

**ANNUAL CREDIT REVIEWS FOR GULF
COAST HURRICANE DISASTER LOAN
DISBURSEMENTS**

Report Number: 08-10

Date Issued: March 28, 2008

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**(This report contains revisions to the OIG's assessment of Agency
comments, which were made subsequent to the March 28, 2008,
issuance date.)**

**Prepared by the
Office of Inspector General
U.S. Small Business Administration**



U.S. Small Business Administration
Office Inspector General

Memorandum

To: Herbert L. Mitchell, Associate Administrator
Office of Disaster Assistance
/s/ Original signed

Date: March 28, 2008

From: Debra S. Ritt
Assistant Inspector General for Auditing

Subject: Report on the Annual Credit Reviews for Gulf Coast Hurricane Disaster Loan Disbursements
Report No. 08-10

This report summarizes the results of our audit of annual credit reviews for Gulf Coast Hurricane disaster loan disbursements. We initiated the audit in response to the increasing number of defaulted Gulf Coast disaster loans processed by the Small Business Administration (SBA). The audit objective was to determine the adequacy of SBA's monitoring efforts to ensure that the financial status of borrowers had not deteriorated to levels that would adversely impact their loan repayment ability. Specifically, we determined whether (1) the credit reviews were conducted before disbursements were made, (2) all required financial documents were obtained, and (3) SBA took appropriate measures to cancel loans when there were adverse changes in the financial condition of borrowers.

As of September 30, 2007, we identified 11,217 loans totaling \$1.1 billion in disbursements for which one or more disbursements occurred over a year after loan approval. Based on review requirements that were in effect at the time of disbursement (since ODA changed the 1-year requirement to 18 months and later to 24 months), we determined that 1,117 of these loans required a credit review, using the applicable timeframe for an updated credit/financial review. We reviewed a statistical sample of 159 of the 1,117 loans. We examined entries in SBA's Disaster Credit Management System (DCMS) for each of the sampled loans to determine the timing of the credit reviews, whether all required financial documents were obtained, and whether SBA took action to address adverse changes in the financial status of borrowers. We also interviewed officials working in SBA's Office of Disaster Assistance (ODA) Processing and Disbursement Center (PDC) in Fort Worth, Texas to determine what, if any, controls were in place to prevent the PDC from disbursing funds when the required reviews were not performed.

We conducted the audit from October 2007 to January 2008 in accordance with *Government Auditing Standards* prescribed by the Comptroller General of the United States.

BACKGROUND

Following the 2005 Gulf Coast hurricanes, ODA approved more than 160,000 disaster loans to help homeowners, renters, businesses and nonprofit organizations return to pre-disaster condition. As of January 25, 2008, SBA had disbursed approximately \$6.3 billion of the approved loans.

Because rebuilding efforts in the Gulf Coast region have been slow due to the extensive damage caused by the hurricanes, many disaster loans were not fully disbursed until long after they were initially approved. During this lengthy disbursement period, the financial condition of many borrowers may have changed due to the loss of businesses and employment in the Gulf Coast region.

To ensure that loan disbursements are not made to borrowers who cannot afford to repay them, SBA requires a review of borrower creditworthiness prior to disbursing funds. Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) 50 30 states that a credit review will be made prior to a disbursement when 12 months have passed since the date of loan authorization, and annual reviews thereafter until the loan has been fully disbursed. Further, in reviewing the financial status of borrowers, loan officers must obtain current credit reports (i.e., Credit Bureau reports and/or Dun & Bradstreet reports), updated financial statements, and Federal tax returns (IRS Form 8821) if the previous tax filing period has expired. If an adverse change in the borrower's financial condition has occurred, SBA must take appropriate measures to cancel the undisbursed portion of the loan.

To further safeguard against disbursing funds without reviewing the financial status of borrowers, disbursement deadlines are recorded in DCMS that serve as a trigger for determining when credit reviews are needed. When loan disbursement deadlines expire, loan officials are required to issue a loan modification to extend the deadlines and to update information on the borrower's financial status.

