Challenges*

In the Fifth Circuit's *City of Seabrook* case, the court made the oft-quoted statement that a strict application of issue exhaustion in rulemaking might require a prospective litigant to be a "psychic able to predict the possible changes that could be made in the proposal when the rule is finally promulgated."<sup>171</sup> This relates to the requirement that agencies give adequate notice to the public about its proposed rule, and to the corollary that if an agency final rule deviates too far from the terms of the proposed rule, the agency should re-propose the rule. The test that courts use to determine this procedural challenge is the "logical outgrowth test"—whether the final rule is a logical outgrowth of the proposed rule such that commenters should have fairly anticipated that an agency might go there.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Amicus Curiae Brief of Law Professors on Issue Exhaustion in Support of Petitioners, 2013 WL 4875111.

<sup>168</sup> 755 F.3d 1010 (D.C. Cir. 2014).

<sup>169</sup> *Id.* at 1022.

<sup>170</sup> *Id.* at 1023 (internal quotations and citations omitted).

<sup>171</sup> 659 F.2d at 1361. The case is discussed, text at notes 130–38 *supra*.

<sup>172</sup> *See Long Island Care at Home, Ltd. v. Coke*, 551 U.S. 158, 174 (2007). *See generally*, JEFFREY S. LUBBERS, A GUIDE TO FEDERAL AGENCY RULEMAKING 258–68 (5th ed. 2012)

The relevance to the issue exhaustion doctrine should be apparent. If there is a true logical outgrowth problem, it would be illogical to require a challenger raising this procedural failure to have made this argument before the agency, and I have not found any cases where the government raised such a defense. However, it is possible that in some circumstances, a litigant may make the similar claim that there was no reason to suspect that such an issue was going to be presented by the agency's rule until it was too late to comment. This argument did prevail in a review of an STB adjudication in *Riffin v. Surface Transportation Board*.<sup>173</sup> Riffin petitioned for review of a decision by the STB after the Board rejected his application for a certificate authorizing the acquisition and operation of a length of railroad track. In the proceeding below, Riffin had included in his application a reservation about shipping certain hazardous materials. The Board sought comment, and a commenter objected, raising the argument that the application was incomplete and defective. The Board noted that comment but rejected the application because the application's reservation violated the statutory duty of common carriers to transport hazardous material where appropriate agencies have promulgated comprehensive regulations. Riffin sought review on the ground that he had a common-law right to not carry hazardous materials, but the government sought to prevent him from making the argument because he hadn't made it before the STB. The D.C. Circuit rejected that position, ruling that because "the Board sua sponte raised the hazardous materials issue in its Decision without first providing Riffin an opportunity to address the issue," "Riffin had no reason to think he had to make his common-law arguments part of his application to the Board."<sup>174</sup>

*Constitutional Issues and Other Cases Where the Court Doesn't Need the Agency's View*

Because agencies cannot determine constitutional questions, courts normally feel that they can decide such issues without requiring the petitioner to have presented the issue to the agency first. In some sense this thinking relates to the futility exemption. A recent high profile case involving the National Labor Relations Act's strong issue exhaustion provision<sup>175</sup> illustrates this. The Noel Canning Company had been found by the Board to have committed an unfair labor practice. Only at the court level did it make the argument that the Board was improperly constituted due to a lack of a quorum because several members had not been properly appointed under the Recess Appointment Clause of the Constitution. The D.C. Circuit, before addressing the constitutional issue raised sua sponte the issue exhaustion provision and decided that "the objections before us concerning lack of a quorum raise questions that go to the very power of the Board to act and implicate fundamental separation of powers concerns. We hold that they are governed by the 'extraordinary circumstances' exception to the 29 U.S.C. § 160(e) requirement and therefore are properly before us for review."<sup>176</sup>

Another example of a case where the court felt it was not necessary to require issue exhaustion on a purely legal, quasi-constitutional issue is *Action for Children's Television v. FCC*, discussed

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<sup>173</sup> 733 F.3d 340 (D.C. Cir 2013).

