Navigating TEFRA Partnership Audits in Multi-Tiered Entity Structures

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The Tax Equity and Fiscal Responsibility Act of 1982 (TEFRA) established a unified procedure for determining the tax treatment of partnership items at the partnership level rather than the partner level. Although these rules addressed a serious and real administrative problem in the assessment of partnership item deficiencies, they also created a complex process with many new problems and potential traps. One particularly unique set of challenges arises in the context of multi-tiered entities.

Multi-tiered entities are partnerships that have a partner or other pass-through entity as a partner. The pass-through partner is commonly referred to as a “tier,” and the partnership in which it holds its interest is the “source” partnership. The partners who hold an interest in the source partnership through a pass-through partner are “indirect partners” of the source partnership. TEFRA procedures apply to any actual partner and “any other person whose income tax liability under subtitle A is determined in whole or in part by taking into account directly or indirectly partnership items of the partnership.” Thus, this definition picks up pass-through partners and indirect partners and is not limited to those
PASS-THROUGH AND INDIRECT PARTNERS NEED TO UNDERSTAND AND PROTECT THEIR RIGHTS UNDER THE TEFRA RULES RELATING TO NOTICE OF AUDITS, AND PARTICIPATION IN ADMINISTRATIVE AND JUDICIAL PROCEEDINGS.
direct partners who receive a Schedule K-1 from the partnership. Pass-through partners include "a partnership, estate, trust, S corporation, nominee, or other similar person through whom other persons hold an interest in the partnership with respect to which proceedings under this subchapter are conducted." Indirect partners are those partners who own an "interest in a partnership through 1 or more pass-thru partners." Pass-through partners and indirect partners face unique issues in navigating the TEFRA rules. For example, TEFRA often shifts the burden of keeping indirect partners informed of proceedings to pass-through partners, and pass-through partners must be aware of their responsibilities under TEFRA to avoid potential liability to the indirect partners. In addition, TEFRA will limit an indirect partner's right to participate in a partnership-level proceeding unless the indirect partner takes steps to protect its rights. These issues are becoming increasingly important as the IRS focuses on tiered entities in an effort to increase the tax compliance of high-wealth taxpayers.

This article highlights the unique issues that pass-through partners and indirect partners face in navigating the TEFRA procedures, including:
1. Notice of audit proceedings.
2. Participation in administrative and judicial proceedings.
3. An extended statute of limitations for unidentified partners.

**Notice of Audit Proceedings**

The IRS is required to give notice of the beginning of an audit (NBAP) and of the end of an audit through a final partnership administrative adjustment (FPAA). These notices must be given to all partners whose names and addresses are furnished to the IRS (notice partners). This information is provided to the IRS in either the tax return of the partnership under audit or in a statement that meets the requirements of Reg. 301.6223(c)-1(b).

Indirect partners are not usually listed on the source partnership's tax return. Therefore, if an indirect partner wants to receive notice, the partner should file a statement with the IRS in accordance with Reg. 301.6223(c)-1(b). This provision requires the statement to identify the partnership and each partner for whom information is supplied; to explain that the statement is furnished to supplement information with respect to the partners in the partnership; to specify the tax year to which the information relates; and to be signed by the person supplying the additional information. Importantly, the statement of an indirect partner will not meet the regulatory requirements if the statement merely refers the IRS to the pass-through partner's return, unless a copy of the return is attached to the statement.

The Service has no obligation to obtain information not provided to it in the partnership's tax return or by the requisite statement, even if the information is readily accessible to it. For example, in Walthalley, three indirect partners did not receive notice from the pass-through partners of a partnership audit. The district court concluded that, while the IRS could have determined the indirect partners' identifying information by looking at the returns of the pass-through partners, the Service was not required to look at those returns or any information other than that required by the statute—i.e., the tax return of the partnership under audit or a statement provided to the IRS.

If the IRS obtains the indirect partner's name, address and indirect partner's interest in the partnership from the requisite statement, Section 6223(c)(3) requires the Service to provide the NBAP and FPAA to the indirect partners directly. Providing the NBAP and FPAA only to the pass-through partner does not satisfy the statutory requirement that these notices be provided to those indirect partners whose identifying information has been provided to the IRS.

