

**Office of the Comptroller of the Currency
Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation
Federal Reserve Board
Office of Thrift Supervision**

**Interagency Policy Statement on
Credit Availability**

March 10, 1993

Problems with the availability of credit over the last few years have been especially significant for small- and medium-sized businesses and farms. This reluctance to lend may be attributed to many factors, including general trends in the economy; a desire by both borrowing and lending institutions to improve their balance sheets; the adoption of more rigorous underwriting standards after the losses associated with some laxities in the 1980s; the relative attractiveness of other types of investments; the impact of higher capital requirements, supervisory policies, and examination practices; and the increase in regulation mandated by recent legislation — specifically, the Financial Institutions Reform Recovery and Enforcement Act (FIRREA) and the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation Improvement Act (FDICIA).

The four federal regulators of banks and thrifts — the Office of the Comptroller of the Currency, the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, and the Office of Thrift Supervision — recognize that in the last several years the buildup of certain regulations and practices has become overly burdensome. Indeed, those regulations and practices may have, in some cases, stifled lending, particularly to small- and medium-sized businesses that met prudent underwriting standards.

It is in the interest of lenders, borrowers, and the general public that creditworthy loans be made. Since economic growth, especially job growth, is fueled primarily by small- and medium-sized businesses, credit availability to those borrowers is especially important. Accordingly, the agencies are working on the details of a new program to help ensure that regulatory policies and practices do not needlessly stand in the way of lending. Loans to creditworthy borrowers should be made whenever possible, as long as they are fully consistent with safe and sound banking practices.

Background

The new program is one aspect of an overall effort by the agencies to evaluate carefully and react appropriately to risk in the United States financial services industry. That overall effort envisions substantial oversight, in some cases more than we have now, in areas that pose greater risk to the system. By the same token, regulatory burden will be reduced where risk is low, especially for strong, well-managed banks and thrifts. This program is also part of a broader effort to ensure equal credit opportunity for all Americans and to make credit and other financial services available to low- and moderate-income neighborhoods and disadvantaged rural areas.

The Program

The new program involves a variety of regulatory and other administrative changes which have been agreed to in principle by the agencies. These changes fall into five categories, each of which is discussed below.

Timing. The agencies will work to complete virtually all of the changes outlined below within the next three months. Once the specifics of any of the changes are agreed upon, that change will be made and published, while distribution of other changes remains to be made.

1. Eliminating Impediments to Loans to Small- and Medium-Sized Businesses

Reducing Documentation. Strong and well-managed banks and thrifts will be permitted to make and carry a basket of loans with minimal documentation requirements, consistent with applicable law. To ensure that these loans are made to small- and medium-sized businesses, there will be a ceiling on the size of such loans and limits on the aggregate of such loans a bank may make.

Encouraging Use of Judgment\Borrower's Reputation. The agencies will issue guidance to make it clear that banks and thrifts are encouraged to make loans to small- and medium-sized businesses, particularly loans in the basket discussed above, and to use their judgment in broadly assessing the creditworthy nature of the borrower — general reputation and good character as well as financial condition may be elements in making these judgments. Reliance on a broad range of factors when making a credit determination is especially important.

Other Assets Especially Mentioned. Improper use of the category of Other Assets Especially Mentioned (OAEM) may inhibit lending to small- and medium-sized businesses. Accordingly, the agencies will clarify that examination and rating procedures do not group OAEM loans with classified loans.

2. Reducing Appraisal Burden and Improving the Climate for Real Estate

The experience of the last decade has underscored the importance of sound underwriting standards and effective supervision for commercial real estate loans. Nonetheless, in certain instances regulatory burdens may be adversely affecting loans to sound borrowers. This may be particularly so in the case of loans secured by real estate that are primarily used for non-real estate business purposes. Real estate collateral is often pledged for loans to small- and medium-sized companies that have few other tangible assets.

Using Real Estate Appraisals Prudently. In some cases currently required real estate appraisals may not add to the safety and soundness of the credit decision. Indeed, in some cases, appraisals may prove so expensive that they make a sound small- or medium-sized business loan uneconomical. Accordingly, the agencies will make changes to their rules relating to real estate appraisals along the following lines:

- **Accept Additional Collateral**

When real estate is offered as additional collateral for a business loan, both the time and expense involved in obtaining an appraisal from a certified or licensed real estate appraiser may discourage a bank or thrift from taking the collateral, may increase the cost of credit significantly, or even may cause the loan not to be made. In some such cases, the real estate appraisal requirement is counterproductive from a safety and soundness perspective. Moreover, the constraint on credit flows to sound businesses may be substantial. Accordingly, the agencies will alter their real estate appraisal rules so as not to require an appraisal by a licensed or certified appraiser for such loans.

- **Reexamine Appraisal Thresholds**

Appraisals conducted by licensed and certified real estate appraisers, even on real estate of modest value can be quite costly. In the case of a smaller loan, the requirement of an appraisal by a licensed or certified real estate appraiser may make a sound loan uneconomical. Accordingly, the agencies will reexamine their existing rules to make certain that thresholds below which formal appraisals are not needed are reasonable.

