

# ECONOMIC SUBSTANCE DOCTRINE

## 1. Clarification of the economic substance doctrine

### Present Law

#### In general

The Code provides detailed rules specifying the computation of taxable income, including the amount, timing, source, and character of items of income, gain, loss, and deduction. These rules permit both taxpayers and the government to compute taxable income with reasonable accuracy and predictability. Taxpayers generally may plan their transactions in reliance on these rules to determine the federal income tax consequences arising from the transactions.

In addition to the statutory provisions, courts have developed several doctrines that can be applied to deny the tax benefits of tax motivated transactions, notwithstanding that the transaction may satisfy the literal requirements of a specific tax provision. The common-law doctrines are not entirely distinguishable, and their application to a given set of facts is often blurred by the courts and the IRS. Although these doctrines serve an important role in the administration of the tax system, they can be seen as at odds with an objective, “rule-based” system of taxation.

A common-law doctrine applied with increasing frequency is the “economic substance” doctrine. In general, this doctrine denies tax benefits arising from transactions that do not result in a meaningful change to the taxpayer’s economic position other than a purported reduction in federal income tax.<sup>1</sup>

#### Economic substance doctrine

Courts generally deny claimed tax benefits if the transaction that gives rise to those benefits lacks economic substance independent of tax considerations – notwithstanding that the purported activity actually occurred. The Tax Court has described the doctrine as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., *ACM Partnership v. Commissioner*, 157 F.3d 231 (3d Cir. 1998), *aff’g* 73 T.C.M. (CCH) 2189 (1997), *cert. denied* 526 U.S. 1017 (1999). Closely related doctrines also applied by the courts (sometimes interchangeable with the economic substance doctrine) include the “sham transaction doctrine” and the “business purpose doctrine.” See, e.g., *Knetsch v. United States*, 364 U.S. 361 (1960) (denying interest deductions on a “sham transaction” whose only purpose was to create the deductions). Certain “substance over form” cases involving tax-indifferent parties, in which courts have found that the substance of the transaction did not comport with the form asserted by the taxpayer, have also involved examination of whether the change in economic position that occurred, if any, was consistent with the form asserted, and whether the claimed business purpose supported the particular tax benefits that were claimed. See, e.g., *Klamath Strategic Investment Fund, LLC v. United States*, 472 F. Supp. 2d 885 (E.D. Texas 2007); *TIFD- III-E, Inc. v. United States*, 459 F. 3d 220 (2d Cir. 2006); *BB&T Corporation v. United States*, \_\_\_ F. Supp. 2d \_\_\_, 2007-1 USTC P 50,130 (M.D.N.C. 2007).

The tax law . . . requires that the intended transactions have economic substance separate and distinct from economic benefit achieved solely by tax reduction. The doctrine of economic substance becomes applicable, and a judicial remedy is warranted, where a taxpayer seeks to claim tax benefits, unintended by Congress, by means of transactions that serve no economic purpose other than tax savings.<sup>2</sup>

### Business purpose doctrine

A common law doctrine that often is considered together with the economic substance doctrine is the business purpose doctrine. The business purpose doctrine involves a subjective inquiry into the motives of the taxpayer – that is, whether the taxpayer intended the transaction to serve some useful non-tax purpose. In making this determination, some courts have bifurcated a transaction in which independent activities with non-tax objectives have been combined with an unrelated item having only tax-avoidance objectives in order to disallow the tax benefits of the overall transaction.<sup>3</sup>

### Application by the courts

#### Elements of the doctrine

There is a lack of uniformity regarding the proper application of the economic substance doctrine.<sup>4</sup> Some courts apply a conjunctive test that requires a taxpayer to establish the presence of both economic substance (i.e., the objective component) and business purpose (i.e., the subjective component) in order for the transaction to survive judicial scrutiny.<sup>5</sup> A narrower approach used by some courts is to conclude that either a business purpose or economic substance is sufficient to respect the transaction.<sup>6</sup> A third approach regards economic substance

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<sup>2</sup> *ACM Partnership v. Commissioner*, 73 T.C.M. at 2215.

<sup>3</sup> *See, ACM Partnership v. Commissioner*, 157 F.3d at 256 n.48.

<sup>4</sup> “The casebooks are glutted with [economic substance] tests. Many such tests proliferate because they give the comforting illusion of consistency and precision. They often obscure rather than clarify.” *Collins v. Commissioner*, 857 F.2d 1383, 1386 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1988).

<sup>5</sup> *See, e.g., Pasternak v. Commissioner*, 990 F.2d 893, 898 (6<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1993) (“The threshold question is whether the transaction has economic substance. If the answer is yes, the question becomes whether the taxpayer was motivated by profit to participate in the transaction.”).

