

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE NORTHERN DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA

NATIONAL UNION FIRE INSURANCE COMPANY OF PITTSBURGH, PA.,	No. C 09-02046 CW
Plaintiff,	ORDER DENYING DEFENDANT'S MOTIONS TO DISMISS AND STAY
v.	
NVIDIA CORPORATION,	
Defendant.	

This declaratory judgment action involves a dispute over whether Defendant NVIDIA Corporation has breached various clauses of the insurance policies it maintains with Plaintiff National Union Fire Insurance Company of Pittsburgh, PA. Defendant has filed a motion to dismiss, arguing that the Court should decline to exercise jurisdiction over the matter. Defendant has also filed a motion to stay the case pending the resolution of a related class action lawsuit. Plaintiff opposes the motions. The matter was heard on July 9, 2009. Having considered oral argument and all of the papers submitted by the parties, the Court denies the motions to dismiss and stay.

BACKGROUND

Defendant sells graphics processing units (GPU) and media communication processor (MPC) products. Computer manufacturers

1 incorporate GPUs and MPCs into their final product. Over the past
2 year, many computer manufacturers and individual computer owners
3 have complained to Defendant that their GPUs and MPCs were not
4 working properly. Between September 12, 2008 and November 18,
5 2008, eight class action lawsuits were filed against Defendant
6 about these products. On February 25, 2009, United States District
7 Court Judge James Ware consolidated the cases in this district
8 under the caption The NVIDIA GPU Litigation, Case No. 08-04312, and
9 a consolidated amended complaint was filed on May 6, 2009
10 (Consolidated Class Action). Plaintiff is defending Defendant in
11 the Consolidated Class Action. The Consolidated Class Action
12 purports to bring claims on behalf of all retail purchasers of
13 computers equipped with a defective NVIDIA GPU or MCP. In that
14 case, the plaintiffs allege that NVIDIA knowingly sold defective
15 GPU and MCP chips which, after installation in notebook computers,
16 caused the graphics to malfunction.

17 The current case concerns a related issue. As a result of the
18 malfunctions in GPUs and MCPs, the companies for whom Defendant
19 designed and sold such GPUs and MCPs began to receive requests from
20 end users of notebook computers to repair the problem. These
21 companies will be referred to as Chip Claimants. On at least seven
22 occasions, Defendant tendered to Plaintiff notices of claims made
23 by Chip Claimants against Defendant. The claims based on such
24 malfunctions sought defense, indemnity, compensation for repairs
25 and extended warranties, and damages. Defendant also requested
26 that Plaintiff waive conditions in the insurance policies that
27 prevent any insured from voluntarily assuming any obligation or
28 making any payment without Plaintiff's consent. This aspect of the

1 policy is called a consent condition. Plaintiff did not agree to
2 waive the consent conditions with respect to some of the claims.

3 Plaintiff requested detailed information about the nature,
4 extent, timing and causes of the claims tendered by Defendant.
5 Defendant refused to provide the information requested for some of
6 the claims. At this juncture, Plaintiff has not consented to any
7 settlements nor has it been permitted to participate in any
8 settlement negotiations between Defendant and the Chip Claimants.
9 To date, Defendant has not sought indemnification from Plaintiff
10 with respect to settlements that Defendant has unilaterally
11 negotiated with some of the Chip Claimants.

12 In the present lawsuit, Plaintiff now seeks a declaration
13 concerning its coverage obligations, if any, owed to Defendant with
14 respect to claims arising from its product malfunctions. Plaintiff
15 asserts that it does not have a legal obligation to pay damages
16 because the harm Defendant incurred does not constitute "property
17 damage" as defined in the insurance policies described below.
18 Plaintiff also alleges that Defendant breached the "voluntary
19 payments" and "cooperation" provisions of the insurance policies.
20 Further, Plaintiff alleges that Defendant's refusal to grant
21 Plaintiff access to the settlement process with Chip Claimants will
22 prevent Plaintiff from determining if its policies are implicated.

