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8	UNITED STAT	ES DISTRICT COURT
9	CENTRAL DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA	
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11	MARGARET MEEHAN,) NO. SACV 11-01310 (SS)
12	Plaintiff,	,))
13	ν.	MEMORANDUM DECISION AND ORDER
14	MICHAEL J. ASTRUE, Commissioner of the Social	,))
15	Security Administration,	,))
16	Defendant.))
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18		I.
19	INTRODUCTION	
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21	Margaret Meehan ("Plaintiff") brings this action seeking to reverse	
22	the decision of the Commissioner	of the Social Security Administration
23	(the "Commissioner" or the "Agency") denying her application for	
24	Disability Insurance Benefits ("DIB") and Supplemental Security Income	
25	("SSI") benefits. The parties	consented, pursuant to 28 U.S.C. §
26	636(c), to the jurisdiction of th	e undersigned United States Magistrate
27	Judge. For the reasons stated	below, the decision of the Agency is
28	REVERSED and REMANDED for furthe	r proceedings.

II.

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PROCEDURAL HISTORY

5 Asserting that she became disabled on June 1, 2007, Plaintiff filed an application for Title II DIB on October 3, 2008 and an application 6 7 for Title XVI SSI on November 4, 2008. (Administrative Record ("AR") 139-144). The Agency denied Plaintiff's initial applications on March 8 3, 2009 and on reconsideration on August 6, 2009. 9 (AR 69, 79). Plaintiff then requested a hearing, which was held before Administrative 10 Law Judge Helen E. Heese (the "ALJ") on November 15, 2010. (AR 16). 11 Plaintiff appeared with counsel and testified at the hearing. (AR 41). 12 A vocational expert and a non-examining medical expert also testified 13 14 at the hearing. (AR 58-60, 49-52). On December 3, 2010, the ALJ issued 15 a decision denying benefits. (AR 13-24). Plaintiff sought review before the Appeals Council, (AR 11), which denied Plaintiff's request 16 17 on July 25, 2011. (AR 1-3). On September 2, 2011, Plaintiff filed the 18 instant action.

III.

THE FIVE-STEP SEQUENTIAL EVALUATION PROCESS

To qualify for disability benefits, a claimant must demonstrate a medically determinable physical or mental impairment that not only prevents engagement in substantial gainful activity, defined by 20 C.F.R. § 416.910 as for-profit work involving significant and productive physical or mental duties, but that is expected to either last for a continuous period of at least twelve months or result in death. <u>See</u>

<u>Reddick v. Chater</u>, 157 F.3d 715, 721 (9th Cir. 1998) (citing 42 U.S.C. 1 § 423(d)(1)(A)); see also Tackett v. Apfel, 180 F.3d 1094, 1098 (9th 2 Cir. 1999) (citing 42 U.S.C. § 423(d)(2)(A)) (noting that the impairment 3 must render the claimant incapable of performing his previously 4 performed work or "any other substantial gainful employment that exists 5 in the national economy."). Unless those two requirements are met, a 6 7 claimant is not disabled within the meaning of the Social Security Act. 8 Tackett, 180 F.3d at 1098.

10 To decide if a claimant is entitled to benefits, an ALJ conducts 11 a five-step inquiry. 20 C.F.R. § 416.920. The steps are:

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- (1) Is the claimant presently engaged in substantial gainful activity? If so, the claimant is found not disabled. If not, proceed to step two.
- (2) Is the claimant's impairment severe? If not, the claimant is found not disabled. If so, proceed to step three.
- 19 (3) Does the claimant's impairment meet or equal the 20 requirements of any impairment listed at 20 C.F.R. Part 21 404, Subpart P, Appendix 1? If so, the claimant is 22 found disabled. If not, proceed to step four.
 - (4) Is the claimant capable of performing his past work? If so, the claimant is found not disabled. If not, proceed to step five.
 - (5) Is the claimant able to do any other work? If not, the claimant is found disabled. If so, the claimant is found not disabled.

1 <u>Tackett</u>, 180 F.3d at 1098-99; see also <u>Bustamante v. Massanari</u>, 262 F.3d 2 949, 953-54 (9th Cir. 2001); 20 C.F.R. § 416.920(b)-(g)(1).