<sup>174</sup> *Id.* at 343–44.

<sup>175</sup> See page 5, *supra*, for the statutory text.

<sup>176</sup> *Noel Canning v. NLRB*, 705 F.3d 490, 497 (D.C. Cir. 2013), *aff'd* *NLRB v. Noel Canning*, 134 S. Ct 2550 (2014). The Supreme Court did not address the issue-exhaustion issue.

earlier, where the court said, “That objection, however, essentially alleging a denial of administrative due process, raises neither a novel factual issue for which an initial Commission determination is quite clearly both necessary and appropriate, nor a legal issue on which the Commission, and even this court has not already made known its general views to the contrary.”<sup>177</sup>

### The *Koretoff* Case and Judge Williams’ Qualms

Judge Stephen Williams has also recently sounded some alarm bells on the extension of this doctrine to rulemaking in *Koretoff v. Vilsack*,<sup>178</sup> a pre-enforcement challenge to a Department of Agriculture rule issued under the authority of an almond marketing order.<sup>179</sup> The challengers made a series of arguments to the district court “that the rule exceeded the Secretary’s authority under both the [statute] and the Almond Order,”<sup>180</sup> and also that the Secretary had failed to make one of the statutorily required findings. The district court allowed the ultra vires argument to be made, but ruled against the challenge on the merits; that court also found that the challengers had “waived” their other argument by failing to make it in its comments to the agency. On appeal, the government argued that under *Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety*,<sup>181</sup> all the arguments should be disallowed, and the D.C. Circuit, after closely examining whether the challengers had actually made these arguments before the agency, agreed. However, it did throw the challengers a lifeline by concluding at the end of the opinion, “We emphasize that nothing in this opinion affects the producers’ ability to raise their statutory arguments if and when the Secretary applies the rule.”<sup>182</sup>

In carving out this exception for an as-applied challenge, the court cited *Murphy Exploration & Production Co. v. U.S. Department of Interior*.<sup>183</sup> In *Murphy*, the court had held that a failure to challenge a rule while participating in rulemaking proceedings did not estop a challenger from challenging the rule in a separate proceeding in which the rule was being applied. In that case, the court recognized that “because administrative rules and regulations are capable of continuing

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<sup>177</sup> *Action for Children’s Television v. FCC*, 564 F.2d 458, 469 (D.C. Cir. 1977).

<sup>178</sup> 707 F.3d 394 (D.C. Cir. 2013).

<sup>179</sup> Petitioners had claimed in district court that the formal rulemaking procedures required to issue or amend a marketing order were required. *See* 7 U.S.C. § 608c(15)(A)&(B) (providing that any handler subject to an order may file a petition with USDA alleging a violation of law, seeking a modification or exemption, and requesting a hearing; rulings on such petitions are reviewable in federal district court). The D.C. Circuit had earlier held that this rule was not an amendment to the order, but instead constituted minimum quality and inspection requirements. *Koretoff v. Vilsack*, 614 F.3d 532, 539 n.3 (D.C. Cir. 2010). Therefore this was an *informal* rulemaking and the statutory exhaustion requirement did not apply.

<sup>180</sup> *Koretoff*, 707 F.3d at 397.

<sup>181</sup> *See* note 120, *supra*.

<sup>182</sup> *Id.* at 399.

<sup>183</sup> 270 F.3d 957, 958 (D.C. Cir. 2001) (“Nothing . . . prevents [plaintiff] from pursuing its claim in a second forum, i.e., apart from the original rulemaking, if such a forum is otherwise available. As we have held before, such a forum is available to a party when a rule is brought before this court for review of further agency action applying it.” (internal quotation marks omitted in original)).

