

section 406(b)(1) merely because T is on the board of trustees of P. This fact alone would not make them have an interest in the transaction which might affect the exercise of their best judgment as fiduciaries.

[42 FR 32390, June 24, 1977]

**§ 2550.408b-3 Loans to Employee Stock Ownership Plans.**

(a) *Definitions.* When used in this section, the terms listed below have the following meanings:

(1) *ESOP.* The term *ESOP* refers to an employee stock ownership plan that meets the requirements of section 407(d)(6) of the Employee Retirement Income Security Act of 1974 (the Act) and 29 CFR 2550.407d-6. It is not synonymous with “stock bonus plan.” A stock bonus plan must, however, be an ESOP to engage in an exempt loan. The qualification of an ESOP under section 401 (a) of the Internal Revenue Code (the Code) and 26 CFR 54.4975-11 will not be adversely affected merely because it engages in a non-exempt loan.

(2) *Loan.* The term *loan* refers to a loan made to an ESOP by a party in interest or a loan to an ESOP which is guaranteed by a party in interest. It includes a direct loan of cash, a purchase-money transaction, and an assumption of the obligation of an ESOP. “Guarantee” includes an unsecured guarantee and the use of assets of a party in interest as collateral for a loan, even though the use of assets may not be a guarantee under applicable state law. An amendment of a loan in order to qualify as an exempt loan is not a refinancing of the loan or the making of another loan.

(3) *Exempt loan.* The term *exempt loan* refers to a loan that satisfies the provisions of this section. A “non-exempt loan” is one that fails to satisfy such provisions.

(4) *Publicly traded.* The term *publicly traded* refers to a security that is listed on a national securities exchange registered under section 6 of the Securities Exchange Act of 1934 (15 U.S.C. 78f) or that is quoted on a system sponsored by a national securities association registered under section 15A(b) of the Securities Exchange Act (15 U.S.C. 78o).

(5) *Qualifying employer security.* The term *qualifying employer security* refers

to a security described in 29 CFR 2550.407d-5.

(b) *Statutory exemption—(1) Scope.* Section 408(b)(3) of the Act provides an exemption from the prohibited transaction provisions of sections 406(a) and 406(b)(1) of the Act (relating to fiduciaries dealing with the assets of plans in their own interest or for their own account) and 406(b)(2) of the Act (relating to fiduciaries in their individual or in any other capacity acting in any transaction involving the plan on behalf of a party (or representing a party) whose interests are adverse to the interests of the plan or the interests of its participants or beneficiaries). Section 408(b)(3) does not provide an exemption from the prohibitions of section 406(b)(3) of the Act (relating to fiduciaries receiving consideration for their own personal account from any party dealing with a plan in connection with a transaction involving the income or assets of the plan).

(2) *Special scrutiny of transaction.* The exemption under section 408(b)(3) includes within its scope certain transaction in which the potential for self-dealing by fiduciaries exists and in which the interests of fiduciaries may conflict with the interests of participants. To guard against these potential abuses, the Department of Labor will subject these transactions to special scrutiny to ensure that they are primarily for the benefit of participants and their beneficiaries. Although the transactions need not be arranged and approved by an independent fiduciary, fiduciaries are cautioned to scrupulously exercise their discretion in approving them. For example, fiduciaries should be prepared to demonstrate compliance with the net effect test and the arm’s-length standard under paragraphs (c)(2) and (3) of this section. Also, fiduciaries should determine that the transaction is truly arranged primarily in the interest of participants and their beneficiaries rather than, for example, in the interest of certain selling shareholders.

(c) *Primary benefit requirements—(1) In general.* An exempt loan must be primarily for the benefit of the ESOP participants and their beneficiaries. All the surrounding facts and circumstances, including those described

in paragraphs (c)(2) and (3) of this section, will be considered in determining whether such loan satisfies this requirement. However, no loan will satisfy such requirement unless it satisfies the requirements of paragraphs (d), (e) and (f) of this section.

(2) *Net effect on plan assets.* At the time that a loan is made, the interest rate for the loan and the price of securities to be acquired with the loan proceeds should not be such that plan assets might be drained off.

(3) *Arm's-length standard.* The terms of a loan, whether or not between independent parties, must, at the time the loan is made, be at least as favorable to the ESOP as the terms of a comparable loan resulting from arm's-length negotiations between independent parties.

