



Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation  
1200 K Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005-4026  
www.pbgc.gov

October 2, 2008



Re:  Case Number 194465,  
Vision Metals Inc. Salaried Employees Pension Plan (the "Vision Metals  
Plan" or "Plan")

Dear

We are responding to your April 20, 2007 appeal of PBGC's determination of your PBGC benefit. As explained below, we must deny your appeal.

**PBGC's Benefit Determination and Your Appeal:**

In its benefit determination letter dated March 28, 2007, PBGC determined that you are entitled to a monthly payment of \$1,414.96 in the form of a Joint and 50% Survivor ("J&50%S") Annuity. PBGC's determination letter informed you that you had been overpaid by \$22,280.67, and that your future monthly payments would be reduced by \$137.96 (9.75%) until you have repaid the total amount, without interest. A copy of the March 28, 2007 benefit determination and its enclosed benefit statement and recoupment summary are at Enclosure 1.

In your appeal letter dated April 20, 2007, you stated that your current monthly PBGC benefit of \$1,835.35 is the same as your pension benefit under the Vision Metals Plan and "is well below PBGC's maximum guaranteed benefit of \$2,231.84." You contend that the \$875.91 benefit you receive as an annuity from Aetna Insurance Company is not part of your Vision Metals Plan benefit.<sup>1</sup> Rather, it is a benefit purchased on your behalf when the Quanex Corporation terminated its Plan in 1985. Your appeal contends that this \$875.91 annuity benefit should not be used in PBGC's calculation of its maximum guaranteed benefit ("MGB") and that "the \$22,280.67 which PBGC

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<sup>1</sup> Your appeal letter also states that a Vision Metals Plan manager, , relayed to you a message that a pension plan consultant at Watson Wyatt Company had checked with PBGC and "had been told that the Aetna annuity was a totally separate issue guaranteed by Aetna Insurance Company and not guaranteed by PBGC." The Appeals Board was unable to find any record of this conversation or who in PBGC, if anyone, provided this information to

states that I owe them [should be] removed you're the records." A copy of your appeal and the two documents you provided supporting your appeal are at Enclosure 2.

### **Background**

According to PBGC records, Vision Metals, Inc. ("Vision"), was in the business of manufacturing steel tubing. Originally, Vision began in 1927 as Michigan Seamless Tube and made several acquisitions and name changes over the years. Vision's headquarters were located in Ann Arbor, Michigan, but relocated to South Lyon, Michigan. Vision owned two plants, Gulf States Tube Facility located in Rosenberg, Texas and Michigan Specialty Tube, located in South Lyon, Michigan.

Vision was a wholly-owned subsidiary of Vision Metals Holding, Inc. ("VMHI"). Vision was the sponsor of the Vision Metals, Inc. Salaried Employees' Pension Plan and two other pension plans.<sup>2</sup> On November 13, 2000, Vision and VMHI filed petitions under Chapter 11 of the Bankruptcy Code. On November 9, 2001, employees at both facilities were notified by letter that their facility would be permanently closed and that all benefits would cease at closing. The expected final closing date according to the letter was December 31, 2001. The letter stated that employees' jobs would end between November 30, 2001 and December 13, 2001. On January 31, 2002, the Gulf States Tube Facility and Michigan Specialty Tube shut down their plants permanently.

Assets of Vision's Michigan facility were sold to Michigan Seamless Tube, an unrelated company, with a closing date of October 21, 2002. The sale, however, did not include the assumption of the pension plans. On January 13, 2003, PBGC provided a Notice of Determination ("NOD") to Vision under section 4042(a)(1) and (2) of the Employee Retirement Income Security Act of 1974, as amended ("ERISA") that the Vision Metals, Inc. Salaried Employees' Pension Plan (the "Plan") had not met minimum funding standards and would not be able to pay benefits when due. Accordingly, PBGC stated its intent to have the Plan terminated and have January 31, 2002 established as the Plan's termination date. While the NOD recommended a January 31, 2002 (date of plant shutdown) termination date, PBGC changed the date of Plan termination ("DOPT") to October 21, 2002, the date of the asset sale to Michigan Seamless Tube.<sup>3</sup>

The two most significant events in the history of the Plan for purposes of this appeal occurred in 1997 and 1985. The Vision Metals, Inc. Salaried Employees' Pension Plan was established effective December 3, 1997 and is a continuation of a portion of the Quanex Corporation

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<sup>2</sup> Vision also sponsored the Michigan Specialty Tube Company Hourly Employee's Pension Plan (the "MST Plan") and the Pension Plan of Gulf States Tube Division of Vision Metals (the "GST Plan"). Neither of these plans is relevant to your appeal.