<sup>6</sup> *See, e.g., Rice’s Toyota World v. Commissioner*, 752 F.2d 89, 91-92 (4<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1985) (“To treat a transaction as a sham, the court must find that the taxpayer was motivated by no business purposes other than obtaining tax benefits in entering the transaction, and, second, that the transaction has no economic substance because no reasonable possibility of a profit exists.”); *IES Industries v. United States*, 253 F.3d 350, 358 (8<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2001) (“In determining whether a transaction is a sham for tax purposes [under the Eighth Circuit test], a transaction will be characterized as a sham if it is not motivated by any economic purpose out of tax considerations (the business purpose test), and if it is without economic substance because no real potential for profit exists (the economic substance test).”). As noted earlier, the economic substance doctrine and the sham transaction doctrine are similar and sometimes are applied

and business purpose as “simply more precise factors to consider” in determining whether a transaction has any practical economic effects other than the creation of tax benefits.<sup>7</sup>

Recently, the Court of Federal Claims questioned the continuing viability of the doctrine. That court also stated that “the use of the ‘economic substance’ doctrine to trump ‘mere compliance with the Code’ would violate the separation of powers” though that court also found that the particular case did not lack economic substance. The Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit (“Federal Circuit Court”) overruled the Court of Federal Claims decision, reiterating the viability of the economic substance doctrine and concluding that the transaction in question violated that doctrine.<sup>8</sup> The Federal Circuit Court stated that “[w]hile the doctrine may well also apply if the taxpayer’s sole subjective motivation is tax avoidance even if the transaction has economic substance, [footnote omitted], a lack of economic substance is sufficient to disqualify the transaction without proof that the taxpayer’s sole motive is tax avoidance.”<sup>9</sup>

### Nontax economic benefits

There also is a lack of uniformity regarding the type of non-tax economic benefit a taxpayer must establish in order to satisfy economic substance. Some courts have denied tax benefits on the grounds that a stated business benefit of a particular structure was not in fact obtained by that structure.<sup>10</sup> Several courts have denied tax benefits on the grounds that the

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interchangeably. For a more detailed discussion of the sham transaction doctrine, see, e.g., Joint Committee on Taxation, *Study of Present-Law Penalty and Interest Provisions as Required by Section 3801 of the Internal Revenue Service Restructuring and Reform Act of 1998 (including Provisions Relating to Corporate Tax Shelters)* (JCS-3-99) at 182.

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., *ACM Partnership v. Commissioner*, 157 F.3d at 247; *James v. Commissioner*, 899 F.2d 905, 908 (10<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1995); *Sacks v. Commissioner*, 69 F.3d 982, 985 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1995) (“Instead, the consideration of business purpose and economic substance are simply more precise factors to consider . . . We have repeatedly and carefully noted that this formulation cannot be used as a ‘rigid two-step analysis’.”).

<sup>8</sup> *Coltec Industries, Inc. v. United States*, 62 Fed. Cl. 716 (2004) (slip opinion at 123-124, 128); *vacated and remanded*, 454 F.3d 1340 (Fed. Cir. 2006), *cert. denied*, 127 S. Ct. 1261 (Mem.) (2007).

<sup>9</sup> The Federal Circuit Court stated that “when the taxpayer claims a deduction, it is the taxpayer who bears the burden of proving that the transaction has economic substance.” The Federal Circuit Court quoted a decision of its predecessor court, stating that “*Gregory v. Helvering* requires that a taxpayer carry an unusually heavy burden when he attempts to demonstrate that Congress intended to give favorable tax treatment to the kind of transaction that would never occur absent the motive of tax avoidance.” The Court also stated that “while the taxpayer’s subjective motivation may be pertinent to the existence of a tax avoidance purpose, all courts have looked to the objective reality of a transaction in assessing its economic substance.” *Coltec Industries, Inc. v. United States*, 454 F.3d at 1355, 1356.

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., *Coltec Industries v. United States*, 454 F.3d 1340 (Fed. Cir. 2006). The court analyzed the transfer to a subsidiary of a note purporting to provide high stock basis in exchange for a purported assumption of liabilities, and held these transactions unnecessary to accomplish any business purpose of using a subsidiary to manage asbestos liabilities. The court also held that the purported

subject transactions lacked profit potential.<sup>11</sup> In addition, some courts have applied the economic substance doctrine to disallow tax benefits in transactions in which a taxpayer was exposed to risk and the transaction had a profit potential, but the court concluded that the economic risks and profit potential were insignificant when compared to the tax benefits.<sup>12</sup> Under this analysis, the taxpayer's profit potential must be more than nominal. Conversely, other courts view the application of the economic substance doctrine as requiring an objective determination of whether a "reasonable possibility of profit" from the transaction existed apart from the tax benefits.<sup>13</sup> In these cases, in assessing whether a reasonable possibility of profit exists, it may be sufficient if there is a nominal amount of pre-tax profit as measured against expected net tax benefits.

### Financial accounting benefits

In determining whether a taxpayer had a valid business purpose for entering into a transaction, at least one court has concluded that financial accounting benefits arising from tax savings do not qualify as a non-tax business purpose.<sup>14</sup> However, based on court decisions that recognize the importance of financial accounting treatment, taxpayers have asserted that financial accounting benefits arising from tax savings can satisfy the business purpose test.<sup>15</sup>

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business purpose of adding a barrier to veil-piercing claims by third parties was not accomplished by the transaction. 454 F.3d at 1358-1360 (Fed. Cir. 2006).