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application, were we to limit review to the adoption of the rule without further judicial relief at the time of its application, we would effectively deny many parties ultimately affected by a rule an opportunity to question its validity.”<sup>184</sup>

Judge Williams concurred in *Koretoff*, but in a separate opinion expressed some doubts about the developing doctrine:

I write separately primarily to note that in the realm of judicial review of agency rules, much of the language of our opinions on “waiver” has been a good deal broader than the actual pattern of our holdings, and that that pattern itself may unfairly disadvantage parties that generally are not well represented by interest groups.<sup>185</sup>

He first recognized the different view proffered by the Fifth Circuit in the *Seabrook* case, and chastised the government for, in its brief in this case, “stretch[ing] the principle still further, throwing into the hopper a case involving an adjudication rather than a rulemaking, even though parties to a litigation obviously have a far clearer burden to speak up to protect their interests than do all of the potentially millions of persons that may be affected by a rulemaking.”<sup>186</sup>

Then, focusing on the court’s recognition that an “application challenge” would be allowed, he pointed out that in the *Murphy* case cited for that exception the court had

[drawn] an analogy to our cases holding that a party’s missing a statutory deadline for *facial* review of a regulation would not bar its challenge on “review of further [agency] action *applying* it.” Of course where a statute specifically precludes even an application challenge if the claim was not timely raised before the agency, we necessarily honor the statute unless the challenger poses a valid constitutional objection.<sup>187</sup>

He concluded:

Generally speaking, then, the price for a ticket to facial review is to raise objections in the rulemaking. This system probably operates quite well for large industry associations and consumer or environmental groups (and the firms and individuals thus represented). But for some the impact is more severe. Firms filling niche markets, for example, as appellants appear to be, may be ill-represented by broad industry groups and unlikely to be adequately lawyered-up at the rulemaking stage. As the Fifth Circuit observed, we presumably do not want to “require everyone who wishes to protect himself from arbitrary agency

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<sup>184</sup> *Id.* at 958–59 (internal quotations omitted).

<sup>185</sup> 707 F.3d at 399 (Williams, J., concurring).

<sup>186</sup> *Id.* at 399–400 (citing *Orion Reserves Ltd. P’ship v. Salazar*, 553 F.3d 697 (D.C. Cir. 2009)).

<sup>187</sup> 707 F. 3d at 400 (citing *Murphy Exploration*, 270 F.3d at 958).

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action not only to become a faithful reader of the notices of proposed rulemaking published each day in the *Federal Register*, but a psychic able to predict the possible changes that could be made in the proposal when the rule is finally promulgated.”<sup>188</sup>

Then he proposed a solution:

A decision of our court has suggested a principle that would open the door to facial challenges by such mavericks. In an [earlier vacated decision<sup>189</sup>] we said that where a party had participated in the rulemaking, “it made sense to speak of [the party’s] failure to raise [its argument] below.” But that could not rightly be said where there was no indication that the plaintiff had participated in the rulemaking in any way. Thus we found no waiver.

Such a principle would provide facial review for parties who don’t bother to participate in the rulemaking—probably a group largely coincident with parties who fail to anticipate its inflicting serious costs on their interests. . . . The argument for allowing facial review under these circumstances is of course at its strongest where the issue posed cannot require a remand to the agency (e.g., a claim under *Chevron*’s “first step”) and the hardship to the plaintiff from delay is especially acute.<sup>190</sup>

This idea of limiting the issue exhaustion rule to parties who actually participated in the rulemaking is worth considering. It has the advantage of being easy to apply,<sup>191</sup> but there is a real risk that some participants might game the system. In a parenthetical, Judge Williams acknowledges “there would be some risk that the rule might induce strategic behavior expanding that group: non-participation in order to get facial review without disclosing one’s position to the agency.”<sup>192</sup> But “It’s not clear that such a strategy presents many advantages.”<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> *Id.* at 401 (quoting *City of Seabrook, Tex. v. EPA*, 659 F.2d 1349, 1360–61 (5th Cir.1981)).