RESULTS

SBA Generally Did Not Review the Financial Status of Borrowers Before Disbursing Additional Loan Funds

SBA's monitoring efforts were not adequate to ensure that the financial status of borrowers had not deteriorated to levels that would adversely impact their loan repayment ability. Generally, ODA did not: (1) perform annual credit reviews, as

required by the Agency's standard operating procedures, before making distributions of loan proceeds; (2) obtain updated financial information; and (3) cancel loans where the borrower had no repayment ability. As a result, SBA disbursed over \$1 billion in loans 1 year or more after loan approval without assurance that borrowers had repayment ability.

Even when reviews should have been conducted based on the revised 18 month and 24 month criteria, ODA disbursed \$4.9 million on 110 (or about 70 percent) of the 159 sampled loans without verifying the creditworthiness of loan recipients. Projecting the sample results to the universe, we estimate¹ that SBA disbursed at least \$29.2 million in loan proceeds that have a higher risk of defaulting. We found no evidence showing that reviews were performed for 86 of the 110 loans. For the other 24 loans, we found evidence of partial credit reviews. For each of these loans, ODA collected only one of the three required financial reports needed to determine the financial status of borrowers. These documents included updated credit reports, current financial statements, and Federal tax return forms. However, because the reviews were not complete, ODA did not collect sufficient financial information to fully assess the financial condition of borrowers.

Although ODA originally established credit reviews as a management control to prevent further disbursements to borrowers who no longer had repayment ability, in 2006 and 2007 ODA issued policy memoranda that relaxed the requirements for these reviews. On November 9, 2006, ODA issued Notice 06-61, *Credit Review for Hurricanes Katrina, Rita and Wilma*, which extended the time period for credit reviews of Gulf Coast Hurricane loans from 12 to 18 months from loan authorization. On September 14, 2007, ODA issued Notice 07-53, *Revised Credit Review for Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Wilma*, which further extended the review period to 24 months. These extensions effectively eliminated credit reviews for 10,100 loans totaling over \$1 billion² in total disbursements. Consequently, ODA circumvented a critical management control, disbursing additional funds on these loans without first determining whether adverse changes had occurred in the financial condition of borrowers that would have impacted their ability to repay the additional loan proceeds that were disbursed.

Further, both extensions were made outside of the normal process for amending standard operating procedures, which requires clearance by senior Agency executives external to ODA. Instead of amending SOP 50 30, ODA simply issued notices to its employees extending the period for credit review. While the

¹ The estimate was based on a 95-percent confidence level.

² This amount represents the total gross disbursements, and not the amount of subsequent disbursements that are at risk. We did not determine the total value of subsequent disbursements made on the 10,100 loans. However, based on prior audits, we believe that a significant portion of the \$1 billion was disbursed a year or more after loan authorization and; therefore, was subject to the original credit review requirement.

Associate Administrator of ODA can approve exceptions to disaster loan policy established by SOP 50 30, ODA was unable to provide a written justification or analysis of why the policy changes were so urgently needed that they could not be executed through a revised SOP. Because extensions of the credit review period represented a significant deviation from policy established by the SOP and ultimately placed a significant amount of loan funds at risk, we believe they should have been approved by the highest levels of SBA.

ODA officials explained that the credit review extensions were justified since economic conditions in the hurricane-hit areas had negatively impacted borrower repayment ability in many cases, through no fault of the borrowers. Therefore, they intended to disburse the full amount of the approved loans regardless of whether borrowers could repay their loans. We believe that by disregarding borrower repayment ability, ODA did not carry out its fiduciary responsibilities. By law, SBA is authorized to make disaster loans. Therefore, by relaxing annual credit review requirements designed to confirm repayment ability, ODA undermined Congress' intent that disaster loans be repaid. Furthermore, SBA recognized that the passage of time can adversely affect a borrower's ability to repay a loan by establishing the annual review requirement. Because most disbursements of Gulf Coast disaster funds were delayed by a year or more after loan approval, we believe it was imprudent of ODA to disburse a significant amount of disaster funds to individuals whose financial status may have changed between the time of loan approval and disbursement. Moreover, as we previously reported, ODA approved loans for many individuals who lacked repayment ability whose applications were processed under expedited procedures. Additional funds were disbursed to these borrowers because ODA relaxed its annual credit review requirements.