<sup>11</sup> See, e.g., *Knetsch*, 364 U.S. at 361; *Goldstein v. Commissioner*, 364 F.2d 734 (2d Cir. 1966) (holding that an unprofitable, leveraged acquisition of Treasury bills, and accompanying prepaid interest deduction, lacked economic substance).

<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., *Goldstein v. Commissioner*, 364 F.2d at 739-40 (disallowing deduction even though taxpayer had a possibility of small gain or loss by owning Treasury bills); *Sheldon v. Commissioner*, 94 T.C. 738, 768 (1990) (stating that "potential for gain . . . is infinitesimally nominal and vastly insignificant when considered in comparison with the claimed deductions").

<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., *Rice's Toyota World v. Commissioner*, 752 F. 2d 89, 94 (4<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1985) (the economic substance inquiry requires an objective determination of whether a reasonable possibility of profit from the transaction existed apart from tax benefits); *Compaq Computer Corp. v. Commissioner*, 277 F.3d 778, 781 (5<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2001) (applied the same test, citing *Rice's Toyota World*); *IES Industries v. United States*, 253 F.3d 350, 354 (8<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2001).

<sup>14</sup> See *American Electric Power, Inc. v. United States*, 136 F. Supp. 2d 762, 791-92 (S.D. Ohio 2001); *aff'd* 326 F.3d 737 (6<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2003).

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., Joint Committee on Taxation, *Report of Investigation of Enron Corporation and Related Entities Regarding Federal Tax and Compensation Issues, and Policy Recommendations* (JSC-3-03) February, 2003 ("Enron Report"), Volume III at C-93, 289. Enron Corporation relied on *Frank Lyon Co. v. United States*, 435 U.S. 561, 577-78 (1978), and *Newman v. Commissioner*, 902 F.2d 159, 163 (2d Cir. 1990), to argue that financial accounting benefits arising from tax savings constitute a good business purpose.

### Tax-indifferent parties

A number of cases have involved transactions structured to allocate income for Federal tax purposes to a tax-indifferent party, with a corresponding deduction, or favorable basis result, to a taxable person. The income allocated to the tax-indifferent party for tax purposes was structured to exceed any actual economic income to be received by the tax indifferent party from the transaction. Courts have sometimes concluded that a particular type of transaction did not satisfy the economic substance doctrine.<sup>16</sup> In other cases, courts have indicated that the substance of the transaction did not support the form of income allocations asserted by the taxpayer, and have questioned whether asserted business purpose or other standards were met.<sup>17</sup>

### **Description of Proposal**

The provision clarifies and enhances the application of the economic substance doctrine. Under the provision, in a case in which a court determines that the economic substance doctrine is relevant to a transaction (or a series of transactions), such transaction (or series of transactions) has economic substance (and thus satisfies the economic substance doctrine) only if the taxpayer establishes that (1) the transaction changes in a meaningful way (apart from Federal income tax consequences) the taxpayer's economic position, and (2) the taxpayer has a substantial non-Federal-tax purpose for entering into such transaction. The provision provides a uniform definition of economic substance, but does not alter the flexibility of the courts in other respects.

If the tax benefits are clearly consistent with all applicable provisions of the Code and the purposes of such provisions, it is not intended that such tax benefits be disallowed if the only reason for such disallowance is that the transaction fails the economic substance doctrine as defined in this provision. Thus, the provision does not change current law standards used by courts in determining *when* to utilize an economic substance analysis.<sup>18</sup>

The provision is not intended to alter the tax treatment of certain basic business transactions that, under longstanding judicial and administrative practice are respected, merely because the choice between meaningful economic alternatives is largely or entirely based on comparative tax advantages. Among<sup>19</sup> these basic decisions are (1) the choice between capitalizing a business enterprise with debt or equity; (2) the choice between foreign

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<sup>16</sup> See, e.g., *ACM Partnership v. Commissioner*, 157 F.3d 231 (3d Cir. 1998), *aff'g* 73 T.C.M. (CCH) 2189 (1997), *cert. denied* 526 U.S. 1017 (1999).

<sup>17</sup> See, e.g., *TIFD- III-E, Inc. v. United States*, 459 F.3d 220 (2d Cir. 2006).

<sup>18</sup> See, e.g., Treas. Reg. sec. 1.269-2, stating that characteristic of circumstances in which a deduction otherwise allowed will be disallowed are those in which the effect of the deduction, credit, or other allowance would be to distort the liability of the particular taxpayer when the essential nature of the transaction or situation is examined in the light of the basic purpose or plan which the deduction, credit, or other allowance was designed by the Congress to effectuate.

