Introduction

The Treasury Market Practices Group (TMPG) recognizes the importance of maintaining the integrity and efficiency of the over-the-counter U.S. government securities (Treasury), agency debt, and agency mortgage-backed-securities (MBS) markets. We believe that the public and all market participants benefit from a marketplace that is transparent and efficient. We believe that these characteristics help maintain vigorous competition and liquidity in the Treasury, agency debt, and agency MBS markets. To that end, we recommend that all Treasury, agency debt, and agency MBS market participants incorporate best practices in their operations in order to promote trading integrity and to support an efficient marketplace.

Best practices are meant to serve as guidelines for market participants seeking to organize their operations in a manner that fosters strong controls and reinforces overall market integrity. The best practices in this document are intended not only for dealers, but also for any market participant active in the wholesale Treasury, agency debt, and agency MBS markets, including brokers, buy-side firms, investors, and custodians. We believe that these best practices, if adopted, can strengthen each market participant’s existing controls. In addition, we believe that the implementation of these best practices will help reduce market disruptions—including, but not limited to, episodes of protracted settlement failure—and buttress overall market integrity, resulting in important benefits for Treasury, agency debt, and agency MBS market participants as well as the public. Information about specific recommendations for minimizing widespread and persistent settlement fails in the Treasury market can be found on the TMPG’s website.

These best practices seek to affirm existing notions of good market conduct and are intended as useful operational guideposts rather than binding rules or regulatory guidance. As each market participant makes use of these recommendations, it should take into account its own unique characteristics, such as asset size, transaction volume, and the form of the organization’s participation in the market (for example, market maker, investor, or custodian).
This compilation is by no means a comprehensive guide to doing business in the Treasury, agency debt, and agency MBS markets. Rather, for market participants both new and established in the Treasury, agency debt, and agency MBS markets, it can serve as a benchmark when reviewing the adequacy of operating procedures. Of course, in addition to considering these best practices, market participants should be sure that they are following all applicable laws at all times and should avoid illegal activities such as price manipulation.

I. Promoting Market Making and Liquidity

The smooth and efficient functioning of the Treasury, agency debt, and agency MBS markets relies on the integrity, honesty, good faith, and mutual trust shown by all participants. An efficient market fosters liquidity, which helps all market participants find buyers and sellers more effectively. It is important that both buyers and sellers promote market liquidity.

- **All market participants should behave in a manner that is consistent with supporting market liquidity.** Dealers, in particular, should promote market making, and all market participants should avoid trading strategies that hinder market clearance. Examples of strategies to avoid include those that cause or exacerbate settlement fails, those that inhibit the provision of liquidity by others, and those that restrict the floating supply of a particular issue in order to generate price movements in that security or related markets.

- **Market participants should be responsible in quoting prices and should promote overall price transparency in the interdealer brokers’ market.**

- **Although legitimate price discovery activities are an integral part of the Treasury, agency debt, and agency MBS markets and should be encouraged, market participants should avoid pricing practices that do not have the objective of resulting in a transaction, or that otherwise result in market distortions.**

- **Price discovery relies on efficient price reporting and transparent markets.** Market participants should not conduct trades through interdealer voice brokers with electronic trading screens without having a record of the transaction published on the screen at the time of the transaction. In addition, market participants should avoid conduct that deliberately seeks to evade regulatory reporting requirements or impedes market transparency efforts.

- **Market participants should ensure adequate oversight of their Treasury, agency debt, and agency MBS trading activity.** The nature of the oversight may vary depending on the role that each market participant plays in the marketplace and the organizational structure of the firm. However, all firms should develop a mechanism for measuring and scrutinizing the market participant’s overall trading activity in the Treasury, agency debt, and agency MBS markets to ensure that trading behavior in the aggregate, as well as along individual business lines, is understood by senior business managers. Oversight coverage should include, at a minimum, the organization’s activities in the Treasury, agency debt, and agency MBS cash markets (including primary and secondary trading), financing markets (including repurchase agreement and dollar roll transactions), and related derivatives and structured products markets.