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The claimant has the burden of proof at steps one through four, and 4 the Commissioner has the burden of proof at step five. Bustamante, 262 5 F.3d at 953-54. If, at step four, the claimant meets his burden of 6 7 establishing an inability to perform the past work, the Commissioner must show that the claimant can perform some other work that exists in 8 "significant numbers" in the national economy, taking into account the 9 claimant's residual functional capacity ("RFC"),¹ age, education and 10 11 work experience. Tackett, 180 F.3d at 1100; 20 C.F.R. § 416.920(g)(1). The Commissioner may do so by the testimony of a vocational expert or 12 13 by reference to the Medical-Vocational Guidelines appearing in 20 C.F.R. Part 404, Subpart P, Appendix 2 (commonly known as "the Grids"). 14 15 Osenbrock v. Apfel, 240 F.3d 1157, 1162 (9th Cir. 2001). When a 16 claimant has both exertional (strength-related) and nonexertional 17 limitations, the Grids are inapplicable and the ALJ must take the testimony of a vocational expert. Moore v. Apfel, 216 F.3d 864, 869 18 (9th Cir. 2000). 19

IV.

THE ALJ'S DECISION

The ALJ employed the five-step sequential evaluation process and concluded, at step one, that Plaintiff had not engaged in substantial gainful employment since June 1, 2007. (AR 18). At step two, the ALJ

^{27 &}lt;sup>1</sup> Residual functional capacity is "the most [one] can still do despite [his] limitations" and represents an assessment "based on all the relevant evidence." 20 C.F.R. § 416.945(a).

found that Plaintiff had severe impairments of fibromyalgia and 1 degenerative disc disease of the lumbar spine. 2 (Id.). The ALJ explained that Plaintiff's conditions of fibromyaldia and degenerative 3 disc disease "have caused [Plaintiff] more than minimal limitations in 4 her ability to perform work related activity and are therefore severe 5 as defined by Social Security Regulations." (Id.). The ALJ determined 6 7 that Plaintiff's "mental impairment of depression . . . does not cause more than minimal limitation in her ability to perform basic mental work 8 activities and is therefore nonsevere." (Id.). 9

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11 At step three, the ALJ found that Plaintiff did not "have an impairment or combination of impairments that meets or medically equals 12 one of the listed impairments in 20 C.F.R. Part 404, Subpart P, Appendix 13 1." (AR 20). At step four, the ALJ determined that Plaintiff "has the 14 15 residual functional capacity to perform light work as defined in 20 CFR 404.1567(b) and 416.967(b) except that she must be able to change 16 positions briefly throughout the day, for 1-3 minutes per hour." 17 (AR 20). The ALJ found that Plaintiff is capable of performing her past 18 relevant work as a loan officer. (AR 24). 19 The ALJ reasoned that 20 Plaintiff had the RFC to perform light work with restrictions and that 21 Plaintiff's past work as a loan officer "does not require the 22 performance of work-related activities precluded by the claimant's 23 [RFC]." Accordingly, the ALJ did not proceed to step five and instead 24 found that Plaintiff was not under a disability within the meaning of 25 the Social Security Act. (AR 16, 24).

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STANDARD OF REVIEW

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4	Under 42 U.S.C. § 405(g), a district court may review the
5	Commissioner's decision to deny benefits. The court may set aside the
6	Commissioner's decision when the ALJ's findings are based on legal error
7	or are not supported by substantial evidence in the record as a whole.
8	<u>Aukland v. Massanari</u> , 257 F.3d 1033, 1035 (9th Cir. 2001); <u>Smolen v.</u>
9	<u>Chater</u> , 80 F.3d 1273, 1279 (9th Cir. 1996).
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11	"Substantial evidence is more than a scintilla, but less than a
12	preponderance." <u>Reddick</u> , 157 F.3d at 720. It is "relevant evidence
13	which a reasonable person might accept as adequate to support a
14	conclusion." Id. To determine whether substantial evidence supports
15	a finding, the court must "'consider the record as a whole, weighing
16	both evidence that supports and evidence that detracts from the
17	[Commissioner's] conclusion.'" <u>Aukland</u> , 257 F.3d at 1035 (quoting <u>Penny</u>
18	<u>v. Sullivan</u> , 2 F.3d 953, 956 (9th Cir. 1993)). If the evidence can
19	reasonably support either affirming or reversing that conclusion, the
20	court may not substitute its judgment for that of the Commissioner.
21	<u>Reddick</u> , 157 F.3d at 720-21.
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23	VI.
24	DISCUSSION
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26	Plaintiff contends that the ALJ erred for two reasons: (1) the ALJ
27	did not provide specific and convincing reasons for rejecting
28	Plaintiff's credibility and subjective complaints, (Memorandum in