<sup>189</sup> The case is an earlier round of the *Murphy Exploration* litigation, *Murphy Exploration & Production Co. v. U.S. Department of Interior*, 252 F.3d 473 (D.C. Cir. 2001) (vacated). In *Koretoff*, Judge Williams explained the vacation thusly:

After the opinion was issued, the government submitted evidence that the challenger had, in fact, participated in the rulemaking proceeding, and the panel—in the *Murphy* decision cited earlier—vacated the relevant part of the opinion. See *Murphy*, 270 F.3d at 958. The panel’s reasoning, of course, remains available to future panels.”

707 F.3d 401.

<sup>190</sup> *Id.* (citations omitted).

<sup>191</sup> This would be much simpler for the court to determine than the proposal suggested by Gabriel Markoff, which would limit issue exhaustion to rulemakings “where participation had been sufficiently pluralistic, Markoff, *supra* note 43 at 1086, which would require courts to “examine the substance of the comments themselves in order to determine whether competing viewpoints on the proposed rule had been offered.” *Id.* at 1087.

<sup>192</sup> 707 F.3d 401.

<sup>193</sup> *Id.*

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One problem with Judge Williams' approach is that numerous courts (including the D.C. Circuit) have completely precluded certain petitioners from obtaining judicial review of rules where they found that the petitioner had been aware of the rulemaking but had chosen not to participate.<sup>194</sup> To reconcile this line of cases with Judge Williams' suggestion would require courts to engage in examination of the intentions or bad faith of such petitioners.

Professor Levin also blanches at the idea of giving preference to non-participants over participants:

To me, it is counterintuitive to give a person who diligently participated in a rulemaking proceeding fewer rights than a person who sat on the sidelines. The former would rightly regard this situation as unfair. We should seek to encourage potentially affected persons to file comments – thus, courts would be sending the wrong message if they were to adopt an exhaustion rule that made commenters worse off than non-commenters.<sup>195</sup>

He also elaborates on another type of “strategic behavior” that could be encouraged by such a differentiation:

The practical implications of the proposal are also troubling. Do we want to give a disgruntled commenter an incentive to recruit a non-commenter straw plaintiff to bring a judicial review proceeding to litigate contentions that the commenter is not permitted to litigate directly? If appeals by a commenter and a noncommenter are consolidated, should there be issues that only the latter is permitted to brief?<sup>196</sup>

I agree with the concerns that led Judge Williams to propose making the doctrine inapplicable to parties who did not participate in the rulemaking, but agree with Professor Levin's view that a better goal is “to make the non-commenter no worse off than the person who commented—not to make him better off.”<sup>197</sup> The guiding principles that close this paper seek to advance that goal.

I believe that the issue exhaustion doctrine, while perfectly appropriate as applied to adjudication raises problems in the rulemaking context if it is applied across the board. As Markoff has argued:

Rulemakings do not involve the rights of a few parties; the rules ultimately promulgated affect the physical and economic health and well-being of the entire United States and may have international effects as well. Thus, when a meritorious argument is procedurally barred, it is society at large who suffers for

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<sup>194</sup> *Gage v. AEC* is one of those cases, see text at notes 54–60, *supra*. See also Spencer, *supra* note 40, at 657 and cases cited in his article at n. 197.

<sup>195</sup> Letter from Ron Levin, *supra* note 51, at 5.

<sup>196</sup> *Id.* at 5–6

<sup>197</sup> *Id.* at 6.

it—not only the individual petitioner. Further, unlike in adjudicatory proceedings, where the parties are contesting their specific interests, there is no guarantee that the parties that participate in rulemakings will be representative of the general interests at stake—a possibility supported by the empirical evidence of imbalanced participation.<sup>198</sup>

### Ossification Effects and Other Policy Arguments

As one who has been a consistent worrywart about increasing ossification of rulemaking,<sup>199</sup> while also generally favoring broader access to judicial review, I should address whether how issue exhaustion affects those two, sometimes conflicting, values.