<sup>19</sup> The examples are illustrative and not exclusive.

corporations and domestic corporations; (3) the treatment of a transaction or series of transactions as a corporate organization or reorganization under subchapter C; and (4) the ability to respect a transaction between related parties provided that the arm's length standard of section 482 is satisfied. Leasing transactions, like all other types of transactions, will continue to be analyzed in light of all the facts and circumstances.<sup>20</sup> As under present law, whether a particular transaction meets the requirements for specific treatment under any of these provisions can be a question of facts and circumstances. Also, the fact that a transaction does meet the requirements for specific treatment under any provision of the Code is not determinative of whether a transaction or series of transactions of which it is a part has economic substance.

The provision does not alter the court's ability to aggregate, disaggregate, or otherwise recharacterize a transaction when applying the doctrine. For example, the provision reiterates the present-law ability of the courts to bifurcate a transaction in which independent activities with non-tax objectives are combined with an unrelated item having only tax-avoidance objectives in order to disallow those tax motivated benefits.<sup>21</sup>

### **Conjunctive analysis**

The provision clarifies that the economic substance doctrine involves a conjunctive analysis – there must be a judicial inquiry regarding the objective effects of the transaction on the taxpayer's economic position as well as an inquiry regarding the taxpayer's subjective motives for engaging in the transaction. Under the provision, a transaction must satisfy both tests, i.e., the transaction must change in a meaningful way (apart from Federal income tax effects) the taxpayer's economic position, and the taxpayer must have a substantial non-Federal-tax purpose<sup>22</sup> for entering into such transaction, in order to satisfy the economic substance doctrine. This clarification eliminates the disparity that exists among the circuits regarding the application of the doctrine, and modifies its application in those circuits in which either a change in economic position or a non-tax business purpose (without having both) is sufficient to satisfy the economic substance doctrine.

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<sup>20</sup> See, e.g., *Frank Lyon v. Commissioner*, 435 U.S. 561 (1978); *Coltec Industries v. United States*, 454 F.3d 1340 (Fed. Cir. 2006), *cert. denied* 127 S. Ct. 1261 (Mem) (2007).

<sup>21</sup> See, e.g., *Coltec Industries, Inc. v. United States*, 454 F.3d 1340 (Fed. Cir. 2006), *cert. denied* 127 S. Ct. 1261 (Mem.) (2007) (“the first asserted business purpose focuses on the wrong transaction--the creation of Garrison as a separate subsidiary to manage asbestos liabilities. . . . [W]e must focus on the transaction that gave the taxpayer a high basis in the stock and thus gave rise to the alleged benefit upon sale. . . .”) 454 F.3d 1340, 1358 (Fed. Cir. 2006). See also *ACM Partnership v. Commissioner*, 157 F.3d at 256 n.48; *Minnesota Tea Co. v. Helvering*, 302 U.S. 609, 613 (1938) (“A given result at the end of a straight path is not made a different result because reached by following a devious path.”).

<sup>22</sup> A purpose of reducing non-Federal taxes is not a non-Federal-tax business purpose if (i) the transaction will effect a reduction in both Federal and non-Federal taxes because of similarities between Federal tax law and the law of the other jurisdiction and (ii) the reduction of Federal taxes is greater than or substantially coextensive with the reduction of non-Federal taxes.

## **Non-Federal-tax business purpose**

Under the provision, a taxpayer's non-Federal-tax purpose for entering into a transaction (the second prong in the analysis) must be "substantial."<sup>23</sup>

An objective of achieving a favorable accounting treatment for financial reporting purposes will not itself be treated as a substantial non-Federal-tax purpose if the origin of such financial accounting benefit is a reduction of Federal income tax.<sup>24</sup> For example, a transaction that is expected to increase financial accounting income as a result of generating tax deductions or losses without a corresponding financial accounting charge (i.e., a permanent book-tax difference)<sup>25</sup> should not be considered to have a substantial non-Federal-tax purpose unless a substantial non-Federal-tax purpose exists apart from the financial accounting benefits.<sup>26</sup>

## **Profit potential**

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<sup>23</sup> See, e.g., Treas. Reg. sec. 1.269-2(b) (stating that a distortion of tax liability indicating the principal purpose of tax evasion or avoidance might be evidenced by the fact that "the transaction was not undertaken for reasons germane to the conduct of the business of the taxpayer"). Similarly, in *ACM Partnership v. Commissioner*, 73 T.C.M. (CCH) 2189 (1997), the court stated:

Key to [the determination of whether a transaction has economic substance] is that the transaction must be rationally related to a useful nontax purpose that is plausible in light of the taxpayer's conduct and useful in light of the taxpayer's economic situation and intentions. Both the utility of the stated purpose and the rationality of the means chosen to effectuate it must be evaluated in accordance with commercial practices in the relevant industry. A rational relationship between purpose and means ordinarily will not be found unless there was a reasonable expectation that the nontax benefits would be at least commensurate with the transaction costs. [citations omitted]

<sup>24</sup> However, if the tax benefits are clearly contemplated and expected by the language and purpose of the relevant authority, such tax benefits should not be disallowed solely because the transaction results in a favorable accounting treatment. An example is the repealed foreign sales corporation rules.