(d) *Use of loan proceeds.* The proceeds of an exempt loan must be used, within a reasonable time after their receipt, by the borrowing ESOP only for any or all of the following purposes:

(1) To acquire qualifying employer securities.

(2) To repay such loan.

(3) To repay a prior exempt loan. A new loan, the proceeds of which are so used, must satisfy the provisions of this section.

Except as provided in paragraphs (i) and (j) of this section or as otherwise required by applicable law, no security acquired with the proceeds of an exempt loan may be subject to a put, call, or other option, or buy-sell or similar arrangement while held by and when distributed from a plan, whether or not the plan is then ESOP.

(e) *Liability and collateral of ESOP for loan.* An exempt loan must be without recourse against the ESOP. Furthermore, the only assets of the ESOP that may be given as collateral on an exempt loan are qualifying employer securities of two classes: Those acquired with the proceeds of the exempt loan and those that were used as collateral on a prior exempt loan repaid with the proceeds of the current exempt loan. No person entitled to payment under the exempt loan shall have any right to assets of the ESOP other than:

(1) Collateral given for the loan,

(2) Contributions (other than contributions of employer securities) that

are made under an ESOP to meet its obligations under the loan, and

(3) Earnings attributable to such collateral and the investment of such contributions.

The payments made with respect to an exempt loan by the ESOP during a plan year must not exceed an amount equal to the sum of such contributions and earnings received during or prior to the year less such payments in prior years. Such contributions and earnings must be accounted for separately in the books of account of the ESOP until the loan is repaid.

(f) *Default.* In the event of default upon an exempt loan, the value of plan assets transferred in satisfaction of the loan must not exceed the amount of default. If the lender is a party in interest, a loan must provide for a transfer of plan assets upon default only upon and to the extent of the failure of the plan to meet the payment schedule of the loan. For purposes of this paragraph, the making of a guarantee does not make a person a lender.

(g) *Reasonable rate of interest.* The interest rate of a loan must not be in excess of a reasonable rate of interest. All relevant factors will be considered in determining a reasonable rate of interest, including the amount and duration of the loan, the security and guarantee (if any) involved, the credit standing of the ESOP and the guarantor (if any), and the interest rate prevailing for comparable loans. When these factors are considered, a variable interest rate may be reasonable.

(h) *Release from encumbrance—(1) General rule.* In general, an exempt loan must provide for the release from encumbrance of plan assets used as collateral for the loan under this paragraph. For each plan year during the duration of the loan, the number of securities released must equal the number of encumbered securities held immediately before release for the current plan year multiplied by a fraction. The numerator of the fraction is the amount of principal and interest paid for the year. The denominator of the fraction is the sum of the numerator plus the principal and interest to be paid for all future years. See § 2550.408b-3(h)(4). The number of future years under the loan must be definitely

ascertainable and must be determined without taking into account any possible extensions or renewal periods. If the interest rate under the loan is variable, the interest to be paid in future years must be computed by using the interest rate applicable as of the end of the plan year. If collateral includes more than one class of securities, the number of securities of each class to be released for a plan year must be determined by applying the same fraction to each class.

(2) *Special rule.* A loan will not fail to be exempt merely because the number of securities to be released from encumbrance is determined solely with reference to principal payments. However, if release is determined with reference to principal payments only, the following three additional rules apply. The first rule is that the loan must provide for annual payments of principal and interest at a cumulative rate that is not less rapid at any time than level annual payments of such amounts for 10 years. The second rule is that interest included in any payment is disregarded only to the extent that it would be determined to be interest under standard loan amortization tables. The third rule is that subdivision (2) is not applicable from the time that, by reason of a renewal, extension, or refinancing, the sum of the expired duration of the exempt loan, the renewal period, the extension period, and the duration of a new exempt loan exceeds 10 years.

(3) *Caution against plan disqualification.* Under an exempt loan, the number of securities released from encumbrance may vary from year to year. The release of securities depends upon certain employer contributions and earnings under the ESOP. Under 26 CFR 54.4975-11(d)(2) actual allocations to participants' accounts are based upon assets withdrawn from the suspense account. Nevertheless, for purposes of applying the limitations under section 415 of the Code to these allocations, under 26 CFR 54.4975-11(a)(8)(ii) contributions used by the ESOP to pay the loan are treated as annual additions to participants' accounts. Therefore, particular caution must be exercised to avoid exceeding the maximum annual additions under section 415 of

the Code. At the same time, release from encumbrance in annually varying numbers may reflect a failure on the part of the employer to make substantial and recurring contributions to the ESOP which will lead to loss of qualification under section 401(a) of the Code. The Internal Revenue Service will observe closely the operation of ESOPs that release encumbered securities in varying annual amounts, particularly those that provide for the deferral of loan payments or for balloon payments. See 26 CFR 54.4975-7(b)(8)(iii).