As discussed above, several judges have suggested the doctrine potentially has a “force-feeding effect” of inducing people to comment on every possible issue they might potentially want to raise in court, which could make the agency’s rulemaking task (and the courts’ task on judicial review) that much harder.<sup>200</sup> While I support the notice-and-comment process, I would not want commenters to feel they have to file “shotgun” comments in an effort to inoculate themselves from later issue-exhaustion defenses.

Professor Wagner, who has cautioned about information overload in agency proceedings,<sup>201</sup> believes that issue exhaustion in rulemaking is a contributing factor:

The courts’ demand that parties exhaust their administrative remedies was originally conceived of as a way to save agency resources, both by avoiding “premature interruption” of the rulemaking process and by bringing the courts into the picture only as a last resort. But when viewed from the perspective of information, this requirement actually increases the burden on agencies. In order to preserve their claims, rational parties will react by erring on the side of providing too much rather than too little information. Indeed, the rule suggests not only that a party must file a comment before it can litigate but also that it must file that same, specific comment before raising it in court. If a party neglects to raise an argument during the comment period, however preliminarily, it is generally foreclosed from raising the issue later. Because the threat of litigation may be the only, or at least the best, way for stakeholders to get the agency’s attention during the rulemaking process, they have strong incentives to lay the

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<sup>198</sup> Markoff, *supra* note 43, at 1086.

<sup>199</sup> See e.g., Jeffrey S. Lubbers, *The Transformation of the U.S. Rulemaking Process—For Better or Worse*, 34 OHIO NORTHERN L. REV. 469 (2008).

<sup>200</sup> See *Portland Cement Ass’n v. EPA*, 665 F.3d 177,186 (D.C. Cir. 2011); *Portland General Elec. Co. v. Bonneville Power Admin*, 501 F.3d 1009, 1024 n. 13 (9th Cir. 2007).

<sup>201</sup> Wendy E. Wagner, *Administrative Law, Filter Failure, and Information Capture*, 59 DUKE L.J. 1321, 1322–23 (2010) (“Rather than filtering information, the incentives tilt in the opposite direction and encourage participants to err on the side of providing too much rather than too little information. Evidence is then offered to show how this uncontrolled and excessive information is taking a toll on the basic objectives of administrative governance.”)

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groundwork for future legal action by including every plausible argument in their comments.

Additionally, and more worrisome from the standpoint of information excess, the courts have held that more general comments from affected parties—even if lodged in writing and on time—are usually not material enough to matter legally. To preserve issues for litigation, affected parties are thus best-advised to provide comments that are specific, detailed, and well documented. This seemingly reasonable requirement for specificity again encourages interested parties to provide too much documentation, too many specifics, and too much detail, rather than too little.<sup>202</sup>

Another concern is that issue exhaustion seems to exacerbate the already existing tendency for commenters to submit comments at the last possible time in the comment period.<sup>203</sup> This strategy apparently has taken root in NEPA proceedings already.<sup>204</sup>

On the other hand, as Professor Levin argues, the agencies (and, one would have to add, the Department of Justice) support the issue exhaustion doctrine and would prefer to be able to pass on issues rather than be confronted with them for the first time in court. As he pithily put it, “I think they would prefer the shotgun to the sandbag any day.”<sup>205</sup>

This paper cannot resolve that question, but I think the competing views argue for a middle ground approach. In some contexts, issue exhaustion makes sense and serves the administrative process and in others it may work too much unfairness or needless formality. The guiding principles at the end seek to help draw this line.

