

Testimony of
Stephen P. Wilson

On behalf of the

AMERICAN BANKERS ASSOCIATION

before the

Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs

United States Senate



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June 16, 2011

Chairman Johnson, Ranking Member Shelby, and members of the Committee, the American Bankers Association appreciates the opportunity to testify at the Senate Banking Committee hearing entitled “Credit Unions: Member Business Loans.” The American Bankers Association (ABA) represents banks of all sizes and charters and is the voice for the nation’s \$13.4 trillion banking industry and its two million employees.

ABA is strongly opposed to recent efforts by the credit union industry to redefine the credit union charter in ways that would effectively turn credit unions into tax-exempt banks. This effort, most recently embodied in S. 509, the “Small Business Lending Enhancement Act of 2011,” would allow the NCUA to permit credit unions that are within 80 percent of their member business lending (MBL) cap to increase this cap and take on significantly more business lending. This would allow a new breed of credit union institutions to more aggressively pursue business customers through large commercial and real estate loans. ***It would also serve as an invitation to credit unions that are not near this cap now to focus on business lending – to the exclusion of consumer lending*** – in order to be eligible for an increase in their business lending cap

Under current law, credit unions have an aggregate MBL cap of 12.25 percent of assets. Business loans under \$50,000 do not count against this cap of 12.25 percent, nor do many other types business loans – leaving ample room for credit unions to carry out their business lending strategy. There is a limitation on business lending, because credit unions are tax exempt and this tax exemption is meant to be targeted at people of small means.

S. 509 would increase the aggregate business loan cap for qualifying credit unions to 27.5 percent of assets – ***more than double the current cap, and greater business lending authority than federal thrifts***. Thrifts are currently limited to 20 percent of total assets, provided that amounts in excess of 10 percent of total assets may be used only for small business loans. Credit unions would be allowed to further leverage their tax advantage and compete directly with tax-paying banks.

Furthermore, **S. 509 does nothing to protect members' interests with regard to consumer loans**, which would necessarily diminish over time as credit unions add business lending. In other circumstances where a credit union will move its focus away from consumer lending, NCUA requires "a clear and conspicuous disclosure" of this change. NCUA's own regulations governing the conversion of a credit union to a mutual savings bank have greater protection of members' interests regarding consumer loans than S. 509. NCUA regulations require:

... a clear and conspicuous disclosure of how the conversion from a credit union to a mutual savings bank will affect the institution's ability to make non-housing-related consumer loans because of a mutual savings bank's obligations to satisfy certain lending requirements as a mutual savings bank.

A credit union that applies and receives the authority to increase business lending under S. 509 almost certainly would reduce its non-housing-related consumer loans. However, the bill **does not require** the credit union to notify members in a clear and conspicuous manner that they could see a reduction in consumer loans. And the bill **does not require** the members of a credit union to approve in the affirmative an expansion in business lending, an action that would essentially create a tax exempt bank. Credit unions that seek a mutual savings bank charter must both mail such a disclosure to their members **and** have an affirmative vote.

Make no mistake about it, S. 509 **is nothing less than legislation that would allow a credit union to look and act just like a bank, without the obligation to pay taxes or have bank-like regulatory requirements, such as the Community Reinvestment Act, applied to them.** Provisions included in S. 509 that try to safeguard this high-risk form of lending are not the issue; rather, the issue is that credit unions have a limited charter, focused on people of small means, for which credit unions have a tax exemption.

Members of Congress have recognized this fundamental problem. As Senator Kerry (D-MA) stated from the Senate floor, credit unions "were never intended to be simply alternative, tax-exempt commercial banks."¹ Other senators have agreed.²

¹ Congressional Record, July 28, 1998, S 9095.

² Congressional Record, July 28, 1998, S 9019.

Indeed, there is a strong legislative history that supports the unique charter of credit unions **with very specific restrictions on business lending**. These restrictions were put in place to protect credit unions from lending that could pose serious threats to safety and soundness. In addition, they were put in place to ensure that credit unions remained primarily focused on individuals. Even so, the law has always made a place for MBL, although with specific restrictions to keep credit unions focused on the task at hand. In the last debate in 1998 over what that level should be, Senator Reed (D-RI) expressed reservations about the hole that the exemption of loans under \$50,000 would create:

I am concerned that loans under \$50,000 would not be counted toward the 12.25 percent cap. As a result, it is possible that credit unions could engage in commercial lending **to a much greater extent** than the limit imposed in the bill.³ [emphasis added]

This congressional concern is well-founded and echoed by many within the credit union industry itself. Business lending is risky business, and **should be limited for all credit unions**. I will address this risk later in my testimony.

