

Summary of Government Interventions in Financial Markets *Norway*

Overview

The Norwegian government has maintained a policy of sustained involvement in financial markets following an economic crisis in the late 1980s – triggered by bad banking, weak market discipline and insufficient regulation. The mechanisms adopted by the Norwegian government to combat the 1980s recession have placed the economy in a better position to endure the current economic crisis than many other EU countries.

Despite this, the Norwegian government is predicting a weakening of the economy in 2009 and is taking comprehensive steps to ensure the financial markets remain stable through the global crisis. The most important measures to date have been:

- the establishment of government finance funds; and
- the introduction of a covered bond swap facility.

State guarantees

General

Norway adopted bank guarantee legislation in 1996 in the wake of the Nordic banking crisis. The aim of this was to restore confidence in the banking system.

Under current legislation, depositor losses are covered up to a total of NOK 2m. The scheme primarily applies to banks based in Norway, who pay a fee to participate. However, branches of overseas banks are also covered. Further, foreign banks are exempt from paying membership fees to participate in the guarantee scheme. For the full criteria, please refer to the legislation at http://www.kredittilsynet.no/archive/stab_pdf/01/01/20040075.pdf

The Ministry of Finance has recently recommended an end to the foreign bank membership fee exemption, with fees to become payable according to the relevant bank's risk. Norges Bank, Norway's central bank, recommended in its most recent financial stability report that the amount guaranteed should be reduced in the future and brought in line with other EU countries. The report is available at http://www.norges-bank.no/templates/reportroot_11458.aspx

F-loans

The Norwegian government makes “F-loans” to banks as a way of providing liquidity to the banking system. These loans are made by the central bank for a fixed interest rate, normally specified in a multi-price auction, and at a set maturity. Norges Bank requires banks to provide security for the loans.

Government Finance Funds

On 8 February 2009, the Norwegian government announced the creation of two funds, the State Finance Fund and the State Bond Fund, with capital totalling NOK 100bn between them. Their purpose is to increase bank capital and provide credit to struggling companies.

<http://www.regjeringen.no/en/dep/fin/The-Ministry/Other-Political-Staff/State-Secretary-Ole-Morten-Geving/taler-og-artikler/2009/policy-measures-to-ease-access-to-fundin.html?id=547339>

State Finance Fund

The State Finance Fund proposal aims to create a fund of NOK 50bn to aid financially sound Norwegian banks. This will involve providing tier 1 capital, allowing banks to strengthen their lending capacity. In return for injection of capital, the banks will adopt measures to curb executive pay.

The Ministry of Finance has set up two main instruments to deliver this. One will be similar to “*fondsobligasjoner*” (fund notes), which is presently issued by banks and recognised as core capital. The other will be a preference capital instrument. Both will carry risk-based coupons.

The European Free Trade Association (“EFTA”) is the authority which oversees Norway’s compliance with the European Economic Area (“EEA”) Agreement. On 8 May 2009, the EFTA Surveillance Authority approved the proposed State Finance Fund bank capitalisation scheme. Following this approval, the State Finance Fund has now begun to develop reporting requirements for potential applicant banks. It is expected that these will be published by June 2009. The application deadline for participation will be 30 September 2009, and systematically important banks will be given priority.

State Bond Fund

Another NOK 50bn will be provided in a bond fund to help ease capital market liquidity. The fund will be built up over the next year through investments in fixed income instruments issued by Norwegian companies. Asset management will be provided by Folketrygdfondet, a state-owned organisation.

Swap facilities

Covered bond swaps

On 12 October 2008 the government announced a covered bond swap facility with the Ministry of Finance to help increase liquidity on the market. Up to NOK 350bn will be made available through the arrangement. Under the proposal, covered bonds are swapped for Treasury bills, structured on market terms and subject to a NIBOR-based floor price. Participants entering into swap agreements may either retain the Treasury bill and receive payment from the government when the bill matures, or sell the bill in the market. Further, they may procure covered bonds either in the market or directly from an authorised mortgage company.

<http://www.regjeringen.no/en/dep/fin/press-center/Press-releases/2008/exchange-of-government-securities-for-co.html?id=533944>

http://www.norges-bank.no/templates/article_73226.aspx

Reciprocal currency arrangements

Norges Bank also announced the extension of temporary reciprocal currency arrangements (swap lines). It has agreed to extend the existing facility of USD 15bn to 30 October 2009.

Other developments

Interest rates

Norges Bank has repeatedly reduced the base interest rate. The base interest rate was most recently set at 1.50 per cent. with effect from 7 May 2009.

Icelandic aid

On 14 October 2008, Iceland drew on swap facilities it had set up with Nordic central banks, tapping Norway for EUR 200m. Under the terms of the facility, Iceland can swap ISK for up to EUR 500m with each bank.

On 20 November 2008, the Ministers of Finance of Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland issued a joint statement on supplementing the IMF financing to Iceland of USD 2.1bn with additional loans of 2.5bn, intended to be split roughly equally between all the Nordic countries.

Short selling

Kredittilsynet, the financial supervisory authority of Norway, first introduced a ban on short selling on 8 October 2008. Initially the ban only applied to certain banking shares. It was extended on 10 October 2008 to cover all primary capital certificates listed on Oslo Børs (the Oslo Stock Exchange). It is expected that the temporary ban will be phased out over time and replaced with new legislation on short selling. However, no specific date has been set for this transition.

Kredittilsynet is currently proposing legal amendments to allow for tougher sanctions against uncovered short selling. It has proposed a legal obligation that those who sell short have access to security, effectively ensure that the short sale is

covered. They are also seeking power to ban all types of short selling where necessary, providing them with the flexibility to respond quickly to unusual market behaviour.

<http://www.kredittilsynet.no/wbch3.exe?ce=21111>

Government Pension Fund

On 11 March 2009 the Ministry of Finance announced a 23 per cent. fall in return for the government Pension Fund, representing a total loss of GBP 65bn. It is the second largest sovereign wealth fund in the world, and Europe's biggest equity investor.

Mortgage company licences

Kredittilsynet granted licenses for ten new mortgage companies to operate as a further measure to help increase market liquidity. These are Sp. Vest, Møre, Sør, Nordea, Sandnes, Sogn og Fjordane, Plus, Øst, Helgeland and Fana. This will help increase available funding to consumers searching for mortgages.

Eksportfinans ASA

The Storting (Norwegian parliament) concluded a NOK 30bn loan to Eksportfinans on 12 December 2008. Eksportfinans is a Norwegian company which provides competitive financial services to export industries. It is owned in part by Norges Bank and the Norwegian Ministry for Trade and Industry. The company is usually funded by issuing bonds in the international capital markets, but the global financial crisis has adversely affected the company and its ability to obtain funding. The Storting decided that it was important to ensure Eksportfinans' ability to continue operations, given that the company is a key source of funding for Norwegian exports. This was particularly important as it is difficult for the Norwegian export industry to obtain export financing from any other sources. The Government proposal will see Eksportfinans receive financial support from the State until 10 December 2010.

On 30 January 2009, the EFTA surveillance authority concluding that Eksportfinans' loan did not constitute State Aid within the meaning of the EEA Agreement.

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