Support of Plaintiff's Complaint ("Complaint Memo.") at 6); and (2) the ALJ failed to give specific and legitimate reasons for rejecting the opinion of Plaintiff's treating physician. (<u>Id.</u>).

The Court agrees with Plaintiff's two grounds for remand. For the reasons discussed below, the Court finds that the ALJ's decision should be reversed and this action remanded for further proceedings.

9 A. <u>The ALJ Failed To Provide Clear And Convincing Reasons For</u> 10 <u>Rejecting Plaintiff's Subjective Complaints</u>

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Plaintiff's first claim is that the ALJ erred by failing to 12 articulate clear and convincing reasons for rejecting her subjective 13 14 complaints. (Complaint Memo. at 6). Specifically, Plaintiff contends 15 that the ALJ erred in demanding objective evidence regarding Plaintiff's 16 subjective symptoms of pain and fatique arising from fibromyalgia. 17 (Complaint Memo. at 8). Plaintiff argues that the ALJ improperly discounted the treating physician's evaluation of Plaintiff because it 18 19 was "based largely on Plaintiff's subjective complaints." (Plaintiff's 20 Reply to Memorandum in Support of Defendant's Answer ("Reply") at 3). 21 For the reasons discussed below, the Court agrees with Plaintiff's 22 contentions.

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The Court notes that an ALJ may reject a plaintiff's testimony upon an explicit credibility finding that is "supported by a specific, cogent reason for the disbelief." <u>Rashad v. Sullivan</u>, 903 F.2d 1229, 1231 (9th Cir. 1990) (internal citations omitted). Unless there is affirmative evidence showing that the plaintiff is malingering, the ALJ's reasons

1 for rejecting the plaintiff's testimony must be "clear and convincing."
2 Lester v. Chater, 81 F.3d 821, 834 (9th Cir. 1995).

The record provides no affirmative evidence showing that Plaintiff 4 5 was malingering. Instead, the record suggests that Plaintiff was truthful. Dr. Sami Nafoosi, a non-examining medical expert, testified 6 7 before the ALJ that he found no indication, based on either Plaintiff's testimony or medical records, that Plaintiff was a malingerer. (AR 57). 8 9 Similarly, the State's examining psychiatrist, Dr. Romualdo Rodriguez, 10 concluded that Plaintiff appeared genuine and truthful during examination. (AR 343-44). Given the absence of affirmative evidence 11 that Plaintiff was malingering, the ALJ was required to provide clear 12 13 and convincing reasons for rejecting Plaintiff's testimony. No such 14 reasons were provided.

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16 The ALJ explained that objective medical evidence did not support 17 Plaintiff's allegations of work-related limitations. (AR 22). The ALJ 18 reached this conclusion by relying on examinations performed by the 19 State's examining physician, Dr. Payam Moazzaz, and Plaintiff's 20 rheumatologist, Dr. Javid Ahmed. (AR 21-22). Upon examining Plaintiff, Dr. Moazzaz concluded that she had a normal gait and full, pain-free 21 22 range of motion in the neck, elbow, forearm, wrists, fingers, knees, 23 ankles, and feet. (AR 276-77). Dr. Moazzaz further concluded that 24 Plaintiff could not only lift and carry 50 pounds occasionally and 25 25 pounds frequently but also sit, stand and walk six hours out of an eight 26 hour workday. (AR 279). Dr. Ahmed's examination similarly revealed 27 that Plaintiff had "normal range of motion of all joints [and] no 28 synovitis or effusion [on all joints]." (AR 22, 327).

