

Reform Penalty and Interest Provisions

#31 CONVERT THE ESTIMATED TAX PENALTY INTO AN INTEREST PROVISION FOR INDIVIDUALS, TRUSTS, AND ESTATES

Present Law

Through the combination of wage withholding and the requirement that taxpayers make estimated tax payments, the IRC aims to ensure that Federal income and payroll taxes are paid ratably throughout the year. IRC § 3402 generally requires employers to withhold tax on wages paid to employees. IRC § 6654 generally requires that taxpayers pay at least the lesser of (i) 90 percent of the tax shown on a tax return for the current tax year or (ii) 100 percent of the tax shown on a tax return for the preceding tax year (reduced by the amount of wage withholding) in four installment payments that are due on April 15, June 15, September 15, and January 15 of the following tax year.¹¹⁴

IRC § 6654(a) provides that a taxpayer who fails to pay sufficient estimated tax will be liable for a penalty that is computed by applying (i) the underpayment rate established under IRC § 6621 (ii) to the amount of the underpayment (iii) for the period of the underpayment. IRC § 6621 is an interest provision. Therefore, the additional amount a taxpayer owes for failing to pay sufficient estimated tax is denominated as a “penalty,” but the computation is strictly an interest charge.

Reasons for Change

For a variety of reasons, taxpayers often have difficulty predicting how much tax they will owe. Self-employed taxpayers or taxpayers who own small businesses experience significant fluctuations in their incomes and expenses from year to year. Taxpayers with significant investment income also may experience significant fluctuations. In addition, significant changes in tax laws, such as those taking effect in 2018, affect tax liabilities in ways that taxpayers may not fully anticipate. As a result, millions of taxpayers do not satisfy the requirements of IRC § 6654 and are liable for penalties, even though many have attempted to comply.

The term “penalty” carries negative connotations, and the National Taxpayer Advocate believes it should be reserved for circumstances in which a taxpayer has failed to make reasonable efforts to comply with the law. Thus, she agrees with the assessment of the Ways and Means Committee when it wrote during a previous Congress: “Because the penalties for failure to pay estimated tax are calculated as interest charges, the Committee believes that conforming their title to the substance of the provision will improve taxpayers’ perceptions of the fairness of the estimated tax payment system.”¹¹⁵ Along those lines, the Office of the Taxpayer Advocate has conducted research studies that have found “tax morale” has an impact on tax compliance.¹¹⁶ For that reason, the failure to pay sufficient estimated tax is better characterized as an interest charge than a penalty for deficient taxpayer behavior.

114 If the adjusted gross income of a taxpayer for the preceding tax year exceeds \$150,000, “110 percent” is substituted for “100 percent” in applying clause (ii). IRC § 6654(d)(1)(C).

115 H.R. REP. NO. 108-61, at 23-24 (2003).

116 See National Taxpayer Advocate 2013 Annual Report to Congress vol. 2, 1-13 (Research Study: *Do Accuracy-Related Penalties Improve Future Reporting Compliance by Schedule C Filers?*).

Recommendation

Convert the penalty for failure to pay sufficient estimated tax to an interest charge. Toward that end, relocate IRC § 6654 from part I of subchapter A of chapter 68 to the end of subchapter C of chapter 67 and make conforming modifications to the headings and text.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ For language that is generally consistent with this recommendation, see H.R. 1528, 108th Cong. § 101 (2003). If the additional charge for failure to pay estimated tax remains a penalty, then the National Taxpayer Advocate reiterates her prior recommendation that Congress enact a reasonable cause exception. See National Taxpayer Advocate 2008 Annual Report to Congress vol. 2, 34-36 (Study: *A Framework for Reforming the Penalty Regime*).