

118TH CONGRESS
1ST SESSION

H. R. 3446

To impose certain limitations on consent decrees and settlement agreements by agencies that require the agencies to take regulatory action in accordance with the terms thereof, and for other purposes.

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

MAY 17, 2023

Mrs. SPARTZ (for herself, Mr. CRAWFORD, Mr. MOOLENAAR, Mr. CLOUD, Mr. STEWART, Mr. TIFFANY, and Mrs. LESKO) introduced the following bill; which was referred to the Committee on the Judiciary

A BILL

To impose certain limitations on consent decrees and settlement agreements by agencies that require the agencies to take regulatory action in accordance with the terms thereof, and for other purposes.

1 *Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representa-*
2 *tives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,*

3 **SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.**

4 This Act may be cited as the “Sunshine for Regu-
5 latory Decrees and Settlements Act of 2023”.

6 **SEC. 2. DEFINITIONS.**

7 In this Act—

1 (1) the terms “agency” and “agency action”
2 have the meanings given those terms under section
3 551 of title 5, United States Code;

4 (2) the term “covered civil action” means a civil
5 action—

6 (A) seeking to compel agency action;

7 (B) alleging that the agency is unlawfully
8 withholding or unreasonably delaying an agency
9 action relating to a regulatory action that would
10 affect the rights of—

11 (i) private persons other than the per-
12 son bringing the action; or

13 (ii) a State, local, or tribal govern-
14 ment; and

15 (C) brought under—

16 (i) chapter 7 of title 5, United States
17 Code; or

18 (ii) any other statute authorizing such
19 an action;

20 (3) the term “covered consent decree” means—

21 (A) a consent decree entered into in a cov-
22 ered civil action; and

23 (B) any other consent decree that requires
24 agency action relating to a regulatory action
25 that affects the rights of—

1 (i) private persons other than the per-
2 son bringing the action; or

3 (ii) a State, local, or tribal govern-
4 ment;

5 (4) the term “covered consent decree or settle-
6 ment agreement” means a covered consent decree
7 and a covered settlement agreement; and

8 (5) the term “covered settlement agreement”
9 means—

10 (A) a settlement agreement entered into in
11 a covered civil action; and

12 (B) any other settlement agreement that
13 requires agency action relating to a regulatory
14 action that affects the rights of—

15 (i) private persons other than the per-
16 son bringing the action; or

17 (ii) a State, local, or tribal govern-
18 ment.

19 **SEC. 3. CONSENT DECREE AND SETTLEMENT REFORM.**

20 (a) PLEADINGS AND PRELIMINARY MATTERS.—

21 (1) IN GENERAL.—In any covered civil action,
22 the agency against which the covered civil action is
23 brought shall publish the notice of intent to sue and
24 the complaint in a readily accessible manner, includ-
25 ing by making the notice of intent to sue and the

1 complaint available online not later than 15 days
2 after receiving service of the notice of intent to sue
3 or complaint, respectively.

4 (2) ENTRY OF A COVERED CONSENT DECREE
5 OR SETTLEMENT AGREEMENT.—A party may not
6 make a motion for entry of a covered consent decree
7 or to dismiss a civil action pursuant to a covered set-
8 tlement agreement until after the end of proceedings
9 in accordance with paragraph (1) and subpara-
10 graphs (A) and (B) of paragraph (2) of subsection
11 (d) or subsection (d)(3)(A), whichever is later.

12 (b) INTERVENTION.—

13 (1) REBUTTABLE PRESUMPTION.—In consid-
14 ering a motion to intervene in a covered civil action
15 or a civil action in which a covered consent decree
16 or settlement agreement has been proposed that is
17 filed by a person who alleges that the agency action
18 in dispute would affect the person, the court shall
19 presume, subject to rebuttal, that the interests of
20 the person would not be represented adequately by
21 the existing parties to the action.

22 (2) STATE, LOCAL, AND TRIBAL GOVERN-
23 MENTS.—In considering a motion to intervene in a
24 covered civil action or a civil action in which a cov-
25 ered consent decree or settlement agreement has

1 been proposed that is filed by a State, local, or tribal
2 government, the court shall take due account of
3 whether the movant—

4 (A) administers jointly with an agency that
5 is a defendant in the action the statutory provi-
6 sions that give rise to the regulatory action to
7 which the action relates; or

8 (B) administers an authority under State,
9 local, or tribal law that would be preempted by
10 the regulatory action to which the action re-
11 lates.