A related issue is that issue exhaustion may benefit well-resourced commenters at the expense of groups that cannot afford to monitor every rulemaking that might affect them. Although some statutes and cases allow for extraordinary circumstances or reasonable grounds for failure to exhaust, these safety valves will likely not be of much use for the low-resourced commenter who simply cannot afford to participate. The upshot is that it is likely that some unwary potential petitioners are going to be thwarted by the issue exhaustion doctrine, and the litigated cases are probably the tip of the iceberg. As Markoff speculates, “the most important direct effect of issue

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<sup>202</sup> *Id.* at 1363–64 (footnotes omitted).

<sup>203</sup> See Steven J. Balla, *Public Commenting on Federal Agency Regulations: Research on Current Practices and Recommendations to the Administrative Conference of the United States*, Admin. Conference of the U.S., 31 n.(Mar. 15, 2011) pdf (finding that one third of comments in a sample of rulemakings were filed in the last three days of the comment period and “analytically informative” comments were even more likely to be filed at the end), *available at* <https://www.acus.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Consolidated-Reports-%2B-Memoranda>.

<sup>204</sup> E-mail to author from Elizabeth Lewis, former Oceana law clerk (Mar. 17, 2015) (describing the commonly held view that in order to best position itself for potential issue-exhaustion battles in court it was strategically beneficial to submit factual comments in NEPA proceedings at the end of the comment period to avoid tipping off opposing participants about issues that might later be litigated). However, this raises the question of whether, in the absence of the issue-exhaustion doctrine, the strategy would be to submit such comments earlier (or not at all).

<sup>205</sup> Letter from Ron Levin, *supra* note 51 at 4.

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exhaustion is not in those few dozen cases that are actually adjudicated and barred by the doctrine; it is in the hundreds of cases that are likely never filed because the parties know that they would be barred by the doctrine because they were unable to file comments earlier in the rulemaking process.”<sup>206</sup> And this doesn’t even count the situation where the court challenger did not know about the rulemaking until it was over or didn’t even exist at the time. Perhaps a looser application of the doctrine when a rule is challenged in the enforcement context, as the *Koretoff* court suggested, would help here.

One should also think about the effect on the courts. On the one hand, a strict application of the doctrine can keep cases or issues out of court entirely. In that sense it may relieve the burden on courts—but that argument surely proves too much because it could be used to severely limit other access-to-review doctrines such as reviewability, standing, ripeness and finality as well. Moreover, the doctrine clearly forces courts to make tough calls on whether the disputed issue had been adequately presented to or known by the agency. I found numerous cases where courts felt compelled to spend a lot of time and effort examining the record and making fine distinctions about whether challenger had raised the issue with sufficient specificity in the rulemaking.

### Does the Type of Challenge Matter?

Of course there are many different types of court challenges to rulemaking. Under the APA, petitioners for review can challenge agency rules as (1) unconstitutional, (2) ultra vires, (3) the product of a procedurally defective rulemaking, or (4) arbitrary and capricious. Such challenges can typically be made either pre-enforcement or as a defense to an enforcement action. The GELLHORN & BYSE CASEBOOK usefully breaks down the possible types of rulemaking challenges into five:

- (1) facial constitutional and statutory authority for the rule (which usually can be determined without any need for an administrative record);
- (2) procedural compliance in the rulemaking;
- (3) factual support for and judgment reasonability of the rulemaking;
- (4) as-applied constitutional and statutory for the rulemaking;
- (5) other issues unique in the particular enforcement context.<sup>207</sup>

It then concludes that challenges 4 and 5 would rarely if ever be ripe for review until the enforcement stage, at which point the rule would be challengeable in court unless there were available opportunities to do so in an agency adjudication.<sup>208</sup> It concludes that type 1 would be “most unlikely to implicate exhaustion concerns,”<sup>209</sup> leaving types 2 and 3, and asks rhetorically “isn’t it sensible to insist that *someone* in the rulemaking must prominently have raised them?”<sup>210</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> Markoff, *supra* note 43, at 1083.

<sup>207</sup> GELLHORN & BYSE CASEBOOK, *supra* note 4, at 1245.