Additionally, the 2007 ODA policy notice eliminated the requirement to review borrowers' updated financial statements and Federal tax return forms when evaluating the financial status of borrowers. Under the September 2007 notice, credit reviews are to be based solely on borrower credit reports. We believe that relying solely on credit reports is imprudent because these reports only provide information on borrower monthly debt payments, and contain no income data needed to establish whether the borrower has sufficient income to repay the loan.

Lastly, although DCMS contained disbursement deadlines that should have served as a trigger for determining when credit reviews were needed, loan officers and their supervisors ignored this information, disbursing funds without reviewing the financial status of borrowers. When loan disbursement deadlines expire, loan officials are required to issue a loan modification to extend the deadlines. However, disbursements were made on 74 of the 159 loans after the disbursement deadlines. To prevent this override from occurring in the future, SBA should

build a control into DCMS in future upgrades of the system that prevents disbursements from being made after established deadlines without loan modifications.

In conclusion, ODA's revision of its credit review policies and the lack of controls in DCMS have resulted in the disbursement of loan funds that have a higher risk that the loan cannot be repaid. In our opinion, ODA's processing of subsequent loan disbursements was not only imprudent, but will likely lead to a greater number of loan defaults, and future adverse changes in borrower credit records and property losses, should foreclosures occur.

SBA Identified No Adverse Changes in the Financial Status of Borrowers

Of the 49 loans in our sample meeting the credit review requirement, SBA did not identify adverse changes in the financial status of borrowers; therefore, the Agency did not cancel any of these loans. However, we determined that six loans involved additional disbursements to borrowers who lacked repayment ability and one involved a borrower who was over 60-days delinquent on child support payments. SOP 50 30 prohibits disbursements to borrowers who are more than 60-days delinquent on child support payments.

Six of the seven loans we identified had been approved under expedited procedures that did not require an analysis of the applicant's repayment ability. As discussed in a previous audit,³ under the Expedited Loan Program, SBA awarded an estimated \$1.5 billion to individuals who lacked repayment ability. This occurred because borrower repayment ability was not considered during the approval process.

Although SBA did not previously identify these deficiencies at the time of disbursement, ODA officials agreed with our conclusion regarding repayment ability when presented with our findings. However, officials noted that it would be inappropriate to withhold remaining loan payments for borrowers on the six loans who were not required to undergo a repayment analysis when their loans were initially approved. We disagree with this view as extending loan funds to borrowers who cannot afford to repay them will cause their loans to ultimately default, impair the future credit standing of borrowers and potentially result in foreclosures on their properties. Therefore, such action would ultimately harm borrowers.

³ *Quality of Loans Processed Under the Expedited Disaster Loan Program*, OIG Report Number 07-34, September 28, 2007.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We recommend that the Associate Administrator for Disaster Assistance:

1. Reinststitute the requirement that updated income tax returns and financial documents be collected along with updated credit reports during annual credit reviews.
2. Rescind Notice 07-53 to ensure that credit reviews are performed for loans that are disbursed 12 months beyond the original loan authorization date.
3. Require written justification for disaster assistance policy that is made outside of the Agency's SOP clearance process.
4. Implement internal system controls into DCMS that ensure disbursements do not occur after expired deadlines. As part of these controls, required credit reviews must be performed to justify extensions.

AGENCY COMMENTS AND OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL RESPONSE

On February 28, 2008, we provided SBA with a draft of the report for comment. On March 21, 2008, ODA submitted its formal response, which is contained in its entirety in Appendix I. ODA generally concurred with the audit findings, but did not concur with three of the four recommendations, and commented on several issues raised in the report. ODA provided a partial response to the fourth recommendation. The Agency agreed that not all credit reviews were completed as required, but did not agree with our opinion of the credit review policies. On April 25, 2008, ODA submitted a second response to this final report, which is contained in its entirety in Appendix II. ODA provided additional comments on issues in the report and again stated its non-concurrence with three of the four recommendations.