II. Maintaining a Robust Control Environment

Market participants that are active in financial markets are familiar with the importance of establishing and maintaining a rigorous internal control environment. Indeed, the variety of legal and reputational pressures that a market participant’s Treasury, agency debt, and agency MBS trading and settlement operations are subject to suggests that a vigorous, well-informed, and assertive internal control program is essential. An internal control program should include the active engagement of the business, audit, legal, risk, and compliance functions.

- **Each market participant should maintain a strong internal control environment sufficient to ensure that each of its business areas acts in accordance with applicable law and best market practices.** Firms should ensure that their organizational structures support a strong control environment, including appropriate information barriers between, for example, trading and loan origination functions. Trading desk management and the supervision, legal, and compliance staff should work collectively to ensure that any questionable trading practices are identified and addressed in a timely manner. Trading desk management and supervision should be aware of, and responsible for, strategies executed by the trading desk. Other control functions, and particularly legal and compliance staff, should be poised to evaluate and respond promptly to questionable trading practices should they occur. Firms should aspire to provide system tools that relay real-time trade position information to the compliance function in order to provide timely notification of large positions.

- **Market participants should ensure that the individuals responsible for legal and compliance functions adhere to robust review and oversight procedures regarding trading and settlement operations.** Senior business managers should take responsibility for ensuring that internal control policies are fully implemented and followed in their business areas.

- **Individuals responsible for internal control functions should have a sufficient understanding of trading...**
strategies engaged in by trading desks to allow them to recognize potentially problematic activity. Individuals responsible for internal control functions, and particularly legal and compliance staff, should have sufficient awareness and understanding of the objective and execution of trading strategies to enable them to detect and deter questionable trading that could result in market disruption, illiquid market conditions, or legal or reputational risk to the organization.

- **Individuals responsible for internal control functions, and particularly legal and compliance staff, should be empowered to bring any concerns to the attention of appropriate senior business managers within the organization.**

- **Individuals responsible for internal control functions that track capital charges associated with trading activity, including settlement fails, should communicate these charges and their source to senior and trading desk management.**

- **Internal control policies should identify the specific trading trends, positions, strategies, or behaviors within the trading operation that constitute triggers for mandatory business and compliance review.** Mandatory review does not in itself automatically suggest that a trading position, strategy, or behavior must be altered; that will depend on the results of the review and consultations between management and compliance. Triggers, among other controls, should aim to identify trading activities that reduce supply circulating in cash or collateral markets. Because the structure of the Treasury, agency debt, and agency MBS markets is always evolving, triggers for mandatory review—and the appropriate thresholds for individual triggers—may change over time as the size and structure of the market change. However, market participants should consider including the following non-exhaustive list of indicators in their compliance plan to prompt further review:
  - a large concentration of holdings in the floating supply of a particular Treasury or agency debt security or in the deliverable supply of a to-be-announced (TBA) MBS issue;
  - in the case of the Treasury or agency debt markets, floating supply, at its largest, reflects the amount of the security originally issued less the amount that has been stripped into zero-interest instruments. Other factors, such as defeasance programs or holdings of large buy-and-hold investors, can limit floating supply further.
  - in the case of the agency MBS market, deliverable supply of a TBA MBS, at its largest, reflects the amount of the security originally issued less any amount that has been paid down or structured into real estate mortgage investment conduits (REMICs). Other factors, such as holdings of large buy-and-hold investors, or the categorization of a basket of pools as “specified collateral,” can limit deliverable supply further.
  - elevated delivery or receive fails in a particular security and/or the presence of particular trades that persistently fail to settle;
  - elevated capital charges resulting from settlement fails;
  - persistent and deep “specialness” of a security;
  - an appreciable or unusual amount of market turnover in a particular security;
  - unusual levels or patterns of either profits or losses;
  - changes in a market participant’s normal securities lending or borrowing patterns in a security in which a market participant has a large position; and
  - in the case of Treasury and agency debt, when securities are trading “special,” placing a substantial percentage of floating supply in general collateral funding arrangements, such as general collateral finance (GCF) or tri-party repo, an apparent increase in such financing over time, or placing large blocks of collateral with select counterparties that typically do not recirculate collateral.