If an indirect partner is not a notice partner, the pass-through partner is required to forward any notice to the indirect partners within 30 days of receiving the notice. In this way, TEFRA places the primary burden for keeping indirect partners informed on the tax matters partner (TMP) and the pass-through partner, rather than the IRS. An indirect partner can generally rely on the pass-through partner to provide notice. However, the partnership proceedings and adjustments still apply to an indirect partner, if the TMP or pass-through partner fails to provide notice. Therefore, an indirect partner should consider becoming a notice partner to protect its rights.

In particular, an indirect partner will want to take additional steps to ensure that it receives notice in two situations:
- When the pass-through partner has filed for bankruptcy.
- When the indirect partner holds less than a 1% interest in a large partnership.

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Bankruptcy of the Pass-Through Partner. Generally, the bankruptcy of a partner will cause the partner’s partnership items relating to the source partnership to be converted into nonpartnership items. If the bankrupt partner is a pass-through partner, however, the IRS position is that the bankruptcy does not convert the partnership items of indirect partners into nonpartnership items. This position poses a serious threat to an indirect partner’s right to control the resolution of its own tax liability. After filing for bankruptcy, the pass-through partner will be cut-off from the TEFRA proceedings and will no longer receive any notices to forward to the indirect partners. Unless the indirect partners are notice partners or have been identified to the TMP, the TEFRA rules provide no means for the indirect partner to receive notice of the partnership-level proceedings.

In *Third/Dividend/Dardanos Assoc.*, the Tax Court disagreed with the IRS’s position and held that the bankruptcy of a pass-through partner converted the indirect partner’s partnership items into nonpartnership items because the bankruptcy cut-off the indirect partners from notice of the TEFRA proceedings. But the Ninth Circuit reversed on appeal, finding that the bankruptcy of a pass-through partner did not affect whether TEFRA applied to the indirect partners.

Given the IRS position, which has been upheld by the Ninth Circuit, indirect partners that hold an interest through a pass-through partner that has filed for bankruptcy should take steps either to secure notice from the TMP or to become notice partners. Otherwise, they may not continue to receive notice of the proceedings and may lose control of the resolution of their tax liability.

Indirect Partners in Large Partnerships. While the indirect partner can generally rely on the pass-through partner for notice, in certain circumstances the pass-through partner may not be a notice partner. Under Section 6223(b), the IRS is not required to provide notice to a partner if (1) the partnership has more than 100 partners, and (2) the partner has less than a 1% interest in partnership profits. Therefore, if the source partnership has more than 100 partners and the pass-through partner has less than a 1% interest in partnership profits, the indirect partner should take steps to obtain notice directly from the IRS.

However, with a large partnership, the indirect partner may not be able to obtain notice directly form the IRS in the usual manner. Normally, under Section 6223(c)(3), if the IRS has the name, address, and profits interest of an indirect partner (i.e., a partner holding his interest in the partnership through a pass-through partner), the IRS must send notice directly to the indirect partner. The indirect partners are then notice partners.

No guidance has been provided, however, on whether the large partnership exception in Section 6223(b) trumps the rule requiring the IRS to provide notice to indirect partners when it has the necessary information to do so. Thus, it is possible that the IRS would still not provide notices directly to an indirect partner, despite receiving identifying information under Section 6223(c)(3), if the partnership has more than 100 partners and the indirect partner has less than a 1% interest. Such indirect partners in large partnerships should join with other partners to form a “notice group” under Section 6223(b)(2) to ensure they are afforded the same rights as notice partners.

Participation in Proceedings

TEFRA procedures streamline partnership audits by allowing the IRS to coordinate administration and settlement primarily with the TMP. This streamlined procedure comes at the expense of the non-notice partners’ ability to control the resolution of their own tax liability. To allow partners to maintain some control, TEFRA gives all partners the right to participate in particular stages of administrative and judicial proceedings. Other rights however are afforded only to notice partners. Limiting certain rights to notice partners may have been intended to exclude only those partners with a small interest in the partnership. But indirect partners with a large interest in the partnership are also non-notice partners, unless their identifying information has been furnished to the IRS.
Widely held source partnerships present administrative challenges. The IRS currently faces limitations on its ability to link partnership returns with their partners—a problem that is particularly acute for widely held, multi-tiered partnerships. These limitations reduce the audits of large partnerships and, therefore, are prompting various tax reform proposals, such as treating large, widely held partnerships, as C corporations for audit purposes or even taxing partnerships with income or assets in excess of a certain amount as C corporations. One commentator noted that the “shared aversion to TEFRA has led the IRS and partnerships to try to sidestep the law’s burdensome notice procedures as much as possible.” For example, the IRS may choose to deal with only the TMP, who can bind itself and non-notice partners, and forego issuing partner-level notices to notice partners and indirect partners of the two largest publicly traded partnerships last year, the Service’s annual limit would have maxed out, leaving it unable to send notices to partners of any other TEFRA partnerships).

