Order Code RS21987
Updated October 26, 2006

CRS Report for Congress

Received through the CRS Web

When Financial Businesses Fail: Protection for Account Holders

Walter W. Eubanks
Specialist in Economic Policy
Government and Finance Division

Summary

Lawmakers have long recognized the importance of protecting some forms of financial savings from risk. Such vehicles clearly include deposits in banks and thrift institutions and credit union "shares." Remedial and other safety net features also cover insurance contracts, certain securities accounts, and even defined-benefit pensions. Questions over how to fund and guarantee Social Security, along with the troubles of the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation, have renewed interest in these arrangements. This report portrays the salient features and legislation of account protection provided by the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, the National Credit Union Share Insurance Fund, state insurance guaranty funds, the Securities Investor Protection Corporation, and the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation. It provides resources for further analysis of each protective arrangement and will be updated as appropriate.

Analysis

Analysts and lawmakers view many financial businesses as having an important role in the U.S. economy, receiving protection for their individual account holders against loss, should the firms fail. Such protections exist both to protect the individuals from risks they probably could not discern for themselves, and to protect the economy against the effects of financial panics if failures occur. Panics, the attendant collapses of wealth, and severe consequences for the economy occurred before Congress created federal deposit insurance in 1934. Government policy protects customers of depository institutions — banks, thrift institutions, and credit unions — in full for accounts up to $100,000 and up to $250,000 for retirement accounts. In addition, customers of insurance companies, securities broker/dealers, and many pension funds receive government or government-sponsored guarantees on specified accounts.

This report provides a side-by-side summary of the major features of financial institutions' customer protection systems, reflecting safety-net provisions legislated over time, usually in reaction to specific collapses. Besides these explicit guarantees, regulatory bodies can attempt the rescue of failing financial enterprises, using many tools authorized by laws and regulations and often acting in the background. Such tools include liquidity lending, arranging memoranda of understanding, issuing cease and desist orders against risky practices, and arranging mergers of weak entities into stronger institutions. If the entire financial economy seems threatened by pending collapse of either a sizeable financial institution that is "too large to fail," or many financial businesses collectively, the Federal Reserve (Fed) can step in as the lender of last resort to avert serious adverse consequences for the economy (e.g., use of the Fed's liberal bank liquidity policy immediately after the 911 attacks). Moreover, Congress may have to provide emergency funding when parts of the federal safety net are under severe pressure. The cleanup of the savings and loan industry in the 1980s and early 1990s, for example, required appropriated funds plus a new deposit insurance fund and regulator. Currently, severely underfunded defined benefit pension plans of steel, airline, and similar businesses suggest that the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation may require much future federal assistance.[1]

An important conceptual distinction between support structures is who ultimately pays for the protection. Lawmakers originally created federal deposit insurance in a "user fee" model of insurance, in which the government owned and operated each insurance system and charged member banks for its use. Following the banking failures of the late 20th century, legislation moved deposit protection part way toward an alternative "mutual" model, in which the burden of financing the system falls more clearly on the banking industry. Mutual institutions are owned by their customers, such as saving associations' depositors and insurance companies' policyholders. As a result, some analysts now claim that the banking industry "owns" the deposit insurance funds in mutual mode. In reality, the federal government still owns and operates them. That is so because in all depository institution cases, the ultimate guarantor is the economic power of the federal government. History has shown that deposit guarantees short of the federal level have universally been inadequate to prevent panics, runs, and severe economic damage when called upon.[2] Industry-sponsored and state-level programs have contained the collapses of their covered entities only if the damages have been small. Credit union share insurance, in contrast, more nearly follows the mutual model. Likewise, state insurance company guaranty and federally-sponsored securities investor protection arrangements follow the mutual model. The troubled pension benefit arrangement, however, remains in user fee mode.

The following tabulation lists the major elements and components of these safety nets. **Table 1** outlines the support structures for accounts at depository institutions. **Table 2** does the same for the nondepository supports. Readers may obtain further analysis of each system in the CRS reports cited for further reading, or via the websites of the administering agencies noted.

---

[1] See the CRS Current Legislative Issue entry, *Pension Security and Retirement Savings*, at [http://beta.crs.gov/cli/cli.aspx?PRDS_CLI_ITEM_ID=446].

[2] CRS Report RL31552, *Deposit Insurance: The Government's Role and Its Implications for Funding*, by Gillian Garcia, William Jackson, and Barbara Miles.