- **Trading desk management and individuals responsible for the determination of credit management policies should be sure to consider the counterparty and market risks associated with transactions and to develop robust risk management processes.**

- **Consistent with prudent management of counterparty exposures, forward-settling transactions, such as agency MBS transactions, should be margined.** To help both parties mitigate counterparty risk owing to market value changes, two-way variation margin should be exchanged on a regular basis. Written master agreements should describe the parties’ agreement on all aspects of the margining regime, including collateral eligibility, timing and frequency of margin calls and exchanges, thresholds, valuation of exposures and collateral, and liquidation.

## III. Managing Large Positions with Care

Although large long or short positions are not necessarily problematic, these positions should be managed responsibly to avoid market disruptions. From time to time, a market participant may amass a particularly large long position in a specific Treasury, agency debt, or agency MBS issue or product. A market participant should manage that position with heightened vigilance, mindful of the need to support market liquidity. Market
Market participants should avoid any strategies that create or exacerbate settlement fails. Such vigilance should be intensified when a large position predominantly or entirely results from proprietary positioning since the market participant has more control over that position’s size and growth.

Firms should adopt a strong presumption against using relatively more expensive funding arrangements to finance large portions of an issue trading deeply special, even on an overnight basis. If such financing is used, senior management should fully understand why the exception is appropriate. Management and legal and compliance functions should be notified of such activity in a timely manner. Failing to deliver is not an acceptable funding arrangement.

In the Treasury or agency debt market, when a participant controls a significant percentage of the floating supply of an issue that is trading deeply special, it should ensure that it is making a good-faith attempt to lend the security into the specials market, rather than choosing to finance large portions of collateral in relatively more expensive funding arrangements.

In the agency MBS market, when a participant holds a large TBA position or controls a significant percentage of the deliverable supply of a TBA issue that is trading deeply special, it should not finance the position with the intent to adversely affect the liquidity of the TBA issue. One example of this type of behavior would be financing a large TBA position in a more expensive manner through the repo market, rather than through the dollar roll market, in order to limit the deliverable supply of the TBA issue.

Market participants with large short positions should make deliveries in good faith. Market participants with a particularly large short position in an issue should be sure that they are making a good-faith attempt to borrow needed securities in order to make timely delivery of securities. Market participants should avoid trading strategies designed to profit from settlement fails. Examples of this type of behavior include the practice of selling short a security in the repo market around or below zero percent, and selling a dollar roll around or below zero percent, with little expectation of being able to obtain the security to make timely delivery. In cases where transactions are subject to a fails charge, different thresholds for profiting from such behavior may be relevant.

When evaluating trading strategies for large positions, market participants should take care that sudden changes in those strategies do not adversely affect the liquidity or settlement of the Treasury, agency, or agency MBS issue in the marketplace. Market participants should not refrain from trading when they hold a large position. However, when market participants consider implementing a new trading strategy for a large position, they should evaluate whether it may affect market liquidity. For example, although open interest in MBS TBAs in a given issue often well exceeds the deliverable supply in the coupon, delivery decisions should not be made with the intention of distorting prices of either the cash security or the dollar roll. Senior management and legal and compliance functions should be made aware of any significant changes to trading strategies.

Management and legal and compliance functions should be alerted as soon as possible about particularly large positions—long and short—taken by a trading desk. Market participants should have policies and systems in place to ensure that appropriate personnel in management and in legal and compliance are alerted in time to take actions to safeguard a market participant’s reputation and manage any legal or regulatory risk.

IV. Promoting Efficient Market Clearing

Smooth and predictable settlement and clearing are crucial for preserving the liquidity and efficiency of the Treasury, agency debt, and agency MBS markets. Settlement fails prevent the market from clearing efficiently and can damage the market’s liquidity and function. While some settlement fails are inevitable, market participants should take care that their internal policies promote practices that support efficient and timely clearing and that avoid unnecessary market congestion. Market participants should avoid practices that intentionally inhibit the efficient clearing of the market.

A market participant’s policies and systems should ensure that trades are entered into trading systems promptly by the trading desk staff and made available to the operations area as quickly as possible in order to promote efficient settlement.

Market participants should be organized to ensure that the settlement and clearing area is managed independently of the trading desk. Settlement and clearing staff should have reporting lines that are separate from those of the trading staff. In addition, internal controls should be in place to restrict trading staff from delaying or influencing settlement of Treasury, agency debt, or agency MBS transactions. Settlement staff should be empowered to question
instructions from trading staff by elevating unusual
instructions to the attention of management. In addition,
policies should require that all requests that deviate from
normal settlement practice be communicated to legal and
compliance staff in a timely fashion.