These findings, however, are not inconsistent with Plaintiff's 1 2 complaint of fibromyalgia and do not amount to a clear and convincing 3 reason for rejecting Plaintiff's substantive pain complaints. The Ninth Circuit has recognized that objective findings "do not establish the 4 presence or absence of fibromyalgia." Jordan v. Northrop Grumman Corp. 5 Welfare Plan, 370 F.3d 869, 872 (9th Cir. 2004) (overruled on other 6 7 grounds by Abatie v. Alta Health & Life Ins. Co., 458 F.3d 955, 963 (9th Cir. 2006)). As stated in Jordan: 8

[F]ibromyalgia's cause or causes are unknown, there is no cure, and, of greatest importance to disability law, its symptoms are entirely subjective. There are no laboratory tests for the presence or severity of fibromyalgia.

Id.; see also Green-Young v. Barnhart, 335 F.3d 99, 108-09 (2d Cir. 15 2003) (explaining that physical examinations for fibrositis patients 16 17 will usually yield normal results-a full range of motion, no joint 18 swelling, normal muscle strength and neurological reactions).

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Here, Plaintiff provides ample evidence that she suffers from 21 fibromyalqia. Dr. Ahmed diagnosed Plaintiff with fibromyalgia 22 associated with irritable bowel syndrome, hypothyroidism, osteoarthritis of the first CMC joint and depression. (AR 327-28). He explained that 23 24 Plaintiff had "multiple tissue tender and trigger points and tenderness in the right first CMC joint", (Id.), and concluded that Plaintiff's 25 26 condition satisfied the American College of Rheumatology criteria for 27 fibromyalgia. (AR 308). Further, Plaintiff's complaint of disabling

pain, extreme fatigue and disturbed sleep are consistent with the 1 symptoms of fibromyalgia. See Sarchet v. Chater, 78 F.3d 305, 306 (7th 2 3 Cir. 1996) (observing that the principle symptoms of fibromyalgia are "pain all over," fatigue, disturbed sleep, and multiple tender spots). 4 Nearly two years of medical records obtained from Plaintiff's treating 5 physician, Dr. Daniel Strub, show that Plaintiff suffered from 6 7 persistent joint pain and fatigue. (AR 329, 378, 381, 384, 389, 399, 402, 407). 8

The Ninth Circuit has recognized that objective findings are not dispositive with respect to whether a person does or does not suffer from fibroyalgia. Jordan, 370 F.3d at 872 (9th Cir. 2004). Thus, the ALJ erred in rejecting Plaintiff's subjective symptoms as inconsistent with the objective medical evidence. <u>See Bunnell v. Sullivan</u>, 947 F.2d 341, 346-47 (9th Cir. 1991).

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17 Further, because Plaintiff's subjective statements of depression were consistent with her medical records, the ALJ erred in rejecting 18 19 Plaintiff's assertion that she suffered from depression. The ALJ 20 reasoned that Plaintiff "did not allege any depression symptoms in her 21 application of benefits, only recently sought formal treatment for this 22 disorder, and [provided] no indication that her symptoms . . . will 23 persist for one year." (AR 22). Although Plaintiff did not mention any 24 depression symptoms in her initial application, the disability report 25 filed with Plaintiff's appeal lists depression as one reason for seeking 26 treatment from Dr. Strub. (AR 185-86). Moreover, Dr. Strub 27 consistently noted that Plaintiff's symptoms were consistent with

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depression. (AR 22, 282, 329, 364, 367, 370, 375, 378, 381, 384, 389, 1 2 399, 402, 407). On several occasions, Dr. Strub noted that Plaintiff's depression was progressing and referred Plaintiff to a psychiatrist, (AR 3 387, 404), who noted that Plaintiff presented with "at least a 3 year 4 history of mood swings and depression, exacerbated by difficulty with 5 fibromyalgia." (AR 410). That psychiatrist, Dr. Samuel Dey, further 6 7 noted that Plaintiff had at least a three-year history of depression and had been taking Celexa, an antidepressant, for eight years. (AR 410). 8 Dr. Dey advised Plaintiff continue taking Celexa and consider 9 10 psychotherapy. (AR 410-11). The ALJ failed to provide a clear and 11 convincing basis for rejecting Plaintiff's testimony that she was 12 depressed.