Credit unions with strong business lending opportunities can take advantage of these opportunities and reach out with credit in their communities through a method that is already available – **by converting to a mutual savings bank charter**. This charter provides the flexibility credit unions desire and preserves the mutual-member focus that is the trademark of the credit union charter. For example, in 2009, Coastway Credit Union in Cranston, RI converted to a mutual savings bank so that it could make more business loans. Viewpoint Bank, formerly Community Credit Union in Plano, TX, which converted to a mutual savings bank in 2005, has taken advantage of its greater business lending authority – almost 18 percent of its assets are in business loans. I will give more detail on this process later in my testimony.

During this hearing, we will also hear about the loans to very small businesses that credit unions want to make but supposedly cannot. While the rhetoric speaks of serving the small business man or woman, the reality is that some credit unions are making **large** dollar loans to

³ Senate Report 105-193, May 21, 1998, p. 29.

businesses, and now they want to make even larger loans. These new-breed credit unions aggressively pursue business customers through large commercial and real estate loans.

Credit unions' current tax-exempt status and lack of equivalent regulation have created huge competitive inequities in the local marketplace. Some aggressive credit unions have made business lending a top priority as they seek to rapidly grow the institutions – making loans that would be made by taxpaying financial institutions. According to NCUA's own data, today, there are more than 173 credit unions with \$1 billion or more in assets, and credit unions with more than \$500 million in assets hold 63 percent of the industry's assets. In the majority of the states in this country, a credit union would rank among the top ten banks. As a former president of a state credit union association said: "In a lot of places, credit unions are the major financial institution."⁴ Unfortunately, provisions to expand business lending for those credit unions most focused on business lending would further exacerbate these competitive inequities.

There are four key points I would like to make today:

- Raising the credit union legal business lending cap is ***not necessary*** for credit unions to meet small business members' credit needs.
- Expanding the lending cap is ***inconsistent with the credit union mission*** of serving consumers, especially those of modest means.
- Business lending is riskier and ***raises serious safety and soundness concerns***.
- There is a better option for credit unions that want to expand business lending – ***convert to a mutual bank charter***.

I. Raising the credit union legal business lending cap is not necessary for credit unions to meet members' credit needs

Credit unions argue that greater business lending authority would enable them to meet the needs of small businesses seeking credit. Such arguments are simply not true. Under current law, ***business loans under \$50,000 do not count against the aggregate business loan cap*** of 12.25 percent of assets.

⁴ "CUs, Banks Put Up Dueling Bills in Oregon," American Banker, March 25, 2003

Let me state this more clearly. ***Credit unions can already make all the business loans they want under \$50,000.*** That means that credit unions start at zero when they make further business loans over \$50,000.

Moreover, the guaranteed portion of Small Business Administration loans does ***not*** count against the aggregate business loan limit, ***nor*** do loans secured by 1 to 4 family primary residences. NCUA has aggressively provided additional exclusions from the cap by regulatory fiat. For example, in October 2003, NCUA excluded business loans made to nonmembers from the cap, allowing more loans by credit unions to circumvent the aggregate business loan cap. As of March 2011, credit unions reported extending almost \$6.7 billion in non-member business loans, which account for almost 18 percent of all outstanding credit union business loan balances. This represents a three-fold increase in nonmember business loans on the books of credit unions in 6 years. The concerns raised by Senator Reed are even more troubling today, as there is even more lending under the radar and outside the limits that Congress had imposed.

Clearly, there is considerable opportunity under current law for credit unions to meet the needs of small business customers. Furthermore, only a few credit unions – ***96 out of 7,292 credit unions*** – are within 80 percent of their congressionally-mandated cap of 12.25 percent of assets, as of year-end 2010, and could be affected by S. 509. This was acknowledged by NCUA Chairman Deborah Matz last year in a hearing: “It’s a small number that are at their cap.”⁵

The minority who are at or near this cap are a new breed of institution that bears little resemblance to traditional credit unions. These “morphed” credit unions, which seek out large commercial customers, are a far cry from traditional credit unions, which have remained true to their credit union mandate to serve people of small means.