23 There are two relevant insurance policies at issue between the
24 parties: Commercial General Liability Policy No. 721-8839 (CGL
25 Policy) and Commercial Umbrella Liability Policy No. 9835530
26 (Umbrella Policy). The CGL Policy is subject to a limit of \$1
27 million and the Umbrella Policy is subject to a limit of \$25
28 million. The CGL Policy provides, in pertinent part,

1 We will pay those sums that the insured becomes legally
2 obligated to pay as damages because of "bodily injury" or
3 "property damage" to which this insurance applies. . . . We
may, at our discretion, investigate any "occurrence" and
settle any claim or "suit" that may result.

4 Compl., Exh. 1 at 7. The CGL Policy and the Umbrella policy also
5 list the insured's "duties in the event of an occurrence, offense,
6 claim, or suit:"

- 7 (c) You and any other involved insured must:
8 (1) Immediately send us copies of any demands, notices,
9 summonses or legal papers received in connection with the
10 claim or "suit";
11 (2) Authorize us to obtain records and other information;
12 (3) Cooperate with us in the investigation or settlement
13 of the claim or defense against the "suit"; and
14 (4) Assist us, upon our request, in the enforcement of
any right against any person or organization which may be
liable to the insured because of injury or damage to
which this insurance may also apply.
- 15 (d) No insured will, except at that insured's own cost,
voluntarily make a payment, assume any obligation, or
incur any expense, other than first aid, without our
consent.

16 Id. at 15, Exh. 2 at 17.

17 Also relevant to this lawsuit are two other insurance
18 policies. American Guarantee & Liability Insurance Company issued
19 an excess liability policy subject to a \$25 million limit. This
20 policy provides a second layer of excess coverage over Plaintiff's
21 policies. Further, Great American Insurance Company of New York
22 issued an excess liability policy subject to a \$25 million limit.
23 This policy provides a third layer of excess coverage over the
policies issued by Plaintiff and American Guarantee.

24 On February 24, 2009, Great American filed a complaint for
25 declaratory relief and rescission against Defendant in Santa Clara
26 Superior Court. Great American Ins. Co. of New York v. NVIDIA
27 Corp., No 109-CV-133413. Great American alleges that Defendant
28 concealed information that was material to the risk being evaluated

1 by Great American prior to issuing the policy. Specifically, Great
 2 American alleges that prior to the issuance of its insurance
 3 policy, Defendant knew and failed to disclose to Great American
 4 that the GPUs sold to customers and incorporated into notebook
 5 computers were failing.¹ Plaintiff is not a party to that lawsuit.

6 LEGAL STANDARD

7 I. Motion to Dismiss for Lack of Subject Matter Jurisdiction

8 Subject matter jurisdiction is a threshold issue which goes to
 9 the power of the court to hear the case. Federal subject matter
 10 jurisdiction must exist at the time the action is commenced.

11 Morongo Band of Mission Indians v. Cal. State Bd. of Equalization,
 12 858 F.2d 1376, 1380 (9th Cir. 1988). A federal court is presumed
 13 to lack subject matter jurisdiction until the contrary
 14 affirmatively appears. Stock W., Inc. v. Confederated Tribes, 873
 15 F.2d 1221, 1225 (9th Cir. 1989).

16 Dismissal is appropriate under Rule 12(b)(1) when the district
 17 court lacks subject matter jurisdiction over the claim. Fed. R.
 18 Civ. P. 12(b)(1). A Rule 12(b)(1) motion may either attack the
 19 sufficiency of the pleadings to establish federal jurisdiction, or
 20 allege an actual lack of jurisdiction which exists despite the
 21 formal sufficiency of the complaint. Thornhill Publ'g Co. v. Gen.
 22 Tel. & Elecs. Corp., 594 F.2d 730, 733 (9th Cir. 1979); Roberts v.
 23 Corrothers, 812 F.2d 1173, 1177 (9th Cir. 1987).