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14 The ALJ also failed to offer a clear and convincing basis for denying Plaintiff's claim that daily headaches contributed to her 15 16 alleged disability. Although Dr. Strub's treatment notes report "no 17 history of headaches", (AR 22, 282, 329, 364, 367, 370, 375, 378, 381, 384, 389, 399, 402, 407), Dr. Ahmed's notes indicate that Plaintiff 18 19 suffered from "headaches once or twice a week." (AR 326). This single 20 inconsistency is not a sufficiently clear and convincing reason to 21 reject Plaintiff's claim.

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The ALJ failed to provide clear and convincing reasons, supported by the record, to reject Plaintiff's testimony. Accordingly, remand is required and full credit must be given to Plaintiff's testimony.

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1B.The ALJ Failed To Provide Specific And Legitimate Reason To Reject2The Treating Physician's Opinions

Plaintiff's second claim is that the ALJ failed to properly 4 consider the opinions of her treating physician, Dr. Strub. (Complaint 5 Memo. at 10). Specifically, Plaintiff argues that the ALJ improperly 6 7 relied on the opinions of "one-time examining physicians hired by the Social Security Administration, " namely, Dr. Moazzaz, D. Rodriguez, and 8 9 Dr. Nafoosi. (Id.). Plaintiff also argues that the ALJ improperly 10 disregarded Dr. Strub's opinion regarding her physical and mental 11 limitations. (Id.). The Court agrees.

13 The opinions of treating physicians are entitled to special weight because the treating physician is hired to cure and has a better 14 15 opportunity to know and observe the claimant as an individual. Magallanes v. Bowen, 881 F.2d 747, 751 (9th Cir. 1989). 16 Where a 17 treating physician's opinion is not contradicted by another doctor, it may be rejected only for "clear and convincing" reasons. Lester, 81 18 19 F.3d at 830. Further, even where a treating physician's opinion is 20 contradicted by another doctor, an ALJ may not reject the treating physician's opinion without providing specific, legitimate reasons, 21 22 supported by substantial evidence in the record. Id.

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Here, because Dr. Strub's opinions are arguably contradicted by other doctors, the ALJ must provide "specific and legitimate reasons" to reject Dr. Strub's opinions. <u>See Lester</u>, 81 F.3d at 830. The ALJ found that Dr. Strub's diagnosis was inconsistent with those of Dr.

1 Ahmed, Dr. Moazzaz and Dr. Nafoosi. (AR 23). However, at least as to 2 Dr. Ahmed's findings, there was no substantive inconsistency. Dr. Strub referred Plaintiff to Dr. Ahmed for possible "early lupus or a collagen 3 connective tissue disease." (AR 326). Dr. Ahmed ruled out "systemic 4 lupus erythematosus at this time" and diagnosed Plaintiff with 5 6 fibromyalgia, associated with irritable bowel syndrome, hypothyroidism, 7 osteoarthritis of the first CMC joint and depression. (AR 327). Ιn subsequent examinations, Dr. Strub consistently stated that Plaintiff 8 9 presented with fibromyalgia, irritable bowel syndrome, hypothyroidism and depression. (AR 330, 379, 382, 385, 387, 390, 400, 403, 408). Dr. 10 11 Ahmed's diagnosis does not conflict with Dr. Strub's assessment of Plaintiff's physical RFC. 12

14 The ALJ was correct that Dr. Strub's conclusions about Plaintiff's work-related limitations differ from those of Dr. Moazzaz and Dr. 15 16 Nafoosi, but the ALJ erred in failing to provide specific and legitimate reasons to reject Dr. Strub's conclusions in favor of those of Dr. 17 Moazzaz and Dr. Nafoosi. Based on examinations of Plaintiff, Dr. Strub 18 determined that pain and fatigue would prevent her from maintaining 19 20 continuous employment in any job. (AR 324). Dr. Strub explained that 21 Plaintiff could sit, stand or walk for no more than two hours in a 22 eight-hour day. (AR 325). In contrast, Dr. Moazzaz concluded that 23 Plaintiff could sit, stand and walk six hours out of an eight hour 24 workday. (Id.). Dr. Nafoosi also concluded that Plaintiff could sit 25 for eight hours of an eight-hour day and stand and walk for six hours 26 of an eight-hour day. (AR 51).