- Relevant transaction information should be provided
to counterparties well in advance of applicable cutoff
times such that counterparties can make timely
delivery of securities. Examples of such information
include account allocation information and, in the case of
agency MBS transactions, TBA pool information.

- To promote the integrity and efficiency of tri-party
repo settlement, market participants should execute
and confirm substantially all tri-party repo trades by
3:00 p.m. ET to help ensure an orderly start to tri-party
settlement processing at 3:30 p.m. ET. Market
participants should also ensure that:
  - All tri-party repo trades should be allocated, matched,
    and confirmed in a timely manner.
  - All tri-party repo trades executed before 3:00 p.m. ET
    should be matched and confirmed by 3:00 p.m. ET.
  - Any tri-party repo trades executed after 3:00 p.m. ET
    should be matched and confirmed within 15 minutes.
  - Trade cancellations and corrections for tri-party repo
    transactions should be rare and occur only as a result of
    operational errors or other mistakes made in good faith.
    Trade cancellations and corrections should not be used
    to adjust or amend previously matched and confirmed
    trades for purposes other than error correction.
  - Trade cancellations and corrections for tri-party
    repo transactions should be routinely reviewed by
    senior desk management and compliance staff, with
    particular focus on any occurrences after 3:00 p.m. ET.

- To promote efficient market clearing and reduce
settlement fails, market participants should avoid the
practice of holding back deliveries until immediately
before the close of the securities wire.

- Practices that cause settlement fails should warrant
high scrutiny from trading management, settlement
staff, and compliance staff. Intentionally failing to
deliver on settlement date in order to “hold the box,”
“sort the box,” or substitute TBA pools should be avoided.
Repeated or systematic practices that cause settlement
fails should not be permissible under a market participant’s
operating procedures.

- Delivery of Treasuries, agency debt, and agency MBS
should minimize market congestion and the risk of
settlement fails. Market participants should have clear
policies regarding how and when to make deliveries of
securities in the settlement and clearing process. These
policies should include internal cutoff times comfortably
in advance of any Fedwire deadlines by which market
participants should provide new trade notifications. For
same-day settlement trades entered very late in the trading
session, deliveries should be processed as expeditiously as
possible.

- Incoming securities from counterparties that are
to be delivered to other counterparties should
be turned around quickly to minimize fails and
promote market clearing and settlement. Internal
policies and systems should identify a standard turnaround
period for ensuring that securities are processed in a
timely and efficient manner.

- All market participants should be diligent in
addressing persistent settlement fails. Protracted
settlement fails inhibit market function and can reduce
market participation. All market participants should aim
to resolve persistent fails as soon as possible. In addition,
market participants should seek to utilize netting solutions
in the event of, and in order to mitigate, round-robin fails.

- Firms engaged in settlement activity involving
deliveries or receipts of Treasuries, agency debt, or
agency MBS should have controls in place that alert
business and compliance managers to significant
settlement fails in an individual issue or CUSIP. For
instance, approaches that such firms might use to monitor
fails are:
  - identifying, for each specific issue, a maximum
    acceptable ratio of fails to aggregate receipts or
    deliveries during each settlement date;
  - identifying a maximum acceptable amount of net fails
to deliver or receive; and
  - establishing a separate absolute dollar threshold for
    settlement fails in a specific issue.

Firms with significant financing activity, in particular,
should consider including these measures in their internal
controls. Internal controls that immediately bring
significant fails in an individual issue to management’s
attention allow managers to respond before fails age or
become systemic, thereby helping to improve overall
market liquidity and functioning for all participants.

The Treasury Market Practices Group (TMPG) is a group of market professionals
committed to supporting the integrity and efficiency of the Treasury, agency
debt, and agency mortgage-backed-securities markets. The TMPG is composed of
senior business managers and legal and compliance professionals from a variety
of institutions—including securities dealers, banks, buy-side firms, market
utilities, and others—and is sponsored by the Federal Reserve Bank of New York.
More information is available at www.newyorkfed.org/tmpg.