II. Business lending is risky and raises serious safety and soundness concerns

Lifting the business lending cap and allowing more large business loans also raises serious safety and soundness concerns. As credit unions have aggressively pursued business

⁵ Senate Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs. “State of the Credit Union Industry” December 9, 2010

lending options, business loan delinquencies have risen and some credit unions have failed. Even other credit unions are concerned about the impact that increased business lending will have on the credit union industry as a whole. Dale Kerslake, President and CEO of Cascade Federal Credit Union (Kent, WA) wrote:

Doubling [member business lending (MBL)] limits for natural person credit unions is not something a majority of credit unions want or need. Yet, if a minority of powerful credit unions and industry trade associations get their way, which they usually do, MBL could easily become the next industry crisis... The proposed MBL limit increase ... lacks safeguards for the thousands of credit unions that pay into NCUSIF and do not do business lending.⁶

Ron Burniske echoed these comments, after his credit union, Chartway Federal Credit Union (Virginia Beach, Va.), took over a failed Utah credit union:

We shouldn't be doing strip centers, corporate buildings and land development. That's not who we are. That's the banks' business.⁷

Credit unions have good reasons to be concerned. As of March 2011, 4.22 percent of all credit union member business loans were at least 60 days or more past due. An additional \$2.1 billion in business loans have been modified. As a concrete example, America First FCU (Riverdale, UT) recently reported that 11.4 percent of its \$450 million of member business loans were 12 months or more past due. If America First were regulated by bank regulators, these loans would have been charged off.

Testifying before the Senate Banking Committee on December 9, 2010, NCUA Chairman Debbie Matz stated: "Presently, 270 of the 633 credit unions which have a 3, 4, or 5 CAMEL rating and make member business loans, MBLs are the primary or secondary contributing factor for the supervisory concern." ***This means that approximately 30 percent of all credit unions that make business loans were a supervisory concern.***

⁶ "MBL Limits – Be Watchful of What Others Wish For," Credit Union Times, February 10, 2010.

⁷ "1 deal down, at least 1 to go for Chartway," Inside Business, January 11, 2010.

Here are some examples of large business loans that have gone bad:

- Centris FCU (Omaha, NE) held **\$11 million** in bad loans to Great Adventures Water Resort.
- Denali Alaskan FCU filed suit against a prominent real estate developer over **\$17 million** in delinquent loans.
- Telesis Credit Union (Chatsworth, CA) was foreclosing on a **\$3 million loan** on a mixed-use office building in Memphis, Tennessee.⁸

In fact, on November 23, 2010, the NCUA's Office of the Inspector General released a report summarizing the 10 costliest natural person credit union failures. ***In 7 of these 10 failures, business lending was a major contributor to the failure.***⁹

Since the report was issued, NCUA placed \$1.6 billion Texans Credit Union into conservatorship. The credit union, starting in 2003, grew its commercial real estate loan portfolio very rapidly to almost \$800 million by 2007. It funded projects ***hundreds of miles away***: a mall project in Illinois, a luxury condo development in Telluride, Colorado, and subdivisions in Mississippi.¹⁰ Eventually, some of these commercial real estate projects failed. This action arose from faulty lending on commercial real estate projects – some of which were outside of its market area.

Moreover, the General Accountability Office in 2003 warned about the danger of business lending by credit unions and it was skeptical that NCUA was up to the challenge to monitor the expansion of credit union business lending.¹¹ It should come as no surprise that the Inspector General's Material Loss Review found adequate oversight often missing: business loans were made to non-members; credit unions exceeded the legal Member Business Loan cap of 12.25 percent; credit unions violated the loan-to-one borrower limit; and credit unions made business loans without a Member Business Loan policy. ***Expanding credit union business lending only encourages larger, riskier loans, without any assurance of adequate oversight.***

⁸ "Telesis' Loan Recoup Attempts Go On," Credit Union Times, December 15, 2010.

⁹ Appendix A provides more details about what the Inspector General discovered.

¹⁰ "The Rise and Fall of Texans Credit Union," Dallas Morning News, May 8, 2011, p. D1.

¹¹ Credit Unions: Financial Condition Has Improved, but Opportunities Exist to Enhance Oversight and Share Insurance Management. U.S. General Accounting Office, October 2003 (GAO-04-91), p. 49.

In addition, NCUA in 2003 authorized credit union service organizations (CUSOs) to originate business loans as a permissible power, even though these third party vendors are *not* subject to NCUA supervision. Today, many credit unions hold business loans that were originated by these credit union service organizations. For example, CU Business Group reported in 2009 that it has underwritten over \$2 billion in business loans since its inception in 2002. Additionally, Michigan Business Connection, a CUSO supporting more than two dozen credit unions, reported managing a portfolio of over \$200 million. Cooperative Business Services, LLC, a CUSO owned by nine Ohio credit unions, reported on its website that it recently provided funding for \$3.56 million investment property.