**Rights Afforded to All Partners.** Any partner, including an indirect partner and a pass-through partner, has the right to participate in the administrative proceeding and the right to file a request for an administrative adjustment (AAR)—i.e., the partnership equivalent to a refund claim. However, any partner who wishes to participate in the audit must coordinate with the TMP because the IRS is not required to notify any other partner of ongoing audit activities, or to adjust the audit schedule to accommodate them. An indirect partner’s right to participate in the audit, then, depends on his ability to coordinate with the TMP.

**Right to File a Protest or Petition for Redetermination.** Only notice partners have the right to contest an FPAA by either filing a protest with IRS Appeals or by filing a petition for redetermination. If an indirect partner would like to preserve this right, the partner should send an identifying statement to the IRS that complies with Reg. 301.6223(c)-1(b). If the partner does not take steps to become a notice partner, the indirect partner’s right to contest the audit’s findings will depend on its ability to convince the pass-through partner (assuming the pass-through partner is a notice partner).
to file a protest or a petition for readjustment.

When the pass-through partner files a petition for readjustment in a U.S. district court or the U.S. Court of Federal Claims, another issue arises that is unique to multi-tiered entities. For these courts to have jurisdiction over a partner’s petition for readjustment, the partner is required to deposit with the IRS the amount by which the partner’s tax liability would increase, if the partner’s return were made consistent with the partnership return as adjusted by the FPAA. The deposit only covers the potential increased tax liability for the filing partner, rather than all partners.

A pass-through partner, however, is required to deposit an amount based on the potential tax liability of “each indirect partner holding an interest through the pass-through partner.”

The IRS has interpreted Reg. 301.6226(e)-1(a)(1) as requiring the deposit amount to include the total impact on tax liability of indirect partners, even if some of the changes to the indirect partner’s tax liability stem from an interest in a separate pass-through intermediary and not the pass-through partner filing the petition. In Russian Recovery Fund, Ltd., the court of federal claims agreed with this interpretation.

This calculation method can require a dramatically higher deposit than might be expected. For example, in Russian Recovery Fund, Ltd., the pass-through partner deposited $50,000, which represented the amount that the indirect partners’ tax liability would be increased as a result of the indirect partners’ interest in the pass-through partner. The amount of the deposit including the impact to the indirect partners’ total tax liability (including the indirect partners’ interest in the source partnership held through other pass-through intermediaries) was over $8 million. Fortunately, incorrectly calculated deposits will not deprive a court of jurisdiction so long as the partner made a good faith attempt to satisfy the deposit requirement and any shortfall in the amount required to be deposited is timely corrected. Courts have liberally interpreted the good faith requirement.

One open issue is whether a partner with a direct interest as well as an indirect interest in the source partnership may be required to deposit the total impact on his or her tax liability by redetermination of the partnership items. The regulations appear to require the partner to deposit the total impact on his or her tax liability, including through any indirect interest. This interpretation is the most consistent with the IRS’s approach above.

The deposit requirement also presents a planning opportunity and another reason for an indirect partner to become a notice partner. If the partners anticipate litigation and want to file the petition for readjustment in a U.S. district court or the U.S. Court of Federal Claims, then the indirect partner with the smallest potential tax liability could file the petition and make the deposit, yet all other partners could still participate in the proceeding without filing a deposit.

Right to Strike Own Settlement.

An indirect partner’s right to strike his or her own administrative settlement with the IRS hinges on whether the indirect partner is a notice partner or whether the indirect partner has filed a statement with the IRS providing that the TMP does not have the authority to bind the indirect partner. The definition of notice partner is not clear if the partnership is subject to the large partnership rule and the IRS has the indirect partner’s name, address, and indirect profits interest in the partnership. In these situations, an indirect partner who wants to preserve his or her right to resolve the tax liability should either form a 5% notice group or file a statement with the IRS denying the TMP the authority to enter into a settlement on the partner’s behalf. If an indirect partner is not a notice partner, the indirect partner can be bound to a settlement by either the TMP or the pass-through partner through which the indirect partner holds its interest in the source partnership.