<sup>25</sup> This includes tax deductions or losses that are anticipated to be recognized in a period subsequent to the period the financial accounting benefit is recognized. For example, FAS 109 in some cases permits the recognition of financial accounting benefits prior to the period in which the tax benefits are recognized for income tax purposes.

<sup>26</sup> Claiming that a financial accounting benefit constitutes a substantial non-tax purpose fails to consider the origin of the accounting benefit (i.e., reduction of taxes) and significantly diminishes the purpose for having a substantial non-tax purpose requirement. See, e.g., *American Electric Power, Inc. v. United States*, 136 F. Supp. 2d 762, 791-92 (S.D. Ohio 2001) ("AEP's intended use of the cash flows generated by the [corporate-owned life insurance] plan is irrelevant to the subjective prong of the economic substance analysis. If a legitimate business purpose for the use of the tax savings 'were sufficient to breathe substance into a transaction whose only purpose was to reduce taxes, [then] every sham tax-shelter device might succeed,'" (citing *Winn-Dixie v. Commissioner*, 113 T.C. 254, 287 (1999)); *aff'd*, 326 F3d 737 (6<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2003).

Under the provision, a taxpayer may rely on factors other than profit potential to demonstrate that a transaction results in a meaningful change in the taxpayer's economic position or that the taxpayer has a substantial non-Federal-tax purpose for entering into such transaction. The provision does not require or establish a specified minimum return that will satisfy the profit potential test. However, if a taxpayer relies on a profit potential, the present value of the reasonably expected pre-Federal tax profit must be substantial in relation to the present value of the expected net Federal tax benefits that would be allowed if the transaction were respected.<sup>27</sup> In addition, in determining pre-Federal-tax profit, foreign taxes are treated as expenses to the extent provided in regulations.<sup>28</sup>

### **Other rules**

The Secretary may prescribe regulations that provide (1) exemptions from the application of the provision, and (2) other rules as may be necessary or appropriate to carry out the purposes of the provision.

No inference is intended as to the proper application of the economic substance doctrine under present law. In addition, the provision shall not be construed as altering or supplanting any other common law doctrine; and the provision shall be construed as being additive to any such other doctrine.

### **Effective Date**

The provision applies to transactions entered into after the date of enactment.

## **2. Penalty for understatements attributable to transactions lacking economic substance, etc.**

### **Present Law**

#### **General accuracy-related penalty**

An accuracy-related penalty under section 6662 applies to the portion of any underpayment that is attributable to (1) negligence, (2) any substantial understatement of income tax, (3) any substantial valuation misstatement, (4) any substantial overstatement of pension liabilities, or (5) any substantial estate or gift tax valuation understatement. If the correct income tax liability exceeds that reported by the taxpayer by the greater of 10 percent of the correct tax or \$5,000 (or, in the case of corporations, by the lesser of (a) 10 percent of the correct tax (or

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<sup>27</sup> Thus, a "reasonable possibility of profit" alone will not be sufficient to establish that a transaction has economic substance.

<sup>28</sup> There is no intention to restrict the ability of the courts to consider the appropriate treatment of foreign taxes in particular cases, as under present law. However, the Treasury Department may, in addition, choose to require treatment of foreign taxes as expenses as provided in regulations.

\$10,000 if greater) or (b) \$10 million), then a substantial understatement exists and a penalty may be imposed equal to 20 percent of the underpayment of tax attributable to the understatement.<sup>29</sup> Except in the case of tax shelters,<sup>30</sup> the amount of any understatement is reduced by any portion attributable to an item if (1) the treatment of the item is supported by substantial authority, or (2) facts relevant to the tax treatment of the item were adequately disclosed and there was a reasonable basis for its tax treatment. The Treasury Secretary may prescribe a list of positions which the Secretary believes do not meet the requirements for substantial authority under this provision.

The section 6662 penalty generally is abated (even with respect to tax shelters) in cases in which the taxpayer can demonstrate that there was “reasonable cause” for the underpayment and that the taxpayer acted in good faith.<sup>31</sup> The relevant regulations provide that reasonable cause exists where the taxpayer “reasonably relies in good faith on an opinion based on a professional tax advisor’s analysis of the pertinent facts and authorities [that] . . . unambiguously concludes that there is a greater than 50-percent likelihood that the tax treatment of the item will be upheld if challenged” by the IRS.<sup>32</sup>

### **Listed transactions and reportable avoidance transactions**

#### **In general**

A separate accuracy-related penalty under section 6662A applies to “listed transactions” and to other “reportable transactions” with a significant tax avoidance purpose (hereinafter referred to as a “reportable avoidance transaction”). The penalty rate and defenses available to avoid the penalty vary depending on whether the transaction was adequately disclosed.