The following response summarizes management's comments and our response.

General Comments

ODA continues to believe that the report fails to recognize the devastating effects of the Gulf Coast hurricanes on the financial condition of borrowers, and does not acknowledge the need to adjust SBA's lending policies accordingly. Specifically, ODA argues that because the hurricanes negatively impacted borrowers' credit, the Agency must give the borrowers additional opportunities to explain poor credit history and derogatory credit bureau reports. Additionally, ODA noted that disaster-related derogatory credit issues may be beyond the borrowers' control and that continuing to enforce the standard credit review policies would have created additional hardships for borrowers.

OIG Response

We acknowledge the Gulf Coast hurricanes created hardships for SBA loan applicants. However, Congress intended that the disaster funds be distributed as loans that would be repaid. Therefore, by relaxing annual credit review requirements designed to confirm repayment ability, ODA undermined Congress' intent that disaster loans be repaid. ODA's own Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) 50 30 states that a credit review will be made prior to a disbursement when 12 months have passed since the date of loan authorization, and annual reviews will be conducted thereafter until the loan has been fully disbursed. Furthermore, SBA recognized that the passage of time can adversely affect a borrower's ability to repay a loan by establishing the annual review requirement. Because most disbursements of Gulf Coast disaster funds were delayed by a year or more after

loan approval, we believe it was imprudent of ODA to disburse a significant amount of disaster funds to individuals whose financial status may have changed between the time of loan approval and disbursement. Moreover, as we previously reported, ODA initially approved loans for many individuals who lacked repayment ability whose applications were processed under expedited procedures. Additional funds were disbursed to these borrowers because ODA relaxed its annual credit review requirements.

ODA's comments also do not acknowledge that disbursing money which borrowers cannot repay only serves to weaken the financial condition of borrowers and create greater hardships for them. If the disaster loans default, resulting in foreclosures, borrowers will not only lose their homes but their credit history will also be negatively impacted. It takes 7 years on average after foreclosure for an individual to fully repair his/her credit standing.

Additionally, by relaxing its annual credit review policy, ODA may have disbursed additional funds to individuals that should never have been approved for their loans. Our September 27, 2008, report on *The Quality of Loans Processed Under the Expedited Disaster Loan Program*, estimated that \$1.5 billion in loans processed under expedited procedures were awarded to applicants who lacked repayment ability. Many of these individuals received subsequent disbursements on their loans because ODA waived the annual credit reviews.

Recommendation 1

Management Comments

Management did not agree with this recommendation and does not plan to reinstitute the requirement for credit reviews for Gulf Coast loans, although there is such a requirement in place for loans approved under all other disaster declarations. However, ODA stated that current guidance (Memo 07-53) for Gulf Coast hurricane loans will stay in effect until September 30, 2008, when it expires. Memo 07-53 does not subject Gulf Coast hurricane victims to the standard credit review requirements. ODA also stated that it temporarily modified certain of its disbursement procedures for this disaster only, in accordance with its legal authority. In ODA's original response to our draft report, it stated that it will implement procedures to ensure the memo is followed, including: issuing specific credit review instruction to loan officers and case managers; establishing points of contact for case managers to obtain guidance on when a complete credit review is required on Gulf Coast loans; and training loan officers on the credit review requirements for Gulf Coast loans. Loan officers will also now be required to follow up with borrowers when credit reports indicate adverse financial changes.

OIG Response

We consider ODA's comments to be unresponsive to our recommendation as it did not agree to reinstitute the necessary credit review requirement for Gulf Coast loan applicants. ODA stated that it intends to maintain the current policy for Gulf Coast loans until September 30, 2008, when all remaining Gulf Coast loan proceeds must be disbursed. Further, although management stated in its original response that it would implement specific credit review procedures, it is unclear whether the procedures will require annual credit reviews. We will seek a management decision on the recommendation through the audit resolution process.

