



Aggregation of Similar Claims in Agency Adjudication

Committee on Adjudication

Proposed Recommendation | June 10, 2016

1 Federal agencies in the United States adjudicate hundreds of thousands of cases each
2 year—more than the federal courts. Unlike federal and state courts, federal agencies have
3 generally avoided aggregation tools that could resolve large groups of claims more efficiently.
4 Consequently, in a wide variety of cases, agencies risk wasting resources in repetitive
5 adjudication, reaching inconsistent outcomes for the same kinds of claims, and denying
6 individuals access to the affordable representation that aggregate procedures promise. Now
7 more than ever, adjudication programs, especially high volume adjudications, could benefit from
8 innovative solutions, like aggregation.¹

9 The Administrative Procedure Act (APA)² does not provide specifically for aggregation
10 in the context of adjudication, though it also does not foreclose the use of aggregation
11 procedures. Federal agencies often enjoy broad discretion to craft procedures they deem
12 “necessary and appropriate” to adjudicate the cases and claims that come before them.³ This
13 broad discretion includes the ability to aggregate common cases, both formally and informally.

¹ Other related techniques that can help resolve recurring legal issues in agencies include the use of precedential decisions, declaratory orders as provided in 5 U.S.C. 554(e), and rulemaking. With respect to declaratory orders, see Recommendation 2015-3, *Declaratory Orders*, 80 Fed. Reg. 78,163 (Dec. 16, 2015), available at <https://www.acus.gov/recommendation/declaratory-orders>. The Supreme Court has recognized agency authority to use rulemaking to resolve issues that otherwise might recur and require hearings in adjudications. See *Heckler v. Campbell*, 461 U.S. 458 (1983).

² See Administrative Procedure Act, Pub. L. No. 79-404, 60 Stat. 237 (1946) (codified as amended at 5 U.S.C. §§ 551–559, 701-706 and scattered sections in Title 5).

³ Broad discretion exists both in “formal adjudication,” where the agency’s statute requires a “hearing on the record,” triggering the APA’s trial-type procedures, and in “informal adjudication,” where the procedures set forth in APA §§ 554, 556 & 557 are not required, thus allowing less formal procedures (although some “informal adjudications” are nevertheless quite formal).



ADMINISTRATIVE CONFERENCE OF THE UNITED STATES

14 Formal aggregation involves permitting one party to represent many others in a single
15 proceeding. In informal aggregation, different claimants with very similar claims pursue a
16 separate case with separate counsel, but the agency assigns them to the same adjudicator or to the
17 same docket, in an effort to expedite the cases, conserve resources, and ensure consistent
18 outcomes.⁴

19 Yet, even as some agencies face large backlogs, few have employed such innovative
20 tools. There are several possible explanations for this phenomenon. The sheer number of claims
21 in aggregate agency adjudications may raise concerns of feasibility, legitimacy, and accuracy
22 because aggregation could: (1) create diseconomies of scale—inviting even more claims that
23 further stretch the agency’s capacity to adjudicate; (2) negatively affect the perceived legitimacy
24 of the process; and (3) increase the consequence of error.

25 Notwithstanding these risks, several agencies have identified contexts in which the
26 benefits of aggregation, including producing a pool of information about recurring problems,
27 achieving greater equality in outcomes, and securing the kind of expert assistance high volume
28 adjudication attracts, outweigh the costs.⁵ Agencies have also responded to the challenges of
29 aggregation by (1) carefully piloting aggregation procedures to improve output while avoiding
30 creation of new inefficiencies; (2) reducing potential allegations of bias or illegitimacy by
31 relying on panels, rather than single adjudicators, and providing additional opportunities for
32 parties to voluntarily participate in the process; and (3) allowing cases raising scientific or novel
33 factual questions to “mature”⁶—that is, putting off aggregation until the agency has the benefit of

⁴ The American Law Institute’s *Principles of the Law of Aggregation* defines proceedings that coordinate separate lawsuits in this way as “administrative aggregations,” which are distinct from joinder actions (in which multiple parties are joined in the same proceeding) or representative actions (in which a party represents a class in the same proceeding). See AMERICAN LAW INSTITUTE, PRINCIPLES OF THE LAW OF AGGREGATE LITIGATION § 1.02 (2010) (describing different types of aggregate proceedings).

⁵ See Michael Sant’Ambrogio & Adam Zimmerman, *Aggregate Agency Adjudication* 27–65 (April 29, 2016), available at <https://www.acus.gov/report/aggregate-agency-adjudication-final-report> (describing three examples of aggregation in agency adjudication).

⁶ Cf. Francis E. McGovern, *An Analysis of Mass Torts for Judges*, 73 TEX. L. REV. 1821 (1995) (defining “maturity” in which both sides’ litigation strategies are clear, expected outcomes reach an “equilibrium,” and global resolutions or settlements may be sought).



ADMINISTRATIVE CONFERENCE OF THE UNITED STATES

34 several opinions and conclusions from different adjudicators about how a case may be handled
35 expeditiously.