(4) *Illustration.* The general rule under paragraph (h)(1) of this section operates as illustrated in the following examples:

*Example.* Corporation X establishes an ESOP that borrows \$750,000 from a bank. X guarantees the loan which is for 15 years at 5% interest and is payable in level annual amounts of \$72,256.72. Total payments on the loan are \$1,083,850.80. The ESOP uses the entire proceeds of the loan to acquire 15,000 shares of X stock which is used as collateral for the loan. The number of securities to be released for the first year is 1,000 shares, i.e.,  $15,000 \text{ shares} \times \$72,256.72 / \$1,083,850.80 = 15,000 \text{ shares} \times 1/15$ . The number of securities to be released for the second year is 1,000 shares, i.e.,  $14,000 \text{ shares} \times \$72,256.72 / \$1,011,594.08 = 14,000 \text{ shares} \times 1/14$ . If all loan payments are made as originally scheduled, the number of securities released in each succeeding year of the loan will also be 1,000.

(i) *Right of first refusal.* Qualifying employer securities acquired with proceeds of an exempt loan may, but need not, be subject to a right of first refusal. However, any such right must meet the requirements of this paragraph. Securities subject to such right must be stock or an equity security, or a debt security convertible into stock or an equity security. Also, they must not be publicly traded at the time the right may be exercised. The right of first refusal must be in favor of the employer, the ESOP, or both in any order of priority. The selling price and other terms under the right must not be less favorable to the seller than the greater of the value of the security determined under 26 CFR 54.4975-11(d)(5), or the purchase price and other terms offered by a buyer, other than the employer or the ESOP, making a good faith offer to purchase the security. The right of

first refusal must lapse no later than 14 days after the security holder gives written notice to the holder of the right that an offer by a third party to purchase the security has been received.

(j) *Put option.* A qualifying employer security acquired with the proceeds of an exempt loan by an ESOP after September 30, 1976, must be subject to a put option if it is not publicly traded when distributed or if it is subject to a trading limitation when distributed. For purposes of this paragraph, a “trading limitation” or a security is a restriction under any Federal or State securities law or any regulation thereunder, or an agreement (not prohibited by this section) affecting the security which would make the security not as freely tradeable as one not subject to such restriction. The put option must be exercisable only by a participant, by the participant’s donees, or by a person (including an estate or its distributee) to whom the security passes by reason of a participant’s death. (Under this paragraph “participant” means a participant and the beneficiaries of the participant under the ESOP.) The put option must permit a participant to put the security to the employer. Under no circumstances may the put option bind the ESOP. However, it may grant the ESOP an option to assume the rights and obligations of the employer at the time that the put option is exercised. If it is known at the time a loan is made that Federal or state law will be violated by the employer’s honoring such put option, the put option must permit the security to be put, in a manner consistent with such law, to a third party (e.g., an affiliate of the employer or a shareholder other than the ESOP) that has substantial net worth at the time the loan is made and whose net worth is reasonably expected to remain substantial.

(k) *Duration of put option—(1) General rule.* A put option must be exercisable at least during a 15-month period which begins the date the security subject to the put option is distributed by the ESOP.

(2) *Special rule.* In the case of a security that is publicly traded without restriction when distributed but ceases to be so traded within 15 months after

distribution, the employer must notify each security holder in writing on or before the tenth day after the date the security ceases to be so traded that for the remainder of the 15-month period the security is subject to a put option. The number of days between the tenth day and the date on which notice is actually given, if later than the tenth day, must be added to the duration of the put option. The notice must inform distributees of the terms of the put options that they are to hold. The terms must satisfy the requirements of paragraphs (j) through (l) of this section.

(l) *Other put option provisions—(1) Manner of exercise.* A put option is exercised by the holder notifying the employer in writing that the put option is being exercised.

(2) *Time excluded from duration of put option.* The period during which a put option is exercisable does not include any time when a distributee is unable to exercise it because the party bound by the put option is prohibited from honoring it by applicable Federal or State law.