Table 1. Comparing Account Protection: Depository Institutions

Feature	Bank Deposits	Thrift Institution Deposits	Credit Union Shares
Statutory Authority	Federal Deposit Insurance Act	Same	Federal Credit Union Act (Amendment)
Original Date/ Major Modification	1933/1991	1934/1989/1991	1970
Citations to Authority and Operations	64 Stat. 873; 12 U.S.C. 1811 ff.	Same	84 Stat. 994; 12 U.S.C. 1781 ff.
Administrator	Independent agency: Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation's Bank Insurance Fund.	Independent agency: Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation's Savings Association Insurance Fund.	Independent agency: National Credit Union Administration manages National Credit Union Share Insurance Fund.
Funding	Banks pay assessments on deposits to maintain fund balance: currently zero for all but riskiest firms.	Same	All federal and electing states may pay assessments; none recently. Contribution of 1% of credit union "shares" required.
Federal Budgetary Status	Part of consolidated federal budget.	Same	Members own off-budget fund.
Federal Government Backstop	$30 billion line of credit with U.S. Treasury; "full faith and credit of the United States."	Same	$100 million line of credit with U.S. Treasury; "full faith and credit of the United States."
Risk-based Assessment	Yes: a few cents more per $100 of covered deposits.	Same	No
Tax Deduction for Assessment	Yes: Business expense deduction for taxes.	Same	None usually since credit unions are exempt from federal and most state taxes.
Product Line Differentiation	None	None	None
Coverage Limit	$100,000 per account, and $250, 000 for retirement accounts.	Same	Same

Source: Congressional Research Service, The Library of Congress.

Table 2. Comparing Account Protection: Nondepository Institutions

Feature	Insurance Policies	Securities Accounts	Pension Accounts
Statutory Authority	State laws; McCarran-Ferguson Act (59 Stat. 33, 1945) removed most federal industry involvement.	Securities Investor Protection Act of 1970	Employee Retirement Income Security Act of 1974; Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2001.
Original Date/ Major Modification	Various.	1970	1974/1994/2000
Citations to Authority and Operations	State laws.	84 Stat. 1636; 15 U.S.C. 78aaa ff.	88 Stat. 829; 29 U.S.C. 1001 ff.
Administrator	Multi state administrators and non-profit associations of licensed insurers; coordinated via National Association of Insurance Commissioners and National Conference of Insurance Legislators.	Non-governmental membership corporation, funded by member securities broker-dealers: Securities Investor Protection Corporation.	“Self-supporting” federal government corporation: Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation.
Funding	Licensed direct insurers pay after actual insolvency; no funds(s) generally exist.	Assessments on members for “reserve” fund advancing payments to claimants: flat $150 yearly per firm. Corporation may levy revenue-based assessment, as in 1989 — 1995.	Employers pay annual premium per participant: $19 minimum in single-employer/$2.60 flat in multi-employer plans.
Federal Budgetary Status	Not applicable.	Not a budgetary account.	On-budget.
Federal Government Backstop	None, except for a program of terrorism reinsurance.	May borrow $1 billion from U.S. Treasury Department through Securities and Exchange Commission; *lacks* “full faith and credit” backup.	Borrowing or appropriation has not covered fund deficits; *lacks* “full faith and credit” backup.

Feature	Insurance Policies	Securities Accounts	Pension Accounts
Risk-based Assessment	No.	No.	Yes: Underfunded single-employer plans pay extra $9/1,000 on unfunded vested benefits, varying with interest rates
Tax Deduction of Assessment	Yes: Life insurers in 45 states and property-liability insurers in 20 may deduct assessments from premium taxes; business expense deduction for federal and state taxes.	Essentially not applicable, although business expense tax deduction is nominally available.	Yes: Employers' business expense deduction for federal and state taxes.
Product Line Differentiation	Insurers are assessed by market share in particular types of insurance.	None.	Program for single-employer plans; another for multi-employer plans.
Coverage Limit	Coverage limits vary by state	Stocks, bonds, and cash registered to holders in closed broker/dealers; $500,000 of which $100,000 may be cash; not protected against changing market values.	Varies. Single-employer plan basic benefits to $3,801 monthly for retirees starting at age 65, adjusted for age and inflation. Multi-employer plan formula is 100% of first $11 of monthly benefits per year of service plus 75% of the next $33 of such benefits, not adjusted.

Source: Congressional Research Service, The Library of Congress.

For Further Reading

CRS Report RS21719, *Bank and Thrift Deposit Insurance Premiums: The Record from 1934 to 2004,* by Barbara Miles and William Jackson.

CRS Report RL31552, *Deposit Insurance: The Government's Role and its Implications for Funding*, by Gillian Garcia, William Jackson, and Barbara Miles.

CRS Report RS20724, *Federal Deposit and Share Insurance: Proposals for Change*, by William Jackson.

CRS Report RL32175, *Insurance Guaranty Funds*, by Carolyn Cobb.

CRS Report 95-118, *Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation: A Fact Sheet*, by Paul Graney.

CRS Report RS21741, *Securities Investor Protection Corporation*, by William Jackson and Gary Shorter.

CRS Report RS21979, *Terrorism Risk Insurance: An Overview*, by Baird Webel.