Recommendation 2

Management Comments

ODA did not agree with our recommendation and specifically stated that it would not rescind Memo 07-53 that expires on September 30, 2008. In the previous management comments, however, ODA indicated it would implement additional instructions to ensure the guidance in the memo is followed and that it would follow up with borrowers when credit reports indicate adverse financial changes.

OIG Response

Because ODA did not agree to rescind Memo 07-53, and it is unclear whether the alternative actions ODA originally proposed include an analysis of borrower

repayment ability prior to disbursing funds, we consider management's comments to be unresponsive to the recommendation. Accordingly, we will pursue a management decision on the recommendation through the audit resolution process.

Recommendation 3

Management Comments

Initially, ODA did not agree with our recommendation, originally stating that all changes to disaster policy are analyzed extensively prior to implementation, and that the memos relaxing credit review requirements were carefully considered before being implemented. In its second response, ODA added that when the Associate Administrator for Disaster Assistance extended the time of reimbursement for the Gulf Coast loans with this temporary modification, he acted within the authority granted to him under SOP 50 30, and that his actions were consistent with ODA's statutory mission and Congressional intent. However, ODA agreed that written justification for exceptions to the SOP made by the Associate Administrator for ODA would be maintained.

OIG Response

ODA agreed to maintain written justification for exceptions to the SOP, but believes its decision to relax annual credit review requirement was carefully considered before being implemented. We maintain that regardless of whether an analysis was performed, ODA lacked authority to establish policy that deviated from the Congressional intent of the credit review process. This action was in direct contradiction to the guidance in SBA SOP 00-23.6, Directives Management Program, (page 19) stating that SOPs must not conflict with laws or regulations and that laws and regulations will control in cases of a conflict between them. Further, as stated in SOP 00-23.6 on page 27, in the case of a significant policy matter or fundamental change, as in the case of the disaster loan program, SOPs must be cleared by the same officials as a new SOP or cancellation of an existing SOP ---- these require clearance by the SBA Administrator or Deputy Administrator.

While we realize ODA is authorized to make such policy changes without advance notice, it is unreasonable to follow inadequate procedures. Rather, SBA should ensure there is reasonable assurance that borrowers can repay their loans. Further, although ODA may have the authority to relax the credit review requirement, we question whether this is a prudent lending practice and what financial impact this will potentially have on the Agency. We contend that in accordance with SOP 00-23.6, ODA must reconsider making such a significant decision with far-reaching impact to simply relax the credit review requirement for loan recipients without the needed higher level management controls and clearance. Accordingly, we will pursue a management decision through the audit resolution process.

Recommendation 4

Management Comments

The Agency agreed with our recommendation to install edits in DCMS that will alert case managers at the time disbursements are ordered if the disbursement period has expired. In its second response, ODA also stated that it would have a business rule installed in DCMS to ensure that a disbursement cannot be ordered when deadlines have expired.

OIG Response

We consider the actions proposed by ODA to be fully responsive to the recommendation.

ACTIONS REQUIRED

Because your second response shows disagreement with three of our four recommendations, we will seek further action through the audit resolution process.

We appreciate the courtesies and cooperation of the Office of Disaster Assistance representatives during this audit. If you have any questions concerning this report, please call me at (202) 205-[FOIA Ex. 2] or Pamela Steele-Nelson, Director, Disaster Programs Group, at (202) 205-[FOIA Ex. 2].

APPENDIX I. AGENCY RESPONSE

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AUDIT

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U.S. SMALL BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20416

Date: March 21, 2008
To: Debra S. Ritt
Assistant Inspector General for Auditing
From: Herbert L. Mitchell
Associate Administrator
For Disaster Assistance
Subject: OIG Draft Report – Annual Credit Reviews For Gulf Coast Hurricane Disaster Loan Disbursements (Project No. 8304)

We have reviewed the draft audit report on Annual Credit Reviews for Gulf Coast Hurricane Disaster Loan Disbursements prepared by your office. While we disagree with your opinion of the revised KRW credit review procedures, we agree not all credit reviews were completed as required.

The report summarized the results of the audit of disaster loan disbursements to borrower's of the Gulf Coast Hurricanes. The basis of the audit was to determine if the SBA followed credit review procedures for KRW files as defined in SOP paragraph 96 d and ODA numbered memo's 06-61 and 07-53.

