



Office of Regulations and Interpretations
Employee Benefits Security Administration, Department of Labor
200 Constitution Avenue NW
FP Building, Room N-5655
Washington, DC 20210

July 28, 2020

**Re: Financial Factors in Selecting Plan Investments Proposed Regulation
(RIN 1210-AB95)**

To whom it may concern:

On behalf of Addenda Capital Inc., I am writing to submit comments on the proposed rule entitled “Financial Factors in Selecting Plan Investments” (“Proposal” or “NPR”). Addenda Capital is committed to integrating environmental, social and governance (ESG) factors into our investment activities because we recognize that ESG integration is essential to fulfil our fiduciary obligations to engage in appropriate risk management and to delivering the best investment returns for clients. We believe that the NPR misconstrues ESG integration and would lead to confusion and costs for retirement plan fiduciaries. We, therefore, urge you to leave the existing guidance to remain in effect and not move forward with a final rule.

Despite the aim of providing clarity for ERISA fiduciaries, the Proposal creates confusion. As elaborated below, it fails to distinguish ESG integration and economically targeted investing (ETI). ESG integration is the consideration of ESG factors as part of prudent and optimal risk management and a strategy to take investment actions aimed at responding to those risks, which is at the core of active investment management. ETIs are investments that aim to provide financial returns as well as collateral, non-financial benefits. For example, ETIs often advertise job creation or climate impact as goals of the investment.

ESG Integration

The Proposal states that an ERISA fiduciary has fulfilled its obligations if it has “selected investments and/or investment courses of action based solely on pecuniary factors.” It goes on to state that, “ESG factors and other similar factors may be economic considerations.” There is now an extensive body of research that makes clear that ESG factors are material financial investment considerations and likely to have significant economic implications in the long run (e.g. stranded assets).

A policy by the DOL, alone, that clarifies that fiduciaries must integrate material factors into their investment actions and that ESG factors may be material would be appropriate. We are concerned, however, that the remaining components of the proposal create



confusion and could cause fiduciaries to believe they are not permitted to consider material ESG factors in their investment analysis.

The “all else being equal test”

Addenda Capital is concerned that the NPR creates new burdens for fiduciaries using the “all else being equal test” that would lead to unnecessary costs for plan participants. It also creates confusion about what activities the DOL is attempting to regulate.

Under the “all else being equal test,” which has been in place since 1994, fiduciaries may select an investment that provides collateral benefits only after they have determined that the risk and return profile of that investment option is substantially similar to that of competing options that would meet the financial needs of the fund just as well.

The Proposal raises questions about whether fiduciaries would, in reality, ever have the opportunity to select between multiple investment options. It proposes the retention of the “all things being equal” test but adds new recordkeeping requirements for fiduciaries to document their analysis that multiple options were equal and that it was, therefore, appropriate to make a decision based on collateral benefits.

At Addenda Capital, we integrate ESG considerations into our investment decisions because we recognize that they have material impact on performance and long-term financial returns. In our experience the integration of ESG factors contributes to a meaningful long-term perspective and assists us in fulfilling our fiduciary duty to act in our clients’ best interests.

The Proposal’s discussion of the all things being equal test is cause for confusion because, while the test was originally developed to guide the consideration of ETIs and the discussion in the Proposal appears to envision the selection of an ETI investment, the language of the Proposal does not distinguish the application of this test from the broader discussion of ESG integration.

ERISA Defined Contribution Pension Plan investment options

The Proposal clarifies that ERISA fiduciaries may select “ESG-themed funds” as an investment option for a participant-directed plan but that an “ESG-themed fund” cannot be the default investment option. This determination appears to be informed by confusion between ESG integration and ETIs. In our view, all investment options should be required to integrate ESG factors, as part of prudent investment decision-making. In addition, it may be appropriate for ERISA fiduciaries to offer ETIs as options that participants may select in participant-directed plans.

The Department’s stated rationale for prohibiting an “ESG-themed fund” from being selected as the default investment option is that it is not appropriate to select



“investment funds whose objectives include non-pecuniary goals.” This statement shows a fundamental misunderstanding of the purpose of ESG integration, which is to integrate all material factors into investment decision-making. In addition, it is likely to cause confusion for fiduciaries as they attempt to rationalize the Department’s statements earlier in the Proposal that ESG factors are likely to have a material economic impact with the discussion of ESG factors in this context, in which the Department has deemed them “non-pecuniary.”

We believe that this recommendation will place the participants in Defined Contribution Pension Plans at a disadvantage when compared with their Defined Benefit Pension Plan counterparts. Many institutional investment managers now integrate ESG factors in their investment process. ESG integration has become a mainstream approach to active investment. The Proposal to exclude such investment strategies from default investment option risks preventing participants from accessing the best investment managers.

Conclusion

The Proposal mischaracterizes ESG integration and fails to distinguish between ESG integration and economically targeted investing. This is likely to lead to confusion for ERISA fiduciaries and cost to plan participants. If the Proposal is finalized in its current form, we are concerned that fiduciaries will struggle to fulfil their obligations to integrate all financially material risk factors, while also trying to conform to the language in the Proposal which appears aimed at preventing fiduciaries from taking account of these same risks.

As institutional investors, we have a duty to act in the best long-term interests of our clients. In this fiduciary role, we believe that ESG factors may be financially material, and integrating ESG factors is core to investment decision-making. If the Proposal goes into effect, it will undermine our ability to act in the long-term best interest of our beneficiaries. As such, we urge you to allow the existing guidance to remain in effect and not move forward with a final rule.

Sincerely,

Marie-Claude Durocher

Marie-Claude Durocher, CFA
Director, Business Development & Client Partnerships (US Market)
mc.durocher@addendacapital.com
T. 514-908-7896
800 René-Lévesque Blvd. West, Suite 2750, Montréal (Québec) H3B 1X9