12 (c) SETTLEMENT NEGOTIATIONS.—Efforts to settle
13 a covered civil action or otherwise reach an agreement on
14 a covered consent decree or settlement agreement shall—

15 (1) be conducted pursuant to the mediation or
16 alternative dispute resolution program of the court
17 or by a district judge other than the presiding judge,
18 magistrate judge, or special master, as determined
19 appropriate by the presiding judge; and

20 (2) include any party that intervenes in the ac-
21 tion.

22 (d) PUBLICATION OF AND COMMENT ON COVERED
23 CONSENT DECREES OR SETTLEMENT AGREEMENTS.—

24 (1) IN GENERAL.—Not later than 60 days be-
25 fore the date on which a covered consent decree or

1 settlement agreement is filed with a court, the agen-
2 cy seeking to enter the covered consent decree or
3 settlement agreement shall publish in the Federal
4 Register and online—

5 (A) the proposed covered consent decree or
6 settlement agreement; and

7 (B) a statement providing—

8 (i) the statutory basis for the covered
9 consent decree or settlement agreement;
10 and

11 (ii) a description of the terms of the
12 covered consent decree or settlement agree-
13 ment, including whether it provides for the
14 award of attorneys' fees or costs and, if so,
15 the basis for including the award.

16 (2) PUBLIC COMMENT.—

17 (A) IN GENERAL.—An agency seeking to
18 enter a covered consent decree or settlement
19 agreement shall accept public comment during
20 the period described in paragraph (1) on any
21 issue relating to the matters alleged in the com-
22 plaint in the applicable civil action or addressed
23 or affected by the proposed covered consent de-
24 cree or settlement agreement.

1 (B) RESPONSE TO COMMENTS.—An agency
2 shall respond to any comment received under
3 subparagraph (A).

4 (C) SUBMISSIONS TO COURT.—When mov-
5 ing that the court enter a proposed covered con-
6 sent decree or settlement agreement or for dis-
7 missal pursuant to a proposed covered consent
8 decree or settlement agreement, an agency
9 shall—

10 (i) inform the court of the statutory
11 basis for the proposed covered consent de-
12 cree or settlement agreement and its
13 terms;

14 (ii) submit to the court a summary of
15 the comments received under subparagraph
16 (A) and the response of the agency to the
17 comments;

18 (iii) submit to the court a certified
19 index of the administrative record of the
20 notice and comment proceeding; and

21 (iv) make the administrative record
22 described in clause (iii) fully accessible to
23 the court.

24 (D) INCLUSION IN RECORD.—The court
25 shall include in the court record for a civil ac-

1 tion the certified index of the administrative
2 record submitted by an agency under subpara-
3 graph (C)(iii) and any documents listed in the
4 index which any party or amicus curiae appear-
5 ing before the court in the action submits to the
6 court.

7 (3) PUBLIC HEARINGS PERMITTED.—

8 (A) IN GENERAL.—After providing notice
9 in the Federal Register and online, an agency
10 may hold a public hearing regarding whether to
11 enter into a proposed covered consent decree or
12 settlement agreement.

13 (B) RECORD.—If an agency holds a public
14 hearing under subparagraph (A)—

15 (i) the agency shall—

16 (I) submit to the court a sum-
17 mary of the proceedings;

18 (II) submit to the court a cer-
19 tified index of the hearing record; and

20 (III) provide access to the hear-
21 ing record to the court; and

22 (ii) the full hearing record shall be in-
23 cluded in the court record.

24 (4) MANDATORY DEADLINES.—If a proposed
25 covered consent decree or settlement agreement re-

1 quires an agency action by a date certain, the agen-
2 cy shall, when moving for entry of the covered con-
3 sent decree or settlement agreement or dismissal
4 based on the covered consent decree or settlement
5 agreement, inform the court of—

6 (A) any required regulatory action the
7 agency has not taken that the covered consent
8 decree or settlement agreement does not ad-
9 dress;

10 (B) how the covered consent decree or set-
11 tlement agreement, if approved, would affect
12 the discharge of the duties described in sub-
13 paragraph (A); and

14 (C) why the effects of the covered consent
15 decree or settlement agreement on the manner
16 in which the agency discharges its duties is in
17 the public interest.

18 (e) SUBMISSION BY THE GOVERNMENT.—

19 (1) IN GENERAL.—For any proposed covered
20 consent decree or settlement agreement that con-
21 tains a term described in paragraph (2), the Attor-
22 ney General or, if the matter is being litigated inde-
23 pendently by an agency, the head of the agency shall
24 submit to the court a certification that the Attorney
25 General or head of the agency approves the proposed

1 covered consent decree or settlement agreement. The
2 Attorney General or head of the agency shall person-
3 ally sign any certification submitted under this para-
4 graph.