Both listed transactions and reportable transactions are allowed to be described by the Treasury department under section 6707A(c), which imposes a penalty for failure adequately to report such transactions under section 6011. A reportable transaction is defined as one that the Treasury Secretary determines is required to be disclosed because it is determined to have a potential for tax avoidance or evasion.<sup>33</sup> A listed transaction is defined as a reportable transaction which is the same as, or substantially similar to, a transaction specifically identified

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<sup>29</sup> Sec. 6662.

<sup>30</sup> A tax shelter is defined for this purpose as a partnership or other entity, an investment plan or arrangement, or any other plan or arrangement if a significant purpose of such partnership, other entity, plan, or arrangement is the avoidance or evasion of Federal income tax. Sec. 6662(d)(2)(C).

<sup>31</sup> Sec. 6664(c).

<sup>32</sup> Treas. Reg. sec. 1.6662-4(g)(4)(i)(B); Treas. Reg. sec. 1.6664-4(c).

<sup>33</sup> Sec. 6707A(c)(1).

by the Secretary as a tax avoidance transaction for purposes of the reporting disclosure requirements.<sup>34</sup>

### Disclosed transactions

In general, a 20-percent accuracy-related penalty is imposed on any understatement attributable to an adequately disclosed listed transaction or reportable avoidance transaction.<sup>35</sup> The only exception to the penalty is if the taxpayer satisfies a more stringent reasonable cause and good faith exception (hereinafter referred to as the “strengthened reasonable cause exception”), which is described below. The strengthened reasonable cause exception is available only if the relevant facts affecting the tax treatment are adequately disclosed, there is or was substantial authority for the claimed tax treatment, and the taxpayer reasonably believed that the claimed tax treatment was more likely than not the proper treatment.

### Undisclosed transactions

If the taxpayer does not adequately disclose the transaction, the strengthened reasonable cause exception is not available (i.e., a strict-liability penalty generally applies), and the taxpayer is subject to an increased penalty equal to 30 percent of the understatement.<sup>36</sup> However, a taxpayer will be treated as having adequately disclosed a transaction for this purpose if the IRS Commissioner has separately rescinded the separate penalty under section 6707A for failure to disclose a reportable transaction.<sup>37</sup> The IRS Commissioner is authorized to do this only if the failure does not relate to a listed transaction and only if rescinding the penalty would promote compliance and effective tax administration.<sup>38</sup>

A public entity that is required to pay a penalty for an undisclosed listed or reportable transaction must disclose the imposition of the penalty in reports to the SEC for such periods as the Secretary shall specify. The disclosure to the SEC applies without regard to whether the taxpayer determines the amount of the penalty to be material to the reports in which the penalty must appear, and any failure to disclose such penalty in the reports is treated as a failure to disclose a listed transaction. A taxpayer must disclose a penalty in reports to the SEC once the taxpayer has exhausted its administrative and judicial remedies with respect to the penalty (or if earlier, when paid).<sup>39</sup>

### Determination of the understatement amount

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<sup>34</sup> Sec. 6707A(c)(2).

<sup>35</sup> Sec. 6662A(a).

<sup>36</sup> Sec. 6662A(c).

<sup>37</sup> Sec. 6664(d).

<sup>38</sup> Sec. 6707A(d).

<sup>39</sup> Sec. 6707A(e).

The penalty is applied to the amount of any understatement attributable to the listed or reportable avoidance transaction without regard to other items on the tax return. For purposes of this provision, the amount of the understatement is determined as the sum of: (1) the product of the highest corporate or individual tax rate (as appropriate) and the increase in taxable income resulting from the difference between the taxpayer's treatment of the item and the proper treatment of the item (without regard to other items on the tax return);<sup>40</sup> and (2) the amount of any decrease in the aggregate amount of credits which results from a difference between the taxpayer's treatment of an item and the proper tax treatment of such item.

Except as provided in regulations, a taxpayer's treatment of an item shall not take into account any amendment or supplement to a return if the amendment or supplement is filed after the earlier of when the taxpayer is first contacted regarding an examination of the return or such other date as specified by the Secretary.<sup>41</sup>

#### Strengthened reasonable cause exception

A penalty is not imposed with respect to any portion of an understatement if it is shown that there was reasonable cause for such portion and the taxpayer acted in good faith. Such a showing requires: (1) adequate disclosure of the facts affecting the transaction in accordance with the regulations under section 6011;<sup>42</sup> (2) that there is or was substantial authority for such treatment; and (3) that the taxpayer reasonably believed that such treatment was more likely than not the proper treatment. For this purpose, a taxpayer will be treated as having a reasonable belief with respect to the tax treatment of an item only if such belief: (1) is based on the facts and law that exist at the time the tax return (that includes the item) is filed; and (2) relates solely to the taxpayer's chances of success on the merits and does not take into account the possibility that (a) a return will not be audited, (b) the treatment will not be raised on audit, or (c) the treatment will be resolved through settlement if raised.<sup>43</sup>

A taxpayer may (but is not required to) rely on an opinion of a tax advisor in establishing its reasonable belief with respect to the tax treatment of the item. However, a taxpayer may not rely on an opinion of a tax advisor for this purpose if the opinion (1) is provided by a "disqualified tax advisor" or (2) is a "disqualified opinion."