24 II. Motion to Dismiss for Failure to State a Claim

25 A complaint must contain a "short and plain statement of the

26
 27 ¹The Court takes judicial notice of the fact that, on June 9,
 28 2009, Santa Clara Superior Court Judge Kevin Murphy granted
 Defendant's motion to stay that case pending the outcome of the
 underlying Consolidated Class Action.

1 claim showing that the pleader is entitled to relief." Fed. R.
2 Civ. P. 8(a). Dismissal under Rule 12(b)(6) is appropriate if the
3 complaint does not give the defendant fair notice of a legally
4 cognizable claim and the grounds on which it rests. Bell Atlantic
5 Corp. v. Twombly, 550 U.S. 544, 555 (2007). In considering whether
6 the complaint is sufficient to state a claim, the court will take
7 all material allegations as true and construe them in the light
8 most favorable to the plaintiff. NL Indus., Inc. v. Kaplan, 792
9 F.2d 896, 898 (9th Cir. 1986).

10 When granting a motion to dismiss, the court is generally
11 required to grant the plaintiff leave to amend, even if no request
12 to amend the pleading was made, unless amendment would be futile.
13 Cook, Perkiss & Liehe, Inc. v. N. Cal. Collection Serv. Inc., 911
14 F.2d 242, 246-47 (9th Cir. 1990). In determining whether amendment
15 would be futile, the court examines whether the complaint could be
16 amended to cure the defect requiring dismissal "without
17 contradicting any of the allegations of [the] original complaint."
18 Reddy v. Litton Indus., Inc., 912 F.2d 291, 296 (9th Cir. 1990).
19 Leave to amend should be liberally granted, but an amended
20 complaint cannot allege facts inconsistent with the challenged
21 pleading. Id. at 296-97.

22 DISCUSSION

23 II. Declaratory Judgment Act and Ripeness

24 Defendant argues that Plaintiff's declaratory relief claims
25 are not ripe for review. The Declaratory Judgment Act permits a
26 federal court to "declare the rights and other legal relations" of
27 parties to "a case of actual controversy." 28 U.S.C. § 2201; see
28 Wickland Oil Terminals v. Asarco, Inc., 792 F.2d 887, 893 (9th Cir.

1 1986). The "actual controversy" requirement of the Declaratory
2 Judgment Act is the same as the "case or controversy" requirement
3 of Article III of the United States Constitution. American States
4 Ins. Co. v. Kearns, 15 F.3d 142, 143 (9th Cir. 1993).

5 Under the Declaratory Judgment Act, a two-part test is used
6 to determine whether jurisdiction over a claim for a declaratory
7 judgment is appropriate. Principal Life Ins. Co. v. Robinson, 394
8 F.3d 665, 669 (9th Cir. 2005). First, the Court must determine if
9 an actual case or controversy exists within its jurisdiction. Id.
10 Second, if so, the Court must decide whether to exercise its
11 jurisdiction. Id.

12 A suit for declaratory relief is appropriate if "the facts
13 alleged, under all the circumstances, show that there is a
14 substantial controversy, between parties having adverse legal
15 interests, of sufficient immediacy and reality to warrant the
16 issuance of declaratory judgment. A case is ripe where the
17 essential facts establishing the right to declaratory relief have
18 already occurred." Boeing Co. v. Cascade Corp., 207 F.3d 1177,
19 1192 (9th Cir. 2000).

20 Defendant argues that there is no case or controversy in the
21 present case because Defendant has not asked Plaintiff to pay
22 indemnity for Defendant's unilateral settlements with some of the
23 Chip Claimants. However, the lack of an indemnification claim does
24 not preclude the existence of a case or controversy. Here, the CGL
25 Policy gives Plaintiff the right to investigate and settle claims
26 that Defendant has tendered to Plaintiff concerning allegedly
27 defective GPUs. Plaintiff's alleged injury stems from the
28 possibility of having to honor a policy no longer in force due to

1 Defendant's breach of these provisions. To "have standing to
2 proceed, [Plaintiff] only had to allege it was threatened with
3 injury by virtue of being held to an invalid policy." Government
4 Employees Ins. Co. v. Dizon, 133 F.3d 1220, 1222 n.2 (9th Cir.
5 1998). The Ninth Circuit has "consistently held that a dispute
6 between an insurer and its insureds over the duties imposed by an
7 insurance contract satisfies Article III's case and controversy
8 requirement." Id. Therefore, the Court concludes that the case is
9 ripe for adjudication.