<sup>208</sup> *Id.* at 1245–46. *See* note 39 *supra*.

<sup>209</sup> *Id.* at 1246.

<sup>210</sup> *Id.* at 1247.

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I would suggest that many procedural challenges need not be subject to the issue exhaustion doctrine, since the APA requirement that the challenger show “prejudicial error”<sup>211</sup> along with the presumption that agencies should know the procedural requirements in their own statutes and regulations should provide sufficient bounds and grounds for such challenges. However, I agree that arbitrary-and-capricious challenges should perhaps be viewed differently. In such cases there may be a basis for concern that an overly permissive policy might defeat the twin purposes of the general exhaustion doctrine, namely to ensure that the agency has had the opportunity to bring its expertise to bear on the issue before it comes to court, and that courts are spared from having to hear issues that could have been resolved at the agency. On the other hand, we must also remember that rulemaking is a process designed for broad participation, including by those who are unrepresented by counsel, and who may frame their comments “in non-legal terms rather than precise legal formulations.”<sup>212</sup>

### Conclusion

Since 2000 when Professor Funk wrote that “courts are hopelessly confused” on the subject of issue exhaustion in rulemaking, I don’t think things have improved much. The Supreme Court has yet to opine on the appropriateness of issue exhaustion in rulemaking. The doctrine has garnered increasing acceptance in the D.C. Circuit and spotty acceptance in other circuits. But a close review of the cases shows that many of them either involve the Clean Air Act, in which the doctrine is statutory, or involve either rulemakings of particular applicability or rulemakings conducted under quasi-adjudicative procedures, or are based on precedents that stem from the application of issue exhaustion in agency adjudications or in challenges to NEPA assessments. And the D.C. Circuit’s recent *Koretoff* case has raised the possibility of limiting the doctrine to pre-enforcement review cases—thus preserving the right for parties to raise previously unrepresented issues in a defense to rule-enforcement. In short, for the most part, the issue exhaustion doctrine is a prudential doctrine originally designed to apply to court challenges to agency adjudications, and it does not comfortably fit most challenges to agency rulemakings

Courts still do not devote enough attention to the fact that most of the statutes and judicial precedents derive from remedy exhaustion statutes or at least statutes governing agency adjudication. Courts are inconsistent on the subject of whether the formal/informal distinction raised in *Sims* should be dispositive. They are also inconsistent on whether the type of legal challenge to the rulemaking matters. Given all this, it is perhaps not surprising that it is possible to distill a fairly long list of ad hoc exceptions to application of the doctrine has grown, and that courts apply them rather inconsistently. And Congress has only twice waded into the area of issue exhaustion in rulemaking.

Congress does of course, retain the power to require issue exhaustion, and there may be some rulemaking contexts where that would make sense, such as that presented by the Clean Air Act, where judicial review is concentrated in the D.C. Circuit and the parties are sophisticated repeat

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<sup>211</sup> 5 U.S.C. § 706(2).

<sup>212</sup> Paraphrasing the court in *Native Ecosystems Council v. Dombeck*, 304 F.3d 886, 900 (9th Cir. 2002).

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players, or by CERCLA, for the reasons mentioned above.<sup>213</sup> There may also be situations in the context of challenges to agency delay or inaction where the failure to file a petition for rulemaking would appropriately prevent consideration of the challenge on the basis of failure to exhaust administrative remedies.

But clearer lines need to be drawn—for the courts and for Congress to consider in individual statutes. The case for issue exhaustion is strongest in those types of rulemakings that are closest to adjudications. If the rulemaking statute is a formal or hybrid one, offering opportunities to request hearings, or if the rulemaking is one of particular applicability, issue exhaustion would normally be appropriate, unless the party had a good excuse for not participating in the hearing.