36 The Administrative Conference recognizes aggregation as a useful tool to be employed in
37 appropriate circumstances. This recommendation provides guidance and best practices to
38 agencies as they consider whether or how to use or improve their use of aggregation.⁷

RECOMMENDATION

39 1. Congress should continue to allow agencies broad discretion and in some circumstances
40 encourage them to develop formal or informal aggregation rules of procedure consistent
41 with past practice, the APA, and due process.

Using Alternative Decisionmaking Techniques

42 2. Agencies should consider using a variety of techniques to resolve claims with common
43 issues of fact or law, especially in high volume adjudication programs. In addition to the
44 aggregate adjudication procedures discussed in recommendations 3–10, these techniques
45 might include the designation of individual decisions as “precedential,” the use of
46 rulemaking to resolve legal issues that would otherwise recur in multiple adjudications,
47 and the use of declaratory orders in individual cases.

Determining Whether to Use Aggregation Procedures

48 3. Agencies should take steps to identify whether their cases have common claims and
49 issues that might justify adopting rules governing aggregation. Such steps could include:
50 a. Developing the information infrastructure, such as centralized docketing, needed
51 to identify and track cases with common issues of fact or law;

⁷ This recommendation covers both adjudications conducted by administrative law judges and adjudications conducted by non-administrative law judges.



ADMINISTRATIVE CONFERENCE OF THE UNITED STATES

- 52 b. Encouraging adjudicators and parties to identify specific cases or types of cases
53 that are likely to involve common issues of fact or law and therefore prove to be
54 attractive candidates for aggregation; and
- 55 c. Piloting programs to test the reliability of an approach to aggregation before
56 implementing the program broadly.
- 57 4. Agencies should develop procedures and protocols to assign similar cases to the same
58 adjudicator or panel of adjudicators using a number of factors, including:
- 59 a. Whether coordination would avoid duplication in discovery;
- 60 b. Whether it would prevent inconsistent evidentiary or other pre-hearing rulings;
- 61 c. Whether it would conserve the resources of the parties, their representatives, and
62 the agencies; and
- 63 d. Where appropriate, whether the agencies can accomplish similar goals by using
64 other tools as set forth in paragraph 2.
- 65 5. Agencies should develop procedures and protocols for adjudicators to determine whether
66 to formally aggregate similar cases in a single proceeding based on the following factors:
- 67 a. Whether the number of cases or claims are sufficiently numerous and similar to
68 justify aggregation;
- 69 b. Whether an aggregate proceeding would be manageable and materially advance
70 the resolution of the cases;
- 71 c. Whether the benefits of collective control outweigh the benefits of individual
72 control, including whether adequate counsel is available to represent the parties in
73 an aggregate proceeding;
- 74 d. Whether (or the extent to which) any existing individual adjudication has (or
75 related adjudications have) progressed; and
- 76 e. Whether the novelty or complexity of the issues being adjudicated would benefit
77 from the input of different adjudicators.



Structuring the Aggregate Proceeding

- 78 6. Agencies that use aggregation should ensure, to the extent possible, that the parties' and
79 other stakeholders' interests are adequately protected and that the process is perceived as
80 transparent and legitimate by considering the use of mechanisms such as:
- 81 a. Permitting interested stakeholders to file amicus briefs or their equivalent;
 - 82 b. Conducting "fairness hearings," in which all interested stakeholders may express
83 their concerns with the proposed relief to adjudicators in person or in writing;
 - 84 c. Ensuring that separate interests are adequately represented in order to avoid
85 conflicts of interest;
 - 86 d. Permitting parties to opt-out in appropriate circumstances; and
 - 87 e. Allowing amicus briefs or oral arguments in agency appeals.
- 88 7. Agencies that use aggregation should develop written and publicly available policies
89 explaining how they initiate, conduct, and terminate aggregation proceedings. The
90 policies should also set forth the factors used to determine whether aggregation is
91 appropriate.
- 92 8. Where feasible, agencies should consider assigning a specialized corps of experienced
93 adjudicators who would be trained to handle aggregate proceedings, consistent with the
94 APA requirement that administrative law judges be assigned in rotation. Agencies
95 should also consider using a panel of adjudicators from the specialized corps to address
96 concerns with having a single adjudicator decide cases that could have a significant
97 impact. Agencies that have few adjudicators may need to "borrow" adjudicators from
98 other agencies for this purpose.

Using Aggregation to Enhance Control of Policymaking

- 99 9. Agencies should make all decisions in aggregate proceedings publicly available. In order
100 to obtain the maximum benefit from aggregate proceedings, agencies should also
101 consider designating final agency decisions as precedential if doing so will:



ADMINISTRATIVE CONFERENCE OF THE UNITED STATES

- 102 a. Help other adjudicators handle subsequent cases involving similar issues more
103 expeditiously;
- 104 b. Provide guidance to future parties;
- 105 c. Avoid inconsistent outcomes; or
- 106 d. Increase transparency and openness.
- 107 10. Agencies should ensure the outcomes of aggregate adjudication are communicated to
108 policymakers or personnel involved in rulemaking so that they can determine whether a
109 notice-and-comment rulemaking proceeding codifying the outcome might be worthwhile.
110 If agencies are uncertain they want to proceed with a rule, they might issue a notice of
111 inquiry to invite interested parties to comment on whether the agencies should codify the
112 adjudicatory decision (in whole or in part) in a new regulation.