<sup>3</sup> The date of the NOD, January 13, 2003, remains the date from which overpayments are calculated. The Appeals Board does not have authority to review or change the DOPT. Having a date of Plan termination as October 21, 2002 as opposed to January 13, 2002 is more favorable to you as it lessens the reduction to the MGB based on age as discussed later in this opinion.

Salaried Employees' Pension Plan ("Quanex Corporation Salaried Plan" or "New Quanex Plan") without gap or lapse in time or coverage.

The establishment of the Plan was directly related to the December 3, 1997 agreement of the Quanex Corporation and Vision to a spin-off business transaction. The spin-off included the sale of Quanex Tube Group locations to Vision. As part of this December 3, 1997 spin-off transaction, Quanex Corporation transferred the assets and liabilities of its New Quanex Plan to Vision. Vision Metals, Inc. then adopted the Vision Metals Plan effective December 3, 1997 as a mirror image of the New Quanex Plan for the exclusive benefit of certain current and former employees of Michigan Seamless, Quanex Corporation, and Vision.

The other key transaction impacting this appeal occurred in 1985 at the Quanex Corporation. Quanex had since 1976 sponsored a Quanex Corporation Pension Plan for Salaried Employees (also referred to as "Old Quanex Plan"). The Old Quanex Plan terminated on October 31, 1985 and the new Quanex Corporation Salaried Plan ("New Quanex Plan") was re-established the following day, November 1, 1985.

Whether this 1985 termination of the Old Quanex Plan and the immediate re-establishment of the New Quanex Plan constituted a "successor plan" under ERISA section 4021(a) is the critical legal issue surrounding your appeal and is discussed later in this opinion.

### **Discussion**

When the Vision Metals Plan terminated effective October 21, 2002, it did not have sufficient assets to provide all benefits PBGC guarantees under Title IV of ERISA. The terms of the Plan, the provisions of ERISA, and PBGC regulations and policies determine your entitlement to PBGC benefits.

PBGC is limited by law as to the pension benefits it guarantees. PBGC determined that one of these limits, the maximum guaranteed benefit ("MGB"), also known as the maximum insurance limit, requires a reduction in your monthly benefit payments from PBGC. Before discussing this key issue of how the MGB applies to your benefits, however, we first will discuss PBGC's determination of your Plan benefit amount.

#### **A. Your Plan benefit amount.**

##### *1. Your Quanex Plan Service.*

PBGC records show that you were hired on  1968 and participated in the Old Quanex Plan. The Old Quanex Plan:

- terminated on October 31, 1985;
- purchased accrued benefits such as your Aetna-provided benefit; and
- was reestablished with the same name on November 1, 1985 (which we refer to as the "New Quanex Plan").

2. *The Re-established New Quanex Plan Offset for Your Aetna Benefit*

For employees, like you, active through the 1985 termination and reestablishment, Continuous Service and Participation continued uninterrupted.<sup>4</sup> The reestablished New Quanex Plan, however, required "offsetting" (reducing) for such an employee's benefits already provided by the terminated Quanex Plan.<sup>5</sup> Thus, under the reestablished New Quanex Plan, your benefit was calculated using all Quanex service, but reduced for your Aetna benefit.

3. *Plan Assets and Liabilities Spun-Off to Vision Metals Plan*

Effective December 3, 1997, the Quanex Corporation:

- sold all of its Tube Group locations to Vision Metals, Inc.; and
- spun-off from the New Quanex Plan to the Vision Metals Plan assets and liabilities for affected employees, such as you.

Vision Metals, Inc. established the Vision Metals Plan effective December 3, 1997 as a mirror image of the New Quanex Plan for the exclusive benefit of certain current and former employees of Michigan Seamless, Quanex Corporation, and Vision.

4. *How Vision Metals Determined Your Benefit*

The Vision Metals Plan also uses all of your Quanex employment, but reduces for your Prior Plan benefit.<sup>6</sup> The Prior Plan is the Old Quanex Plan that was terminated effective October 31, 1985. Vision Metals calculated your total Plan benefit as:

- \$3,007.50<sup>7</sup> per month if paid as a Straight Life Annuity; or
- \$2,711.26<sup>8</sup> per month in your Joint and 50% Survivor Annuity form.

The Vision Metals Plan's Worksheet calculation of your benefit is at Enclosure 4. Vision used 33.32 [17.155 + 16.165] years total service, from September 5, 1968 through December 31, 2001.

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<sup>4</sup> November 1, 1985 New Quanex Plan sections 3.01 and 3.02.