The audit included an analysis on 159 loans of 1,117 requiring reviews as of September 30, 2007. The report concluded that 70% of the loans were disbursed without performing the necessary credit review. The report also criticized SBA for revising the normal credit review procedures as defined in SOP paragraph 96 d. for KRW borrowers in numbered memo's 06-61 and 07-53. The report ignores the fact that the Gulf Coast region and the majority of Hurricane Katrina, Rita and Wilma victims suffered catastrophic physical and economic injury as a result of the Hurricanes. The economic and physical disaster recovery period for the Gulf Coast region, including businesses and individual home owners was significantly longer than experienced in other disaster declarations. As a result of these extraordinary hardships associated with the extended recovery period, SBA's made a decision to modify the credit review procedures as defined in SOP paragraph 96 d. for KRW borrowers. The decision to temporarily revise the credit review procedures was appropriate and is supported in the current SBA guidance in SOP paragraph 76 and SBA training manual #4. The physical and economic hardships that KRW borrowers were faced with were disaster related and the circumstances were beyond the borrower's control.

SOP Paragraph 76

Poor Credit History: You must give applicants with poor credit history every opportunity to provide explanations before you reach a conclusion about their overall credit worthiness. Generally, a history that consists of minor, isolated instances of poor credit or late payments is acceptable provided that:

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Training Module #4

Derogatory Credit Issues

In some instances, derogatory credit may be beyond control of the applicant.

For example:

- Unemployment
- Protracted labor strikes
- Prolonged illness
- Uninsured medical costs
- Divorce, etc
- ~~Disaster related~~

Continuing to enforce the standard credit review policies would have created an additional hardship on SBA's KRW borrowers.

Comments on the Recommendations:

Recommendations #1: Reinstigate the requirement that updated income tax returns and financial documents be collected along with updated credit reports during annual credit reviews.

ODA Response: For KRW files SBA numbered memo 07-53 is in effect until September 30, 2008. To ensure we adhere to the credit review policy as outlined in the memo we have initiated the following procedures:

- *Issued specific credit review instructions to the loan officers and case managers on the policy and level of review required for KRW files.*
- *Established loan processing points of contacts for case managers to obtain guidance and determine if a complete credit review is required on any KRW file prior to disbursement*
- *Completed loan officer training classes the week of 2/1/08 and covered the credit review policy and requirements for KRW loans.*

For all Non-KRW files SBA policy as defined in SOP paragraph 96 d is in effect which requires updated tax returns, financial data and credit reports when a credit review is required. Additionally we have completed the following:

- *Revised the SBA disbursement period from 12 months to 6 months from the date of the SBA loan authorization and agreement for all new disaster declarations.*
- *Issued specific credit review instructions to case managers on the policy and level of review required for Non-KRW files.*
- *Established loan processing points of contacts for case managers to obtain guidance and determine if a complete credit review is required prior to disbursement*

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- Completed loan officer training classes the week of 2/1/08 and covered the credit review policy and requirements for Non-KRW loans.

Recommendation #2: Rescind Notice 07-53 to ensure that credit reviews are performed for loans that are disbursed 12 months beyond the original loan authorization date.

ODA Response: The revised credit policy covering the KRW loans is reasonable given the circumstances and we have taken additional steps to ensure that the policy is followed. If the credit report indicates an adverse change the loan officer or case manager is required to follow up, which may include obtaining updated financials and tax returns on an individual basis.

Recommendation #3: Require written justification for disaster assistance policy that is made outside the Agency's SOP clearance process.

ODA Response: Because of the nature of disasters the Agency SOP authorizes the Associate Administrator to make changes to the policies and procedures governing the disaster loan program. All changes to the Agency SOP governing the disaster loan program are thoroughly reviewed and justified prior to implementation. In this specific instance which is the subject of this audit a great deal of consideration was given to the magnitude of the disaster, the amount of devastation, its impact on the economy and the extended recovery period well beyond any other disaster in the history of the country.