- **Limit Periodic Appraisals**

In some cases real estate appraisals have been required after a loan has been made, and in circumstances where the appraisal did not add to the safety and soundness of the loan. Accordingly, the agencies will work to make certain that real estate appraisals are required after a loan is made only when clearly needed for safety and soundness purposes, provided of course, that all requirements under law have been met.

Changing Rules on Financing of Other Real Estate Owned. Currently, accounting and other rules may discourage banks and thrifts from providing financing to borrowers who wish to purchase real estate classified as Other Real Estate Owned. The agencies will review rules relating to the reporting treatment and classification of such loans and make appropriate changes to facilitate financing to creditworthy borrowers, consistent with safe and sound banking and accounting practices.

Reviewing In Substance Foreclosure Rules. The inappropriate use of in substance foreclosure rules have required foreclosure valuation treatment of loans when borrowers were current on principal and interest payments and could reasonably be expected to repay the loan in a timely fashion. The agencies will work with the appropriate authorities to alter that treatment and to coordinate a change in accounting principles and reporting standards.

Avoiding Liquidation Values on Real Estate Loans. Loans secured by real estate should be evaluated based on the borrower's ability to pay over time, rather than a presumption of immediate liquidation. The agencies will work with their examination staffs to ensure that real estate loans are evaluated in accordance with agency policy.

3. Enhancing and Streamlining Appeals and Complaint Processes

Appeals. It is important for bankers to have an avenue by which they can obtain a review of an examiner's decision when they wish. For that reason, each of the agencies has established an appeals process. To ensure the effectiveness of those processes, each agency will take appropriate steps to ensure that its appeals process is fair and effective.

In particular, each agency will ensure that its process provides a fair and speedy review of examination complaints and that there is no retribution against either the bank or the examiner as the result of an appeal.

Complaints. Each of the agencies has a process to handle more general complaints from the institutions they regulate and from the general public. Although the volume of such complaints can be high, each agency recognizes that reviewing and responding to these complaints is an important element of proper supervision. The agencies are particularly concerned that complaints of discriminatory lending practices be handled with the utmost seriousness and on an expedited basis.

Accordingly, the agencies will review their complaint processes to improve both the care with which complaints are scrutinized and the timeliness of responses.

4. Improving Examination Process and Procedures

Reducing the Burden of the Examination Process. A proper examination of a bank or thrift by its very nature involves some disruption to the examined institution. Such disruptions, however, are costly to the institution and can interfere with its credit functions. It is highly desirable that examination disruptions be minimized.

Accordingly, the agencies have agreed to intensify efforts to minimize such disruptions and, in particular, to take the following steps: (i) eliminate duplication in examinations by multiple agencies, unless clearly required by law, (ii) increase coordination of examinations among the agencies when duplication is required, and (iii) establish procedures to centralize and streamline examination in multibank organizations.

Refocusing the Examination Process. If examinations are to fulfill their functions both in the areas of safety and soundness, fair lending, and consumer protection compliance, it is important constantly to reexamine the elements of the examination to determine whether the process is effective. Similarly, regulations and interpretations must continually be assessed to determine whether they are fulfilling these functions.

To improve the regulatory process, the agencies have agreed to heighten their emphasis in examinations on risk to the institution and to issues involving fair lending in place of areas that have become less productive over time. Agency policies and procedures will be reviewed with this focus in mind.

Reducing Regulatory Uncertainty. Uncertainty is part of the regulatory burden that banks and thrifts face and that contributes to their reluctance to make some credits available. This uncertainty can stem from ambiguous language in regulations and interpretations, from delays in publishing regulations and interpretations, and from failures to follow uniform examination standards that clearly reflect agency policies.

Accordingly, the agencies will review their regulations and interpretations to minimize ambiguity wherever possible and will step up efforts to publish regulations and interpretations required by law or sound regulatory practice. In addition, the agencies will reemphasize to their examiners to follow agency policies and guidelines carefully and accurately in carrying out examinations and reviewing applications. The agencies will make every effort to ensure that examination and application processing is performed uniformly across the country.

5. Continuing Further Efforts and Reducing Burden

Further Efforts. Additional items will be reviewed for possible change. One item that will be reviewed relates to the treatment of partially charged-off loans. Under current practice delinquent loans that have been partially charged off cannot be returned to

performing status even when the borrower is able to, and fully intends to, pay the remaining interest and principal to the bank in a timely fashion. The agencies will work to develop common standards for determining when a loan may be returned to accrual status.

Paperwork Burden. No good is served by forcing banks to bear an excessive regulatory paperwork burden. Accordingly, the agencies have begun and will continue to review *all* paperwork requirements to eliminate duplication and other excesses that do not contribute substantially to safety and soundness.

Regulatory Burden. It is not paperwork alone that unnecessarily burdens banks and thrifts. Regulations and interpretations also may be unnecessarily burdensome. In some cases the passage of time has made regulations outmoded. In other cases the regulations may not have fulfilled their goals.

Accordingly, the agencies also have begun and will continue to review *all* regulations and interpretations to minimize burden while maintaining safety and soundness standards.