Unfortunately, loans originated by CUSOs have resulted in credit union failures. Credit Union Times quotes NCUA Board Member Gigi Hyland addressing the National Association of Credit Union Service Organizations earlier this year regarding losses at Texans CU arising from its business lending CUSO as saying: "We could see things were going wrong but we had to go through the side door and through the maze to get there. By the time we got there, it was too late."¹²

III. Expanding the business lending cap is inconsistent with the credit union mission of serving consumers, especially those of modest means

The real goal of expanded business lending is for some aggressive credit unions to make even more large dollar loans. The truth is that these new-breed credit unions have made business lending a top priority as they seek to rapidly grow the institution – making loans that any taxpaying financial institution would want to make. The fact that a few credit unions are hitting the Congressionally-mandated limits on business lending is largely because they are making large commercial loans – including those to businesses out of their market area.

A dramatic example of just how far these credit unions have gone is the financing of Thumper Pond, a resort development in Minnesota that went bankrupt. This luxury resort featured a golf course, spa, water park, hotels, and a planned condominium community. The resort was financed by a large commercial loan made by Spire Federal Credit Union and is

¹² "NCUA Sells Importance of Increased CUSO Authority to Stay Ahead of Losses," Credit Union Times, May 4, 2011.

clearly counter to the chartered mission of serving people of modest means. Moreover, the resort is located over 200 miles from the credit union's headquarters. Is this the kind of loan that should be tax-subsidized?

Congress put these current limits in place after considerable debate to ensure credit unions remained focused on individuals, especially people of small means. In fact, the Senate Report implementing the Credit Union Membership Access Act of 1998 stated that the limits "...are intended to ensure that credit unions continue to fulfill their specified mission of meeting the credit and savings needs of consumers, especially persons of modest means, through the emphasis on consumer rather than business loans."¹³

Cases like the Thumper Pond fiasco show that credit unions are leveraging their tax-exemption to provide loans to large businesses that already have plenty of credit options available through taxpaying banks. ***This credit union tax expenditure is neither focused nor contained; it takes revenue from banks that compete for these same loans – revenue that would be taxed and would help to offset some of the current federal budget deficit.***

IV. There is a better option for credit unions that want to expand business lending – convert to a mutual bank charter.

While credit union rhetoric suggests that without greater business lending authority there are no options for these institutions to grow and better serve their customers, the reality is that a very viable option is available today through switching to a mutual savings bank charter – a route that some credit unions have already taken. This charter provides greater flexibility, still preserves the mutual-member focus that credit unions find desirable, and is accompanied by the effective and experienced supervision of traditional banking regulators.

The savings bank charter would give credit unions the ability to expand their business lending and retain their mutual structure. However, NCUA actively impedes the ability of credit unions to engage in charter choice. Removal of NCUA's obstructionism is a far better alternative to enabling more business lending than a wholesale change in powers that will benefit

¹³ Senate Report 105-193, May 21, 1998, pp.9-10.

only a small proportion of large credit unions. Facilitating conversion to a mutual savings bank charter will benefit those credit unions that have outgrown their charter, and will also improve the fiscal position of the United States as these entities pay their fair share of taxes.

Conclusion

Increased business lending powers are not necessary to meet the credit needs of businesses. Credit unions have ample authority under current law to make all the small business loans they want. S. 509 will empower credit unions to make larger commercial loans and cause credit unions to stray even further from their mission to serve consumers, especially those of modest means. Increasing the business lending cap will raise serious safety and soundness concerns.

Rather than expanding the business lending authority of credit unions, Congress should close the loopholes that are allowing credit unions to make business loans to non-members to circumvent the aggregate business loan cap. Additionally, Congress should rightfully be concerned about the increasing use of third-party vendors by credit unions to originate business loans, as CUSOs are a ticking time bomb waiting to explode given the fact that NCUA does not have authority to regulate these entities.

Against a backdrop where non-traditional credit unions forsake the common bond in favor of fast growth, and where energies are diverted to favoring the well-off and businesses rather than meeting their chartered obligation to serve people of modest means, it is no surprise that ABA opposes expansion of credit union powers. To allow such expansion will only move the new breed of credit unions further and further away from their mandated mission.

Appendix A

Business Lending Helped Lead to Credit Union Failures

The NCUA Office of Inspector General's Capping Report on Material Loss Reviews (MLR) found that the concentration of Member Business Lending (MBL) was a frequent area of concern. Of the ten MLRs that were reviewed for the report, the MBL issue was a factor in seven of the credit union failures. The table below explains each credit union's MBL problem.