Recommendation #4: Implement internal system controls in DCMS that ensure disbursements do not occur after expired deadlines. As part of the controls, required credit reviews must be performed to justify extensions."

ODA Response: We agree with the IG recommendation to have an edit installed in DCMS that will alert the case manager at the time they try to order a disbursement if the disbursement period is expired. We are currently working on automating this process.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this draft report and if you have any questions on this response please feel free to contact me or James Rivera.

[FOIA Ex. 2]

Herbert L. Mitchell
Associate Administrator
for Disaster Assistance

APPENDIX II. RESPONSE TO OIG AUDIT REPORT

Date: April 25, 2008

To: Debra Ritt
Assistant Inspector General For Auditng

From: Herbert L. Mitchell
Associate Administrator
For Disaster Assistance

Subject: Audit Report - Annual Credit Reviews for Gulf Coast Disaster Loans

Thank you for the opportunity to clarify our earlier response of March 21, 2008, to your recommendations outlined in the report entitled "Annual Credit Reviews for Gulf Coast Hurricane Disaster Loan Disbursements." We appreciate the effort of your team in preparing the report and in affording us this additional opportunity.

In response to the extraordinary and catastrophic nature of the Gulf Coast Hurricanes, ODA extended disbursement periods for affected disaster borrowers in the Gulf Coast region and temporarily modified its credit review procedures for such disbursements. ODA remains convinced that its actions in this regard were appropriate and legal, and consistent with its statutory mission and Congressional intent. For OIG to suggest otherwise and to characterize ODA's actions as imprudent and in violation of SBA regulations and legislative intent is inaccurate, inappropriate and unproductive.

The statutory mission of the SBA Disaster Program is to help disaster victims recover from disasters and rebuild their lives by providing affordable and timely financial assistance to homeowners, renters and businesses. After the extraordinary events of the Gulf Coast Hurricanes, ODA processed over 400,000 loan applications and approved more than 160,000 disaster loans to help homeowners, renters, businesses and non-profit organizations return to pre-disaster condition. To put this into perspective, the average number of loan applications received by SBA for the five previous largest hurricanes was 47,664, with an average of 17,054 loan approvals. The largest disaster addressed by SBA before the Gulf Coast Hurricanes was the Northridge Earthquake, which resulted in 250,402 loan applications and 124,262 approved loans. In response to the overwhelming infrastructure and economic damage caused by the Gulf Coast Hurricanes across a huge geographic area, ODA temporarily modified certain of its disbursement procedures for this disaster only, in accordance with its legal

APPENDIX II. RESPONSE TO OIG AUDIT REPORT

authority. Your report disagrees with these modifications and criticizes ODA for making them.

In a typical disaster, ODA disburses loan funds within the first six months; in the aftermath of the Gulf Coast Hurricanes, however, nothing was typical. Through no fault of their own, approved disaster borrowers were not ready or able to begin the process of rebuilding their homes and businesses in the usual timeframes. The economy in this huge geographic area was not coming back as quickly as in other disasters. Infrastructure was not being repaired in a timely fashion. Businesses and individuals were waiting to return or were not returning at all. In working with the thousands of approved disaster borrowers in the Gulf Coast area who did not have access to their personal or business financial records and who were facing unprecedented obstacles to rebuilding, ODA extended the timeframes for disbursements of SBA disaster loans.

ODA also modified the credit analysis performed by ODA loan officers during the extended disbursement period for Gulf Coast Hurricane borrowers. The reason was simple. Because of the continuing extreme economic stress in the region and the resulting impact on the income of the local population, ODA concluded that (1) the current credit report was a solid and reliable indicator of the willingness and ability of borrowers to maintain their credit and to pay their debts, (2) requiring additional information from all such approved borrowers, many of whom were still physically displaced, would have imposed a significant burden on them with little associated benefit to SBA, and (3) disbursements could be made more quickly and without sacrificing credit standards under the modified credit analysis.