#### Disqualified tax advisor

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<sup>40</sup> For this purpose, any reduction in the excess of deductions allowed for the taxable year over gross income for such year, and any reduction in the amount of capital losses which would (without regard to section 1211) be allowed for such year, shall be treated as an increase in taxable income. Sec. 6662A(b).

<sup>41</sup> Sec. 6662A(e)(3).

<sup>42</sup> See the previous discussion regarding the penalty for failing to disclose a reportable transaction.

<sup>43</sup> Sec. 6664(d).

A disqualified tax advisor is any advisor who: (1) is a material advisor<sup>44</sup> and who participates in the organization, management, promotion, or sale of the transaction or is related (within the meaning of section 267(b) or 707(b)(1)) to any person who so participates; (2) is compensated directly or indirectly<sup>45</sup> by a material advisor with respect to the transaction; (3) has a fee arrangement with respect to the transaction that is contingent on all or part of the intended tax benefits from the transaction being sustained; or (4) as determined under regulations prescribed by the Secretary, has a disqualifying financial interest with respect to the transaction.

A material advisor is considered as participating in the “organization” of a transaction if the advisor performs acts relating to the development of the transaction. This may include, for example, preparing documents: (1) establishing a structure used in connection with the transaction (such as a partnership agreement); (2) describing the transaction (such as an offering memorandum or other statement describing the transaction); or (3) relating to the registration of the transaction with any federal, state, or local government body.<sup>46</sup> Participation in the “management” of a transaction means involvement in the decision-making process regarding any business activity with respect to the transaction. Participation in the “promotion or sale” of a transaction means involvement in the marketing or solicitation of the transaction to others. Thus, an advisor who provides information about the transaction to a potential participant is involved in the promotion or sale of a transaction, as is any advisor who recommends the transaction to a potential participant.

#### Disqualified opinion

An opinion may not be relied upon if the opinion: (1) is based on unreasonable factual or legal assumptions (including assumptions as to future events); (2) unreasonably relies upon representations, statements, findings or agreements of the taxpayer or any other person; (3) does not identify and consider all relevant facts; or (4) fails to meet any other requirement prescribed by the Secretary.

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<sup>44</sup> The term “material advisor” means any person who provides any material aid, assistance, or advice with respect to organizing, managing, promoting, selling, implementing, or carrying out any reportable transaction, and who derives gross income in excess of \$50,000 in the case of a reportable transaction substantially all of the tax benefits from which are provided to natural persons (\$250,000 in any other case). Sec. 6111(b)(1).

<sup>45</sup> This situation could arise, for example, when an advisor has an arrangement or understanding (oral or written) with an organizer, manager, or promoter of a reportable transaction that such party will recommend or refer potential participants to the advisor for an opinion regarding the tax treatment of the transaction.

<sup>46</sup> An advisor should not be treated as participating in the organization of a transaction if the advisor’s only involvement with respect to the organization of the transaction is the rendering of an opinion regarding the tax consequences of such transaction. However, such an advisor may be a “disqualified tax advisor” with respect to the transaction if the advisor participates in the management, promotion, or sale of the transaction (or if the advisor is compensated by a material advisor, has a fee arrangement that is contingent on the tax benefits of the transaction, or as determined by the Secretary, has a continuing financial interest with respect to the transaction).

### Coordination with other penalties

To the extent a penalty on an understatement is imposed under section 6662A, that same amount of understatement is not also subject to the accuracy-related penalty under section 6662(a) or to the valuation misstatement penalties under section 6662(e) or 6662(h). However, such amount of understatement is included for purposes of determining whether any understatement (as defined in sec. 6662(d)(2)) is a substantial understatement as defined under section 6662(d)(1) and for purposes of identifying an underpayment under the section 6663 fraud penalty.

The penalty imposed under section 6662A does not apply to any portion of an understatement to which a fraud penalty is applied under section 6663.

### **Description of Proposal**

The provision imposes a new, stronger penalty for an understatement attributable to any transaction that lacks economic substance (referred to in the statute as a “noneconomic substance transaction understatement”).<sup>47</sup> The penalty rate is 30 percent (reduced to 20 percent if the taxpayer adequately discloses the relevant facts in accordance with regulations prescribed under section 6011). No exceptions (including the reasonable cause or rescission rules) to the penalty are available (i.e., the penalty is a strict-liability penalty). Under the provision, outside opinions or in-house analysis would not protect a taxpayer from imposition of a penalty if it is determined that the transaction lacks economic substance or is not respected as described below.

A “noneconomic substance transaction” means any transaction if (1) the transaction lacks economic substance (as defined in the provision regarding the clarification of the economic substance doctrine).<sup>48</sup> For this purpose, a transaction is one that lacks economic substance if it is disregarded as a result of the application of the same factors and analysis that is required under the provision for an economic substance analysis, even if a court uses a different term to describe the doctrine.