While pass-through partners have the authority to bind indirect partners
to an administrative settlement, it is not clear whether they have the authority to bind indirect partners in a judicial settlement. The pass-through partner may not be considered a “party” to the judicial proceeding. Tax Court Rule 247(a) defines the parties to a TEFRA proceeding as partners who satisfy Sections 6226(c) and (d). While a pass-through partner should meet the technical definitions in Sections 6226(c) and (d), Section 6226(d) is titled “Partner Must Have Interest in Outcome.” Commentators have pointed out that a pass-through partner does not have an interest in the outcome because—by definition—the partnership items flow through the pass-through partner to the indirect partners. This issue was raised by the taxpayer in Chomp Associates but was not resolved by the Tax Court. Therefore, it remains an open issue and one that indirect partners should address by becoming notice partners.

Extended Statute of Limitations for Unidentified Partners

Indirect partners have the unique disadvantage of being subject to an extended statute of limitations. Generally, the statute of limitations for the assessment of partnership items is three years after the later of either the date the partnership return was filed or the last day for filing the return. However, Section 6229(e) extends the statute of limitations for “unidentified partners” until one year after the partner has been identified to the IRS. Specifically, the extended statute of limitations in Section 6229(e) applies if the name, address, and taxpayer identification number of a partner are not furnished on the partnership return and either:

1. The IRS mailed a FPAA before the expiration of the partnership statute of limitations.
2. The partner failed to notify the Service of his or her inconsistent treatment of partnership items pursuant to Section 6222.

Because indirect partners are likely not identified on the partnership return, indirect partners are highly likely to be subject to this extended statute of limitations unless they provide an identifying statement to the IRS.

A partner who is not identified on the partnership return will remain “unidentified” until it files a statement with the IRS that includes its name, address, and taxpayer identification number in accordance with Reg. 301.6223(c)-1. Identifying information that does not satisfy the regulatory requirements will not trigger the one-year statute of limitations. For example, in Costello, the district court found that the listing of the indirect partner on the pass-through partnership’s return did not satisfy the regulatory identification requirement for the source partnership. Therefore, the statute of limitations for the assessment of partnership items from the source partnership was not tolled for the unidentified indirect partner.

Similarly, in Gaughf Properties, L.P., the Tax Court held that information obtained about indirect partners from an IRS summons issued to KPMG did not satisfy the technical requirements of Reg. 301.6223(c)-1(b). Specifically, the information:

• Was not filed with the service center where the partnership return was filed.
• Did not explain that the statement was furnished to correct or supplement earlier information with respect to the partners in the partnership.

An indirect partner that does not file an identifying statement is subject to the extended limitations period if the partner takes an inconsistent position on its return and fails to notify the IRS. An inconsistent position can be taken both intentionally and unintentionally. For example, an individual or entity may not be aware that it has an interest in a source partnership and, therefore, may fail to include partnership items on its return. Field Service Advice 1998-272 provided guidance about a trust that owned an interest in a partnership subject to a TEFRA audit. The IRS entered into a settlement agreement with the trust. The IRS later determined that the trust was a grantor trust. The IRS took the position that the extended statute of limitations under Section 6229(e) applied to the grantor because:

1. The grantor was not listed on the partnership’s tax return.
2. The grantor (likely believing the trust was the partner in the partnership) had not included any partnership income in its return.

The grantor could have protected itself either by furnishing its identifying information to the IRS or by filing a notice of inconsistent treatment.

Conclusion

In many ways, TEFRA reduced the procedural burden on partners by streamlining the process and reducing overall audit costs. In exchange for this benefit, TEFRA’s procedures in many cases shift the notice burden to pass-through partners and limit an indirect partner’s right to control the resolution of his tax liability. Pass-through partners and indirect partners should approach a TEFRA audit with caution. A pass-through partner should take care to comply with TEFRA’s notice requirements to avoid potential liability to its partners. Likewise, indirect partners should protect their rights to participate in partnership-level proceedings and to control the resolution of their own tax liability.