(3) *Price.* The price at which a put option must be exercisable is the value of the security, determined in accordance with paragraph (d)(5) of 26 CFR 54.4975-11.

(4) *Payment terms.* The provisions for payment under a put option must be reasonable. The deferral of payment is reasonable if adequate security and a reasonable interest rate are provided for any credit extended and if the cumulative payments at any time are no less than the aggregate of reasonable periodic payments as of such time. Periodic payments are reasonable if annual installments, beginning with 30 days after the date the put option is exercised, are substantially equal. Generally, the payment period may not end more than 5 years after the date the put option is exercised. However, it may be extended to a date no later than the earlier of 10 years from the date the put option is exercised or the date the proceeds of the loan used by the ESOP to acquire the security subject to such put option are entirely repaid.

(5) *Payment restrictions.* Payment under a put option may be restricted by the terms of a loan, including one

used to acquire a security subject to a put option, made before November 1, 1977. Otherwise, payment under a put option must not be restricted by the provisions of a loan or any other arrangement, including the terms of the employer's articles of incorporation, unless so required by applicable state law.

(m) *Other terms of loan.* An exempt loan must be for a specific term. Such loan may not be payable at the demand of any person, except in the case of default.

(n) *Status of plan as ESOP.* To be exempt, a loan must be made to a plan that is an ESOP at the time of such loan. However, a loan to a plan formally designated as an ESOP at the time of the loan that fails to be an ESOP because it does not comply with section 401(a) of the Code or 26 CFR 54.4975-11 will be exempt as of the time of such loan if the plan is amended retroactively under section 401(b) of the Code or 26 CFR 54.4975-11(a)(4).

(o) *Special rules for certain loans—(1) Loans made before January 1, 1976.* A loan made before January 1, 1976, or made afterwards under a binding agreement in effect on January 1, 1976 (or under renewals permitted by the terms of such an agreement on that date) is exempt for the entire period of such loan if it otherwise satisfies the provisions of this section for such period, even though it does not satisfy the following provisions of this section:

- (i) The last sentence of paragraph (d);
- (ii) Paragraphs (e), (f), and (h)(1) and (2); and
- (iii) Paragraphs (i) through (m), inclusive.

(2) *Loans made after December 31, 1975, but before November 1, 1977.* A loan made after December 31, 1975, but before November 1, 1977, or made afterwards under a binding agreement in effect on November 1, 1977 (or under renewals permitted by the terms of such an agreement on that date) is exempt for the entire period of such loan if it otherwise satisfies the provisions of this section for such period even though it does not satisfy the following provisions of this section:

- (i) Paragraph (f);
- (ii) The three provisions of paragraph (h)(2); and

(iii) Paragraph (i).

(3) *Release rule.* Notwithstanding paragraphs (o)(1) and (2) of this section, if the proceeds of a loan are used to acquire securities after November 1, 1977, the loan must comply by such date with the provisions of paragraph (h) of this section.

(4) *Default rule.* Notwithstanding paragraphs (o)(1) and (2) of this section, a loan by a party in interest other than a guarantor must satisfy the requirements of paragraph (f) of this section. A loan will satisfy these requirements if it is retroactively amended before November 1, 1977, to satisfy these requirements.

(5) *Put option rule.* With respect to a security distributed before November 1, 1977, the put option provisions of paragraphs (j), (k), and (l) of this section will be deemed satisfied as of the date the security is distributed if by December 31, 1977, the security is subject to a put option satisfying such provisions. For purposes of satisfying such provisions, the security will be deemed distributed on the date the put option is issued. However, the put option provisions need not be satisfied with respect to a security that is not owned on November 1, 1977, by a person in whose hands a put option must be exercisable.

(Approved by the Office of Management and Budget under control number 1210-0046)

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**§ 2550.408b-4 Statutory exemption for investments in deposits of banks or similar financial institutions.**

(a) *In general.* Section 408(b)(4) of the Employee Retirement Income Security Act of 1974 (the Act) exempts from the prohibitions of section 406 of the Act the investment of all or a part of a plan's assets in deposits bearing a reasonable rate of interest in a bank or similar financial institution supervised by the United States or a State, even though such bank or similar financial institution is a fiduciary or other party in interest with respect to the plan, if the conditions of either § 2550.408b-4(b)(1) or § 2550.408b-4(b)(2) are met. Section 408(b)(4) provides an exemption