10 The Court now turns its attention to whether to exercise its
11 jurisdiction over the matter. "Ordinarily it would be uneconomical
12 as well as vexatious for a federal court to proceed in a
13 declaratory judgment suit where another suit is pending in a state
14 court presenting the same issues, not governed by federal law,
15 between the same parties." Brillhart v. Excess Ins. Co., 316 U.S.
16 491, 495 (1942). Further, "when a party requests declaratory
17 relief in federal court and a suit is pending in state court
18 presenting the same state law issues, there exists a presumption
19 that the entire suit should be heard in state court." Chamberlain
20 v. Allstate Ins. Co., 931 F.2d 1361, 1366-67 (citing Brillhart, 316
21 U.S. at 495). In Brillhart, the Supreme Court identified several
22 factors for the district court to consider when determining whether
23 to exercise jurisdiction over a declaratory judgment action, and
24 the Ninth Circuit has affirmed that "the Brillhart factors remain
25 the philosophical touchstone for the district court." Government
26 Employees, 133 F.3d at 1225. "The District court should avoid
27 needless determination of State law issues; it should discourage
28 litigants from filing declaratory actions as a means of forum

1 shopping; and it should avoid duplicative litigation." Id.
2 (internal citations omitted). The Ninth Circuit has also suggested
3 considerations in addition to the Brillhart factors that may assist
4 in deciding whether to exercise jurisdiction, including:

5 [W]hether the declaratory action will settle all
6 aspects of the controversy; whether the declaratory
7 action will serve a useful purpose in clarifying the
8 legal relations at issue; whether the declaratory
9 action is being sought merely for the purposes of
procedural fencing or to obtain a "res judicata"
advantage; or whether the use of a declaratory action
will result in entanglement between the federal and
State court systems.

10 Id. at 1225 n.5.

11 Defendant argues that the Brillhart factors weigh against the
12 Court's exercise of discretion because the state coverage action,
13 in which Great American is suing Defendant for failing to disclose
14 that it knew the GPUs it sold to customers were malfunctioning,
15 involves the same set of facts as the present lawsuit. However,
16 Plaintiff is not even a party in the state action. That case
17 involves a different insurance carrier and policy and seeks
18 different coverage determinations. The Great American policy was a
19 third layer of excess coverage over Plaintiff's policies. Unlike
20 Plaintiff's policies, the Great American Policy only provides
21 coverage for "loss," which is defined as "those sums actually paid
22 in settlement or satisfaction of a claim which you are legally
23 obligated to pay as damages after making proper deductions for all
24 recoveries and salvage." Hairston Decl. Ex. C at 18. Moreover,
25 the state court action could result in a judgment that does not
26 concern the grounds raised in the instant lawsuit. Therefore, it
27 is not clear whether the state action will provide an adequate
28 forum for Plaintiff to obtain the relief that it is seeking in the

1 present case. Although the factual underpinning of the state
2 action and the present case is similar, the differences are too
3 great to consider them parallel proceedings for purposes of the
4 Declaratory Judgment Act. Therefore, the Court concludes that the
5 present suit is a proper use of the Declaratory Judgment Act, 28
6 U.S.C. § 2201, to resolve the insurance coverage claims raised by
7 Plaintiff.

8 II. Motion to Dismiss

9 Defendant argues that count one of Plaintiff's complaint
10 should be dismissed because Plaintiff did not adequately plead all
11 of the required elements of the claim. In this count, Plaintiff
12 seeks a declaration from the Court that Defendant breached the
13 cooperation clause and the voluntary payments clause of the
14 insurance policies. California courts have consistently held that
15 an insurer need not demonstrate prejudice in order to sue under a
16 voluntary payments clause. Low v. Golden Eagle Ins. Co., 110 Cal.
17 App. 4th 1532, 1544-45 (2003). However, an insured's breach of "a
18 cooperation clause does not excuse the insurer's performance unless
19 the insurer can show that it suffered prejudice." Belz v.
20 Clarendon America Ins. Co., 158 Cal. App. 4th 615, 625 (2007).