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The Court notes, however, that Dr. Strub treated Plaintiff for two 1 years, while Dr. Moazzaz conducted a single examination of Plaintiff and 2 Dr. Nafoosi did not examine Plaintiff at all. As Plaintiff's treating 3 physician, Dr. Strub is presumed to be in a better position to assess 4 5 Plaintiff's functional limitations. See Magallanes, 881 F.2d at 751. In order to overcome this presumption, the ALJ must provide specific and 6 7 legitimate reasons to adopt Dr. Moazzaz and Dr. Nafoosi's opinions over 8 Dr. Strub's opinion. Lester, 81 F.3d at 830.

10 Here, the ALJ did not provide a sufficiently specific or legitimate reason for her rejection of Dr. Strub's medical opinions. The ALJ found 11 that "Dr. Strub's opinion on limitations appears to be based entirely 12 on the claimant's subjective complaints and are unsupported by 13 14 radiological studies or laboratory reports." (AR 23). However, a 15 treating physician's diagnoses should not be discounted merely because they are based on the patient-plaintiff's subjective complaints. 16 See 17 Morgan v. Comm'r of Soc. Sec. Admin., 169 F.3d 595, 602 (9th Cir. 1999). Further, the ALJ erred in demanding objective evidence such as 18 19 "radiological studies or laboratory reports" to demonstrate the severity 20 of fibromyalgia. (See AR 23). As noted above, courts have recognized that fibromyalgia is a disabling impairment that lacks objective tests 21 22 to conclusively confirm the disease. See e.g., Benecke v. Barnhart, 379 23 F.3d 587, 594 (9th Cir. 2004) (holding that the ALJ erred by requiring 24 objective evidence for a disease that eludes such measurement); Green-25 Young, 335 F.3d at 108. Accordingly, the absence of objective findings 26 is not a legitimate ground to reject Dr. Strub's opinions.

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The ALJ also erred in discounting Dr. Strub's medical opinions 1 merely because his treatment notes allegedly failed to either indicate 2 that Plaintiff had complained of disabling pain or was referred to a 3 pain management specialist. (AR 23). This reason is contradicted aby 4 the record. Dr. Strub's treatment notes recorded Plaintiff's complaints 5 of severe joint pain throughout the treatment period. (AR 282-86, 329-6 7 30, 364-65, 367-68, 370-71, 375-76, 378-79, 381-82, 384-85, 389-90, 399-400, 402-03, 407-08). Moreover, although Dr. Strub did not refer 8 9 Plaintiff to a pain management specialist, Dr. Strub prescribed Plaintiff pain medication including Tramadol, Norco and Vicodin. 10 (AR 11 330, 379, 382, 385, 387, 390, 400, 403, 408). Dr. Strub's failure to refer Plaintiff to a pain management specialist was not a specific and 12 13 legitimate reason to reject his opinions.

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In sum, because the ALJ failed to provide specific and legitimate reasons for rejecting the treating physician's opinions, the case must be remanded. Remand for further proceedings is appropriate where additional proceedings could remedy defects in the Commissioner's decision. <u>See Harman v. Apfel</u>, 211 F.3d 1172, 1179 (9th Cir. 2000); <u>Kail v. Heckler</u>, 722 F.2d 1496, 1497 (9th Cir. 1984).

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Here, if the treating physician's opinions as well as Plaintiff's testimony are fully credited, Plaintiff must be found disabled. But there is an outstanding issue of whether Plaintiff was disabled as early as June 1, 2007. As Dr. Nafoosi pointed out at the hearing, although Plaintiff alleged disability beginning from June 1, 2007, Plaintiff did not seek treatment from Dr. Strub until November or December of 2008. (AR 52, 160, 296). Dr. Nafoosi noted that there was no "medically

1	determinable severe condition" prior to January 1, 2009. (AR 52). Thus
2	remand to the agency for additional investigation or explanation, to
3	determine when Plaintiff's disability began, is more appropriate in this
4	case.
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6	VII.
7	CONCLUSION
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9	Consistent with the foregoing, IT IS ORDERED that judgment be
10	entered REVERSING the decision of the Commissioner and REMANDING this
11	matter for further proceedings consistent with this decision. IT IS
12	FURTHER ORDERED that the Clerk of the Court serve copies of this
13	Order and the Judgment on counsel for both parties.
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15	DATED: August 30, 2012
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18	/S/ Suzanne H. Segal
19	UNITED STATES MAGISTRATE JUDGE
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