5 (2) TERMS.—A term described in this para-
6 graph is—

7 (A) in the case of a covered consent decree,
8 a term that—

9 (i) converts into a nondiscretionary
10 duty a discretionary authority of an agency
11 to propose, promulgate, revise, or amend
12 regulations;

13 (ii) commits an agency to expend
14 funds that have not been appropriated and
15 that have not been budgeted for the regu-
16 latory action in question;

17 (iii) commits an agency to seek a par-
18 ticular appropriation or budget authoriza-
19 tion;

20 (iv) divests an agency of discretion
21 committed to the agency by statute or the
22 Constitution of the United States, without
23 regard to whether the discretion was
24 granted to respond to changing cir-
25 cumstances, to make policy or managerial

1 choices, or to protect the rights of third
2 parties; or

3 (v) otherwise affords relief that the
4 court could not enter under its own au-
5 thority upon a final judgment in the civil
6 action; or

7 (B) in the case of a covered settlement
8 agreement, a term—

9 (i) that provides a remedy for a fail-
10 ure by the agency to comply with the
11 terms of the covered settlement agreement
12 other than the revival of the civil action re-
13 solved by the covered settlement agree-
14 ment; and

15 (ii) that—

16 (I) interferes with the authority
17 of an agency to revise, amend, or
18 issue rules under the procedures set
19 forth in chapter 5 of title 5, United
20 States Code, or any other statute or
21 Executive order prescribing rule-
22 making procedures for a rulemaking
23 that is the subject of the covered set-
24 tlement agreement;

1 (II) commits the agency to ex-
2 pend funds that have not been appro-
3 priated and that have not been budg-
4 eted for the regulatory action in ques-
5 tion; or

6 (III) for such a covered settle-
7 ment agreement that commits the
8 agency to exercise in a particular way
9 discretion which was committed to the
10 agency by statute or the Constitution
11 of the United States to respond to
12 changing circumstances, to make pol-
13 icy or managerial choices, or to pro-
14 tect the rights of third parties.

15 (f) REVIEW BY COURT.—

16 (1) AMICUS.—A court considering a proposed
17 covered consent decree or settlement agreement shall
18 presume, subject to rebuttal, that it is proper to
19 allow amicus participation relating to the covered
20 consent decree or settlement agreement by any per-
21 son who filed public comments or participated in a
22 public hearing on the covered consent decree or set-
23 tlement agreement under paragraph (2) or (3) of
24 subsection (d).

25 (2) REVIEW OF DEADLINES.—

1 (A) PROPOSED COVERED CONSENT DE-
2 CREES.—For a proposed covered consent de-
3 cree, a court shall not approve the covered con-
4 sent decree unless the proposed covered consent
5 decree allows sufficient time and incorporates
6 adequate procedures for the agency to comply
7 with chapter 5 of title 5, United States Code,
8 and other applicable statutes that govern rule-
9 making and, unless contrary to the public inter-
10 est, the provisions of any Executive order that
11 governs rulemaking.

12 (B) PROPOSED COVERED SETTLEMENT
13 AGREEMENTS.—For a proposed covered settle-
14 ment agreement, a court shall ensure that the
15 covered settlement agreement allows sufficient
16 time and incorporates adequate procedures for
17 the agency to comply with chapter 5 of title 5,
18 United States Code, and other applicable stat-
19 utes that govern rulemaking and, unless con-
20 trary to the public interest, the provisions of
21 any Executive order that governs rulemaking.

22 (g) ANNUAL REPORTS.—Each agency shall submit to
23 Congress an annual report that, for the year covered by
24 the report, includes—

1 (1) the number, identity, and content of covered
2 civil actions brought against and covered consent de-
3 crees or settlement agreements entered against or
4 into by the agency; and

5 (2) a description of the statutory basis for—

6 (A) each covered consent decree or settle-
7 ment agreement entered against or into by the
8 agency; and

9 (B) any award of attorneys fees or costs in
10 a civil action resolved by a covered consent de-
11 cree or settlement agreement entered against or
12 into by the agency.

13 **SEC. 4. MOTIONS TO MODIFY CONSENT DECREES.**

14 If an agency moves a court to modify a covered con-
15 sent decree or settlement agreement and the basis of the
16 motion is that the terms of the covered consent decree or
17 settlement agreement are no longer fully in the public in-
18 terest due to the obligations of the agency to fulfill other
19 duties or due to changed facts and circumstances, the
20 court shall review the motion and the covered consent de-
21 cree or settlement agreement de novo.

22 **SEC. 5. EFFECTIVE DATE.**

23 This Act shall apply to—

24 (1) any covered civil action filed on or after the
25 date of enactment of this Act; and

1 (2) any covered consent decree or settlement
2 agreement proposed to a court on or after the date
3 of enactment of this Act.

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