21 Here, Plaintiff has failed adequately to plead that it suffered
22 prejudice; however, Plaintiff does not seek to excuse its
23 performance. Plaintiff merely requests that the Court declare that
24 Defendant must comply with the cooperation clause. No prejudice
25 need be shown to justify such a declaration. Therefore, the Court
26 denies Defendant's motion to dismiss count one.

27 III. Motion to Stay

28 "To eliminate the risk of inconsistent factual determination

1 that could prejudice the insured, a stay of the declaratory relief
2 action pending resolution of the third party suit is appropriate
3 when the coverage question turns on facts to be litigated in the
4 underlying action." Montrose Chemical Corp. v. Superior Court, 6
5 Cal. 4th 287, 301 (1993). Three possible concerns arise when
6 considering the trial of coverage issues which necessarily turn
7 upon facts to be litigated in another pending lawsuit.

8 First, the insurer, who is supposed to be on the side of the
9 insured and with whom there is a special relationship,
effectively attacks its insured and thus gives aid and
10 comfort to the claimant in the [pending] suit; second, such a
circumstance requires the insured to fight a two-front war,
11 litigating not only with the underlying claimant, but also
expending precious resources fighting an insurer over
12 coverage questions -- this effectively undercuts one of the
primary reasons for purchasing liability insurance; and
13 third, there is a real risk that, if the declaratory relief
action proceeds to judgment before the underlying action is
14 resolved, the insured could be collaterally estopped to
contest issues in the latter by the results in the former.
15 It is only where there is no potential conflict between the
trial of the coverage dispute and the underlying action that
16 an insurer can obtain an early trial date and resolution of
its claim that coverage does not exist.

17 Haskel, Inc. v. Superior Court, 33 Cal. App. 4th 963, 979 (1995).

18 Here, a stay is not warranted because there is no risk of
19 inconsistent factual determinations. The factual issues to be
20 litigated in the declaratory judgment action are entirely different
21 from those to be litigated in the Consolidated Class Action.
22 Plaintiff filed this declaratory judgment action seeking a
23 declaration concerning its coverage obligations with respect to
24 claims asserted by the Chip Claimants against Defendant. The
25 present action will involve a determination of the reasonableness
26 of the settlements between Defendant and the Chip Claimants,
27 whether Defendant breached its duties under the insurance policies
28 and whether the terms of the policies cover Defendant's claims.


1 The Chip Claimants are not part of the Consolidated Class Action
2 and the present case does not seek a declaration as to Plaintiff's
3 coverage obligations for the Consolidate Class Action. This is not
4 an instance where Defendant will be required to fight a "two-front"
5 war. Further, Defendant's argument that the instant case should be
6 stayed because it is concerned that it may be collaterally estopped
7 from mounting certain defenses in the Consolidated Class Action is
8 without merit. The mere possibility of collateral estoppel does
9 not justify a stay of the declaratory proceeding. Allstate Ins.
10 Co. v. Gillette, 2006 WL 997236, *4 (N.D. Cal). Defendant may seek
11 a protective order and move for filing under seal any documents
12 that could be prejudicial to it in other litigation. Accordingly,
13 the Court denies Defendant's motion for a stay of this case.
14 Litigation relating to Defendant's duty to cooperate and its
15 voluntary payments may proceed.

CONCLUSION

17 For the foregoing reasons, the Court denies Defendant's
18 motions to dismiss and stay. (Docket Nos. 11 and 12). Defendant
19 shall file an answer within twenty days from the date of this
20 order.

IT IS SO ORDERED.

Dated: 8/18/09



CLAUDIA WILKEN
United States District Judge