<sup>5</sup> November 1, 1985 New Quanex Plan section 14.01.

<sup>6</sup> See Enclosure 3 page IV-2, Plan section 4.04.

<sup>7</sup> 17.155 years pre-11/1/85 x \$7,784.05 x 1.5% - \$30.90 fee + 16.165 years (11/1/85 - 12/31/2001) x (1% x \$7,784.05 earnings + .5% x \$3,636.05 earnings above "covered compensation") x 0.667 reduction for starting early. The .667 (1 - 60 months x 5/9%) adjustment for post-11/1/1985 service is required by Plan section 4.04(B) - See also calculations at Enclosure 4, pages 3 and 4.

<sup>8</sup> \$3,007.5 x .9015 annuity form adjustment.

substantially the same employees as a previously established plan, and provides substantially the same benefits as that plan provided. 29 U.S.C. § 1321(a).

This statutory language accordingly indicates that a successor plan and its predecessor(s) are to be treated as a single entity. We also note that the phrase “for purposes of this title” in the above provision refers to Title IV of ERISA, which (among other things) includes the MGB provision.

PBGC’s experience is that successor plans often are created by “termination/re-establishment” transactions, in which the plan sponsor terminates a sufficient defined benefit pension plan and then establishes a new plan covering substantially the same employees and providing substantially the same benefits.<sup>12</sup> PBGC concluded that it is reasonable for participants in “termination/re-establishment” transactions to be treated similarly regarding the MGB to participants in plans that have remained ongoing. Such consistent treatment will occur only if the successor and predecessor plans are treated as one entity. We note that the termination of the Old Quanex Plan and the creation of the New Quanex Plan occurred as a result of such “termination/re-establishment” transactions.

**2. *The PBGC and Appeals Board conclusion that the Vision Metals Plan is a successor to the Old Quanex Plan.***

PBGC considered Vision Metals Plan effective December 3, 1997 to be a successor to the Quanex Corporation Salaried Employee’s Pension Plan (the New Quanex Plan) and made this determination in April 2005. The finding is documented in the Actuarial Case Memorandum dated March 7, 2007 (excerpt at Enclosure 5).

An implicit finding in PBGC’s determination of your benefit is also that the New Quanex Plan is a successor to the Old Quanex Plan in 1985. We note that the determination that a new plan is a successor to a former plan increases participants’ benefits in some cases and reduces them in others.<sup>13</sup> In the circumstances of your case, the determination that the New Quanex Plan is a successor to the

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<sup>12</sup> Generally, employers have engaged in “termination/re-establishment” transactions for the purpose of recovering surplus assets in the predecessor plan upon its termination. If the employer complies with the legal requirements governing such transactions, recovery of surplus assets is permitted under ERISA and the Internal Revenue Code.

<sup>13</sup> In the case of the Vision Metals Plan, a handful of participants had their maximum guaranteeable benefits reduced because of a determination that the New Quanex Plan is a successor to the Old Quanex Plan. But, had the New Quanex Plan terminated in an unfunded condition less than five years after it was created, a determination that the new plan is a successor could avoid benefit cutbacks based on ERISA’s guarantee limits, such as reductions due to the phase-in of benefits under a newly-established pension plan (see 29 United States Code (“U.S.C.”) section 1322(b)(1), (2), and (7)), and under the five-year lookback provision that governs the allocation of certain plan assets (see 29 U.S.C. section 1344(b)(3)).

Old Quanex Plan results in benefits reductions because it means your Plan benefit exceeds the amount PBGC can lawfully pay based on the MGB (maximum insurance limit).<sup>14</sup>

Under PBGC's usual procedures in cases where a successor plan may exist, PBGC's Office of Chief Counsel ("OCC") prepares a legal opinion analyzing the successor plan issue. PBGC's Benefits Payment and Administration Department ("BAPD") then implements OCC's successor plan opinion in determining the benefits PBGC pays to participants in the pension plan. Furthermore, if a participant raises a successor plan issue in the appeal of his or her benefit determination, the OCC legal opinion on the successor plan issue will be part of the record for purposes of the Appeals Board's review.

In this case, however, OCC had not prepared a legal opinion on the issue of whether the New Quanex Plan was a successor to the Old Successor Plan. The Appeals Board therefore asked appropriate officials in OCC to prepare a successor plan opinion in advance of the Appeals Board's consideration of this issue. We further delayed answering your appeal until we received OCC's analysis on this issue. The analysis by OCC concluded that the New Quanex Plan is a successor to the Old Quanex Plan.