Issue exhaustion also makes more sense as well when the court challenge is based on factual disputes with the agency (or complaints that the agency should have chosen an alternative approach to the rule), couched as an arbitrary-and-capricious challenge. These are the types of arguments that can most beneficially be brought to the agency's attention first.

But constitutional or other purely legal arguments, or procedural challenges, would normally not benefit as much and might even be fruitless if not futile to bring to the agency's attention. Not only are these the type of questions that courts can decide without agency's help (some legal issues may be exceptions), but agencies should be intrinsically aware of their own jurisdiction, statutory authority, and applicable procedures anyway.

### Guiding Principles<sup>214</sup>

Congress in enacting judicial review statutes, and the courts in interpreting such statutes and in making prudential decisions about what issues may be raised in challenges to rules, should consider the following principles:

1. The “issue exhaustion doctrine,” that issues raised in court challenges to agency action should first be raised with the agency, applies less squarely to rulemaking cases than it does to cases involving administrative adjudication. It also applies more comfortably to pre-enforcement review cases than to as-applied cases such as cases where rules are challenged in the context of an enforcement proceeding.
2. The issue exhaustion doctrine is most appropriately applied to certain types of rulemaking:
  - Where statutorily required;
  - To rulemakings of particular applicability;
  - To rulemakings that are conducted using procedures that include a right to a hearing, unless the litigating party had a good excuse for not participating in such hearings;

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<sup>213</sup> See text at note 116, *supra*.

<sup>214</sup> The draft report presents some preliminary guiding principles the Committee on Judicial Review may wish to consider in its deliberations. Further development of recommendations is expected.

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- To complex, fact-based rulemakings such as those conducted under the Clean Air Act, where judicial review is concentrated in the D.C. Circuit and the parties are sophisticated repeat players, or such as those involved in CERCLA cases, where expedition is of particular concern and the overall program to prioritize the clean-up of particular toxic waste sites should not be hamstrung by challenges at every decision point.
3. The issue exhaustion doctrine is most appropriately applied in rulemaking cases to certain types of issues and is less appropriately applied to others.
- A. Most appropriately applied to challenges to:
- Agency fact-finding, reasoning, choice of alternatives and other similar issues that are incorporated in the arbitrary and capricious test.
  - Agency failures to exercise their discretion;
- B. May be appropriately applied to challenges to (depending on the circumstances):
- Agency interpretations of their own statute;
  - Agency failures to follow a statutory requirement found in a law that is not the APA or its own organic statute;
- C. Ordinarily not appropriately applied to challenges to:
- Agency violations of the Constitution;
  - Agency actions that raise purely legal questions that are not aided by the agency's view;
  - Agency violations of procedural requirements contained in the APA, their own statutes, or their own regulations.
4. Even when the issue exhaustion doctrine is applicable in the rulemaking context, courts should allow parties who did not raise the issue in the comment process to raise it in court if:
- They are challenging the rule in the context of an as-applied challenge, such as a defense to an enforcement action;
  - Another commenter raised the issue sufficiently;
  - The agency raised the issue sua sponte;
  - Other circumstances make clear that the agency was aware of the issue;
  - The issue was so fundamental that the agency can be presumed to have been aware of it.
5. In addition, even when the issue exhaustion doctrine is applicable in the rulemaking context, courts should apply the standard exceptions to the exhaustion of remedies doctrine, such as:

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- issues, that by their nature could not have been raised before the agency (e.g., a material change in circumstances or a serious impropriety in the administrative process);
- where the challenged action is patently in excess of the agency’s authority;
- where it would have been futile to raise before the agency;
- where the agency has in fact considered the issue;
- where the obvious result would be a plain miscarriage of justice.<sup>215</sup>

6. Reviewing courts should allow litigants challenging rules to have a full opportunity to demonstrate that they did in fact raise the issue first with the agency or that any of the above circumstances—indicating that application of the doctrine would be inappropriate—are present.

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<sup>215</sup> See *WATCH*, 712 F.2d at 682.