Financial statements and tax returns would still be reviewed in the event a borrower's credit report revealed an adverse change in the borrower's condition. ODA had observed, however, that financial statements and tax returns in the first two years after the Gulf Coast Hurricanes routinely reflected the predictably lower post-disaster income levels of the local population. They were therefore not as useful an indicator of repayment ability as in other disasters where recovery would have been well underway and incomes rebounded within the first year after the disaster. Moreover, applicants are approved for disaster loans based on their pre-disaster income and creditworthiness. ODA does not perform a credit review of an approved disaster borrower at the time of loan disbursement for the purpose of re-underwriting the loan. Instead, the credit review on undisbursed loans informs SBA as to whether there has been a significant adverse change in the condition of the borrower – a determination that can readily be made through a review of a current credit report. ODA continues to believe that its actions in this regard were appropriate and legal, and consistent with its mission and Congressional intent.

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The audit report suggests that ODA's legitimate response to this unique disaster was somehow negligent. We strongly disagree. Under SBA disaster regulations, at the time of an application for a disaster loan the applicant must have satisfactory credit and character and there must be a reasonable assurance of repayment ability. Those criteria are what SBA considers when approving a disaster loan. Under SBA's Disaster Program SOP, ODA is authorized to review credit reports, financial statements and tax returns at the time of disbursement of an approved disaster loan. When the Associate Administrator for Disaster Assistance (AA/ODA) extended the time of disbursement for the Gulf Coast Hurricane disaster loans, he also concluded that a determination of whether a borrower's financial condition had changed during the extended disbursement period could be derived from current credit bureau reports. When the AA/ODA made this temporary modification, he acted within the authority granted to him under SOP 50 30, paragraph 5. ODA's actions in this regard were appropriate and legal, and consistent with its statutory mission and Congressional intent.

Section 4(d) of the Small Business Act requires SBA to act in the public interest in making loans under the Act. ODA firmly believes that it acted in the public interest in its disbursement actions taken in the context of the extraordinarily catastrophic nature of the Gulf Coast Hurricanes. ODA strongly disagrees with OIG's contentions to the contrary.

The OIG report is also wrong in any contention that ODA violated the regulations when it temporarily modified its credit analysis procedures for disbursements for this disaster. The analysis of credit criteria at the time of disbursement is a function covered by the Disaster Program SOP, not the regulations. In fact, the practice of performing a credit review after loan approval and prior to subsequent disbursement was begun only 10 years ago, under ODA Memo #97-83. It was subsequently incorporated into the SOP via revision 4B in April of 1999. Thus, the disbursement credit review is ODA policy, created by memo and then incorporated into the SOP, but is not required by regulation.

Finally, the Director of Program Policy and Evaluation has conducted an on-site review of internal controls at the PDC to improve compliance with Disaster SOP requirements. He has also had extensive conversations with the PDC management regarding compliance with the credit review procedures, and we have instituted appropriate training.

OIG RECOMMENDATIONS AND AGENCY RESPONSE

OIG recommends that the Associate Administrator for Disaster Assistance:

APPENDIX II. RESPONSE TO OIG AUDIT REPORT

1. Reinstitute the requirement that updated income tax returns and financial documents be collected along with updated credit reports during annual credit reviews.

We do not agree with this recommendation and do not plan to reinstitute the requirement before the scheduled expiration of the memo on September 30, 2008, which solely impacts loans approved under the disaster declarations for the Gulf Coast Hurricanes. The requirement is in place for loans approved under all other disaster declarations.

2. Rescind Notice 07-53 to ensure that credit reviews are performed for loans that are disbursed 12 months beyond the original loan authorization date.

We do not agree with this recommendation and do not plan to rescind the notice. It is scheduled to expire on September 30, 2008.

3. Require written justification for disaster assistance policy that is made outside of the Agency's SOP clearance process.

We agree that written justification for exceptions to the SOP made by the AA/ODA will be maintained.

4. Implement internal system controls into DCMS that ensure disbursements do not occur after expired deadlines. As part of these controls, required credit reviews must be performed to justify extensions.

We agree with the recommendation to have a business rule installed in DCMS that will ensure that a disbursement cannot be ordered when deadlines have expired.