We have carefully reviewed the OCC legal opinion, as well as previous PBGC precedents, in our analysis of this matter. The Appeals Board has determined the New Quanex Plan is a successor to the Old Quanex Plan. Our full findings are in the Appendix to this decision. The Appeals Board also finds that the Vision Metals Plan, created in the spinoff transaction in December 1997, is a successor to the New Quanex Plan. The Appeals Board, thus, determined that your accrued benefit under the Old Quanex Plan, represented by the portion of your benefit payable by Aetna, is part of your Vision Metals Plan benefit and is subject to PBGC's maximum guaranteed benefit.

**3. *PBGC's offset of your Aetna annuity benefit is consistent with PBGC precedents.***

In Opinion Letter 86-28 (Enclosure 6), PBGC rejected an argument, similar to the one raised in your appeal, made in a case that also involved a pension plan's purchase of insurance annuities. In that case, the annuity provided the individual with a monthly benefit that exceeded the MGB. PBGC concluded in the opinion letter that the purchased annuity had to be taken into account for purposes of the MGB limitation. PBGC noted that "the fact that the Plan assets used to purchase the annuity contract . . . are not available to pay other outstanding Plan liabilities upon Plan termination

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<sup>14</sup> We note that, if the New Quanex Plan was not a successor to the Old Quanex Plan, then your benefit accrued under the Old Quanex Plan (and now paid by Aetna) would not be used in calculating your benefit under the New Quanex Plan's successor (i.e., the Vision Metals Plan). The Aetna annuity would not be offset because the MGB limits the benefits "under a single-employer plan which terminates . . ." Thus, if the Old Quanex Plan is considered to be a separate plan from the Vision Metals Plan (rather than part of a successor plan relationship), then the Aetna annuity distributed to you by the Old Quanex Plan would not be deducted from the Vision Metal Plan's MGB.

does not affect the application of [the MGB limit] to benefits under the Plan.” Accordingly, since the purchased annuity was already providing more than the maximum guaranteed amount, the letter stated that it would be “inconsistent with both the statute's maximum guarantee limitation and with the PBGC's statutory mandate” for PBGC to provide this participant with additional guaranteed payments. Furthermore, PBGC’s position in Opinion Letter 86-28 was upheld by the court’s decision in Lami v. PBGC, 1989 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 19153 (W .D. Pa . 1989).

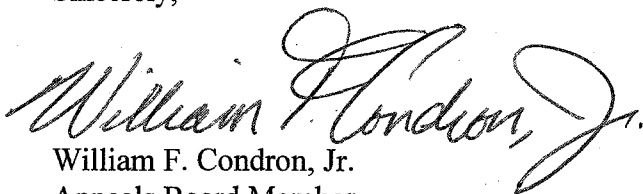
PBGC has applied the holding in Opinion Letter 86-28 to cases where the insurance annuity was purchased by a predecessor plan. Specifically, PBGC has concluded that when a “continued” successor plan is created through “spin-off termination” or “termination/re-establishment transactions, it is appropriate to apply a single MGB that takes into account the insurance annuities purchased in those transactions.

Thus, PBGC’s MGB limit applies to your full, combined benefits under the Vision Metals Plan and its predecessor plans, which includes both the portion of your benefits that were paid by the Vision Metals Plan (\$1,835.35) and the portion that is paid by your Aetna annuity (\$875.91). We further found that the two documents you submitted with your appeal (at Enclosure 2) do not provide a basis for changing PBGC’s decision concerning how the MGB should be applied. In fact, language in both documents is consistent with the Plan language of calculating the total pension benefit based on total service under all prior plans) and then using the Aetna annuity (already purchased) as part of the total pension benefit.

**Decision**

You have presented no basis to change PBGC’s determination dated March 28, 2007 and, thus, your appeal is denied. This letter concludes your administrative remedies with respect to PBGC’s March 28, 2007 determination. You may, if you wish, seek review in federal district court of PBGC’s determination with respect to the issue you raised.

Sincerely,



William F. Condron, Jr.  
Appeals Board Member

Appendix - Appeals Board Analysis of the Successor Plan Issue

7 Enclosures:

- (1) Benefit Determination dated March 28, 2007 with Benefit Statement and Recoupment Summary (5 pages)
- (2) Your appeal (3 pages)
- (3) Excerpt, Vision Metals, Inc. Salaried Employees’ Pension Plan document (14 pages)
- (4) Vision Metals Plan Calculation Worksheet (7 pages)
- (5) Excerpt, Actuarial Case Memorandum dated 3/7/2007 (2 pages)
- (6) PBGC Opinion Letter 86-28, dated December 31, 1986 (3 pages)
- (7) Joint Implementation Guidelines (5 pages)