For purposes of the bill, the calculation of an “understatement” is made in the same manner as in the present law provision relating to accuracy-related penalties for listed and reportable avoidance transactions (sec. 6662A). Thus, the amount of the understatement under the provision would be determined as the sum of (1) the product of the highest corporate or

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<sup>47</sup> Thus, unlike the present-law accuracy-related penalty under section 6662A (which applies only to listed and reportable avoidance transactions), the new penalty under the provision applies to any transaction that lacks economic substance.

<sup>48</sup> That provision generally provides that in any case in which a court determines that the economic substance doctrine is relevant, a transaction has economic substance only if: (1) the transaction changes in a meaningful way (apart from Federal income tax effects) the taxpayer’s economic position, and (2) the taxpayer has a substantial non-Federal-tax purpose for entering into such transaction. Specific other rules also apply. See “Explanation of Provision” for the immediately preceding provision, “Clarification of the economic substance doctrine.”

individual tax rate (as appropriate) and the increase in taxable income resulting from the difference between the taxpayer's treatment of the item and the proper treatment of the item (without regard to other items on the tax return),<sup>49</sup> and (2) the amount of any decrease in the aggregate amount of credits which results from a difference between the taxpayer's treatment of an item and the proper tax treatment of such item. In essence, the penalty will apply to the amount of any understatement attributable solely to a non-economic substance transaction.

As in the case of the understatement penalty for reportable and listed transactions under present law section 6662A(e)(3), except as provided in regulations, the taxpayer's treatment of an item will not take into account any amendment or supplement to a return if the amendment or supplement is filed after the earlier of the date the taxpayer is first contacted regarding an examination of such return or such other date as specified by the Secretary.

As in the case of the understatement penalty for undisclosed reportable transactions under present law section 6707A, a public entity that is required to pay a penalty under the provision (but in this case, regardless of whether the transaction was disclosed) must disclose the imposition of the penalty in reports to the SEC for such periods as the Secretary shall specify. The disclosure to the SEC applies without regard to whether the taxpayer determines the amount of the penalty to be material to the reports in which the penalty must appear, and any failure to disclose such penalty in the reports is treated as a failure to disclose a listed transaction. A taxpayer must disclose a penalty in reports to the SEC once the taxpayer has exhausted its administrative and judicial remedies with respect to the penalty (or if earlier, when paid).

Regardless of whether the transaction was disclosed, a penalty under the provision cannot be asserted until there has been a review and approval by the Chief Counsel of the Internal Revenue Service (or, if so delegated, a branch chief within the office of Chief Counsel) and the taxpayer has had the opportunity to submit a written statement in connection with that review. Once the penalty has been asserted following such National Office review, the penalty cannot be compromised for purposes of a settlement without approval of the Chief Counsel (or, if so delegated, a branch chief within the office of Chief Counsel). The penalty can be compromised in such event only to the extent the underlying understatement with respect to which it was asserted is also compromised. Furthermore, the IRS is required to keep records summarizing the application of this penalty and providing a description of each penalty compromised under the provision and the reasons for the compromise. If a final adjudication of a court determines that the economic substance doctrine does not apply, then a noneconomic substance penalty asserted by the IRS in that case would not apply.

Any understatement on which a penalty is imposed under the provision will not be subject to the accuracy-related penalty under section 6662 or under 6662A (accuracy-related penalties for listed and reportable avoidance transactions). However, an understatement under the provision is taken into account for purposes of determining whether any understatement (as

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<sup>49</sup> For this purpose, any reduction in the excess of deductions allowed for the taxable year over gross income for such year, and any reduction in the amount of capital losses that would (without regard to section 1211) be allowed for such year, would be treated as an increase in taxable income.

defined in sec. 6662(d)(2)) is a substantial understatement as defined under section 6662(d)(1). The penalty imposed under the provision will not apply to any portion of an understatement to which a fraud penalty is applied under section 6663.

#### **Effective Date**

The provision applies to transactions entered into after the date of enactment.

### **3. Denial of deduction for interest on underpayments attributable to noneconomic substance transactions**

#### **Present Law**

No deduction for interest is allowed for interest paid or accrued on any underpayment of tax which is attributable to the portion of any reportable transaction understatement with respect to which the relevant facts were not adequately disclosed.<sup>50</sup> The Secretary of the Treasury is authorized to define reportable transactions for this purpose.<sup>51</sup>

#### **Description of Proposal**

The provision extends the disallowance of interest deductions to interest paid or accrued on any underpayment of tax which is attributable to any noneconomic substance underpayment (whether or not disclosed).

#### **Effective Date**

The provision applies to transactions entered into after the date of enactment

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<sup>50</sup> Sec. 162(m). Under section 6664(d)(2)(A), in such a case of nondisclosure, the taxpayer also is not entitled to the “reasonable cause and good faith” exception to the section 6662A penalty for a reportable transaction understatement.

<sup>51</sup> See the description of present law under the immediately preceding proposal, “Penalty for understatements attributable to transactions lacking economic substance, etc.”