

FEDERAL E-DISCOVERY

Court Refuses To Compel 'Based on Relevance Alone'



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Of the many changes to e-discovery practice introduced by the 2015 amendments to the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure, the most impactful may have been the change to Rule 26(b)(1) that restored proportionality to the determination of the appropriate scope of discovery. After the amendments went into effect, many courts around the country quickly—and even proactively—incorporated the principle and factors of proportionality from Rule 26(b)(1) into their decisions, often as part of limiting the scope of requested discovery.

In a recent decision, a court denied a motion to compel additional discovery, criticizing the moving party for focusing its arguments on relevance, and not on



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whether the requested discovery was proportional to the needs of the case. The decision is a reminder of the fundamental importance of proportionality post-2015, when allowable discovery is not determined by relevance alone.

'Weidman v. Ford'

In *Weidman v. Ford Motor Company*, 2021 WL 2349400 (E.D. Mich. June 9, 2021), the plaintiffs sued Ford, claiming brake defects in a type of Ford vehicle. As part of its third set of requests for production, the plaintiffs—in request for

production 69 (RFP 69)—asked Ford to produce documents relating to the presence of hydrocarbons. The plaintiffs later explained that although “hydrocarbon intrusion” was not explicitly detailed in their complaint, they were asking for such documents since “recently uncovered evidence” from prior discovery, along with an expert report, purportedly suggested that hydrocarbon intrusion was a cause of the alleged brake defect. See *id.* at *1.

Ford objected to RFP 69 as overly broad and unduly burden-

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some. As part of a series of discussions attempting to confer on the issue and reach a compromise, the plaintiffs requested that Ford run a set of search terms across multiple document custodians to target documents responsive to the RFP. Ford ultimately refused plaintiffs' request that it conduct such a search and produce all non-privileged search hits, leading to the plaintiffs filing the motion to compel at issue in the decision.

Scope of Discovery Under Rule 26(b)(1)

In its decision on the plaintiffs' motion, the court began its analysis by reviewing Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 26(b)(1), which, as amended in 2015, provides that "Parties may obtain discovery regarding any nonprivileged matter that is relevant to any party's claim or defense and proportional to the needs of the case." *Id.* at *2. Noting that demonstrating relevance is an "extremely low bar," the court detailed the proportionality factors, "the importance of the issues at stake in the action, the amount in controversy, the parties' relative access to relevant information, the parties' resources, the importance of the discovery in resolving the issues, and whether the burden or expense of the proposed discovery outweighs its likely benefit." *Id.*

In support of their motion, the plaintiffs had argued that "records about hydrocarbon infusion are highly relevant" and that even under the 2015 amendments, "Rule 26 allows broad discovery." *Id.* As to proportionality, though, the court pointedly observed, "[l]ike most briefing this court sees in discovery motions, plaintiffs' note the proportionality factors but only briefly address them." *Id.*

Observing that parties tend either to interpret Rule 26 too broadly or too narrowly, the court raised its own role in ensuring the appropriate scope of discovery.

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Quoting the Advisory Committee notes to the 2015 amendments, the court wrote, "[t]he [2015] rule change signals to the court that it has the authority to confine discovery to the claims and defenses asserted in the pleadings, and signals to the parties that they have no entitlement to discovery to develop new claims or defenses that are not already identified in the pleadings." *Id.*

As to the relative importance of proportionality in determining the scope of discovery, the court then stated, "[t]he key phrase of

the current Rule 26(b)(1) is the one describing proportionality[.]" *Id.* at *3. Citing a recent decision from the Sixth Circuit, which in turn cited the Advisory Committee notes, the court continued, "[t]he change ensures that the parties and courts share the 'collective responsibility to consider the proportionality of all discovery and consider it in resolving discovery disputes.'" *Id.* Continuing to cite the Sixth Circuit decision, here where it quoted the 2015 Year-End Report on the Federal Judiciary that presented the 2015 amendments, the court wrote, "Instead of facilitating costly and delay-inducing efforts to look under every stone in an e-discovery world populated by many stones, the new rule 'crystalizes the concept of reasonable limits on discovery through increased reliance on the common-sense concept of proportionality.'" *Id.* It concluded that "[u]nder amended Rule 26(b)(1), a court does not fulfill its duty when it compels discovery based on relevance alone." *Id.*

Proportionality of Discovery Efforts; Certifications

The plaintiffs in this matter, however, in relying more on emphasizing the relevance of the requested discovery, "fail[ed] to show that another search of the Ford custodians' accounts would be proportional to the needs of the case." *Id.* The court determined

that the plaintiffs did not make the case that Ford's prior discovery efforts were "insufficient to uncover materials about hydrocarbon intrusion causing the alleged brake defect." And after reviewing the emails offered by the plaintiffs as their evidence that other relevant documents existed, it found that its "review of the emails did not reveal an obvious gap in the production." Id.

For its part, Ford successfully demonstrated to the court that it had already conducted what it had called a "reasonable, proportional and diligent search" for relevant documents, which included conducting its own search in response to RFP 69, which resulted in Ford referring the plaintiffs to 769 previously produced documents. Id. at *1. Additionally, Ford represented that it "produced over 100,000 pages of documents in response to plaintiffs' requests for production of documents and interrogatories" and that "during depositions of Ford employees, 'the witnesses either expressly denied that hydrocarbons were an issue in connection with the leak-into-booster or bypass conditions, or despite their involvement in the investigation, they had not seen instances of hydrocarbons entering the braking systems and leading to a leak-into-booster or bypass condition.'" Id. at *4. Citing and quoting deposition testimony,

including from three 30(b)(6) witnesses, Ford asserted "that none of the deposition testimony showed that more documents about the hydrocarbon issue exist." Id.

The court also examined the impact of attorney certifications under Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 26(g), which "requires an attorney to sign a discovery response, thus certifying that the response was made after a reasonable inquiry" and of a "proper response" under Rule 34(b)(2)(C), which requires that "a responding party must state whether it withheld any responsive mate-

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rial as a result of its objections." Id. Citing recent precedent, the court found that "[a]bsent credible evidence, the responding party's representation that there are no additional documents is sufficient to defeat a motion to compel." Id.

Unconvinced by the plaintiffs' evidence that Ford neglected to produce all materials responsive to RFP 69 and persuaded by Ford's assertions as to the reasonableness and proportionality of their

searches, the court denied the motion to compel Ford to run the plaintiffs' keyword search, concluding that "[t]urning over every stone to see if more documents about hydrocarbon intrusion exists would not be proportional to the needs of the case." Id. The court conditioned this denial on Ford serving on the plaintiffs "a proper response under Rules 26(g) and 34(b)." Id.

Conclusion

Discovery under the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure remains broad, even after the 2015 amendments. After the prior decade of expanding costs due to the nature and volume of electronically stored information, though, the amendments have proven successful in introducing more reasonable limits on discovery—largely due to the impact of proportionality.

Weidman is a reminder that judges have an active role to play in managing the proper bounds of discovery, including by incorporating proportionality considerations into their decisions. It is also a notice to parties—both those requesting and opposing expansion of discovery—that judges will expect that they thoughtfully and thoroughly address the proportionality factors of Rule 26(b)(1).