



**FEDERAL BAR ASSOCIATION  
NORTHERN DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA CHAPTER**

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**OFFICERS**

**President**  
Sharon L. O'Grady  
Pillsbury Winthrop LLP  
50 Fremont Street  
San Francisco, CA  
94105  
(415) 983-1000  
sogrady@pillsbury  
winthrop.com

**Vice President, San Francisco**  
Jennifer S. Abrams  
Pacific Gas and Electric  
Company Law Dept.  
77 Boale Street,  
Room 3105B  
San Francisco, CA  
94105  
(415) 973-4462  
jsad@pga.com

**Vice President, Oakland**  
Valeria M. Stewart  
Federal Bureau of  
Prisons  
7950 Dublin Boulevard  
Dublin, CA 94568  
(925) 803-4723  
valerie4kids@aol.com

**Vice President, San Jose**  
Bradford C. Lewis  
Fenwick & West LLP  
2 Palo Alto Square  
Palo Alto, CA 94306  
(650) 858-7560  
blewis@fenwick.com

**Secretary/Treasurer**  
Kathleen S. Morris  
Remcho, Johansen &  
Purcell  
201 Dolores Avenue  
San Leandro, CA 94577  
(510) 345-5200  
kmmorris@rjp.com

**Agency Chair**  
Laurel Beeler  
Assistant U.S. Attorney  
450 Golden Gate  
Avenue, 11th Fl.  
P.O. Box 36055  
San Francisco, CA  
94102  
415/436-6765  
laurel.beeler@usdoj.gov

February 13, 2004

VIA FACSIMILE AND OVERNIGHT COURIER

Peter G. McCabe, Secretary  
Committee on Rules of Practice and Procedure  
Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts  
One Columbus Circle, N.E.  
Washington, D.C. 20544

Re: FRAP Amendment to Permit Citation of Unpublished Decisions

Dear Mr. McCabe:

The Northern District of California Chapter of the Federal Bar Association (the "Chapter") submits this letter in opposition to the proposed amendment to the Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 32.1, "Citation of Judicial Dispositions." The proposed amendment would eliminate all restrictions "upon the citation of judicial opinions, orders, judgments, or other written dispositions that have been designated as 'unpublished,' 'not for publication,' 'non-precedential,' 'not precedent,' or the like." This letter expresses the position only of the Chapter, and not that of the Federal Bar Association itself.

The Chapter has 168 members. We represent practitioners who specialize in federal practice and come from every aspect of that practice. We overwhelmingly oppose the proposed rule change.

We believe that the issue should be left to the discretion of the individual circuit courts, as is now the case. In those circuits which restrict citation of "not for publication" dispositions, like the Ninth Circuit, parties may always adopt the reasoning in an unpublished disposition. Citation to the case itself, however, lends to it an aura of importance that is unwarranted.

It is no secret that the language in unpublished dispositions is not given the careful attention by the judges that the wording of published opinions receive, particularly with respect to possible use or misuse in future litigation. Yet permitting its citation suggests that all of the judges joining in the decision agree, not just on the result, but on the language. Given the large volume of cases which federal appellate judges must decide every year, it is simply not possible for them to closely scrutinize the language of each decision in which they join.

Moreover, a change in the rules to allow free citation of unpublished dispositions will increase the workload for lawyers and for judges - and not just the judges of the affected appellate courts - who will as a practical matter have to sift through and analyze large amounts of

**Immediate Past President**  
Scott R. Raber  
Newton, Raber & Rempel  
1451 Grant Road  
Mountain View, CA 94040  
650/967-7854  
sraber@nkr.com

**HONORARY OFFICERS**

The Hon. Marilyn H. Patel  
Chief Judge  
United States District Court  
450 Golden Gate Avenue  
San Francisco, CA 94102  
415/522-2000

Kevin V. Ryan  
United States Attorney  
U.S. Attorney's Office  
450 Golden Gate Avenue,  
11th Fl.  
P.O. Box 36055  
San Francisco, CA 94102  
415/436-7200

Barry J. Portman  
Federal Public Defender  
450 Golden Gate Avenue,  
Rm. 17424  
P.O. Box 36105  
San Francisco, CA 94102  
415/436-7700

**STEERING COMMITTEE**

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additional materials, most of which will be useless (which is why they were designated not for publication). The result will be increased court backlog and increased litigation costs.

Further, we are concerned that the proposed rule change will force the Ninth Circuit to move to single word dispositions – “Affirmed” or “Reversed” – as some circuits have done. An unexplained disposition does not give the losing party the feeling that the court has heard and considered his or her position. We think it is important that the appellate courts explain to the parties the basis for their decisions, and are concerned that the proposed rule change will inhibit the courts’ ability to do that.

Finally, to the extent there is any value to be gleaned from unpublished dispositions, permitting the citation of unpublished dispositions creates an unlevel playing field. Poor litigants do not necessarily have equal access to those materials, and may be disadvantaged relative to litigants who have ready access.

We thank you for the opportunity to comment.

  
Sharon L. O'Grady  
President,  
Northern District of California Chapter,  
Federal Bar Association

cc: United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit  
Jack D. Lockridge, Executive Director, Federal Bar Association