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**#54262**

**Date:** March 06, 2024

**Subject:** CHANGES TO CASH DIVIDEND ADJUSTMENT POLICIES,  
GUIDELINES

OCC originally published Information Memo #24424 on May 24, 2008, to provide guidelines and FAQs on changes made to cash dividend adjustment policies and subsequently posted numerous updates to Memo #24424 with the most recent updates published in 2012<sup>1</sup> (collectively “Guidelines Information Memos”). This memo incorporates the policies outlined in the Guidelines Information Memos, provides additional guidance on variable dividends, clarifies that adjustment determinations are made by OCC, and removes references to the adjustment panels of the Securities Committee. The Frequently Asked Questions (“FAQs”) below have been filed as Interpretative Guidance with the Securities and Exchange Commission on February 20, 2024 (SR-OCC-2024-003).

The information contained in the Guidelines Information Memos is reprinted below and includes the aforementioned updates and revisions.

**NOTE: The following version of this Information Memo supersedes all previously published versions of the Guidelines Information Memos.**

OCC has received questions about how the adjustment policy for cash dividends or distributions is administered and to provide examples of how the policy might be applied to actual or hypothetical situations. The purpose of this Memo is to respond to some of these questions. A review of the adjustment policy is presented below, followed by a number of FAQs.

### **The Definition of “Ordinary” Cash Dividends**

Under the changes to the OCC By-Laws which became effective in February 2009, a cash dividend or distribution will be considered ordinary (regardless of size) if it is declared pursuant to a policy or practice of paying such dividends on a quarterly or other regular basis. Dividends paid outside such a policy or practice will be considered non-ordinary. OCC will normally adjust for non-ordinary dividends unless the

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<sup>1</sup> . OCC published Information Memo #31714 on November 30, 2012, announcing a policy determination made by the OCC Securities Committee pertaining to accelerated dividends. Information Memo #31806 was published on December 7, 2012, announcing a policy determination pertaining to the application of the \$.125 per share adjustment threshold to fund share cash distributions. Information Memo #31917 was published on December 18, 2012, providing a summary of guidelines for cash dividend adjustment policies, including the definition of “Ordinary” Cash Dividends.

amount is less than \$12.50 per contract. The determination of whether a given cash dividend is “ordinary” according to this definition will be made by OCC on a case-by-case basis.

## **II. Frequently Asked Questions**

**Disclaimer:** This Information Memo is intended to provide useful guidelines for how the contract adjustment policy has been and will be applied in practice. However, as indicated several times below, all adjustments are individually determined by OCC on a case-by-case basis, and exceptions may be made to general rules, interpretations, and policies in cases where OCC determines such exceptions to be appropriate. In no instance are the examples provided below meant to determine in advance the decisions that OCC will make in the future.

### **Overview of the Adjustment Policy**

- Q. Who decides if an option adjustment shall be made?
- A. All adjustments are determined on a case-by-case basis by OCC.
- Q. What cash dividends call for an adjustment?
- A. “Ordinary” cash dividends do not call for adjustments. An “ordinary” cash dividend is defined as one paid “pursuant to a policy or practice of paying such dividend on a quarterly or other regular basis.” A cash dividend which is considered to be *outside* this regular policy or practice is non-ordinary. Assuming a given dividend is non-ordinary according to this definition, a size test is also imposed: the value of the dividend must be at least \$12.50 per option contract. Thus, if the dividend is non-ordinary and yields at least \$12.50 per option contract, then an adjustment will be made.
- Q. What’s the rationale for this approach?
- A. In general, dividends declared pursuant to a policy or practice of a company can be anticipated and priced into option premiums according to standard models. Non-ordinary dividends declared outside the normal policy of the company cannot be anticipated and integrated into pricing with the same degree of assurance. Thus, when such dividends are announced, if no adjustment is made, the only way a call holder can capture the dividend is through exercise prior to the ex-dividend date. When this happens, significant option time value can be lost and financial losses due to operational error in submitting exercises may occur. The intention is to allow such dividends to accrue to the benefit of call holders without requiring them to exercise their options.
- Q. So any dividend that can’t be *anticipated* will be deemed a non-ordinary dividend?
- A. No. Although such dividends may be unanticipated, the important criterion is whether a dividend is paid pursuant to a program or policy of paying dividends on a quarterly or other regular basis. In some cases, the dividends of a company paid according to such a policy may be highly variable and subject to increases or decreases that some may consider “unanticipated.” Nevertheless, these dividends would not normally be deemed non-ordinary.

## Examples: What if...?

- Q. Can you give an example of how the \$12.50 adjustment threshold will work in practice?
- A. In order for an option to be adjusted, the value of the dividend must be at least \$12.50 per option contract. However, if the security on which the dividend is paid underlies option contracts with more than one contract size – e.g., as a result of adjustments for previous splits – then the nonstandard contracts would be adjusted only if the value of the dividend on the nonstandard contract is at least \$12.50 *and* the standard-size contract (normally 100 shares) would also be adjusted.

For example, suppose an option covers 100 shares of stock and a \$0.10 special cash dividend is declared. This dividend, although non-ordinary, would yield only \$10.00 in value for this option contract. Therefore, no adjustment would be made.

A second example: Suppose an option covers 100 shares of stock and another option covers 150 shares of the same stock (as the result of a previous adjustment for a 3 for 2 split). A \$0.10 special dividend is declared. The dividend would yield \$10.00 in value for the 100 share option and \$15.00 for the other. However, in this case, since the standard-size (100 share) contract would not be adjusted (the \$12.50 threshold not being met), the 150 share option would also *not* be adjusted.

A third: Suppose an option covers 100 shares of stock and another option covers 50 shares of the same stock (as a result of a previous adjustment for a 1 for 2 reverse split). A \$0.15 special dividend is declared. The dividend would yield \$15.00 in value for the 100 share option and \$7.50 for the 50 share option. In this case, the standard-size (100 shares) option would be adjusted, but the 50 share option would *not* be adjusted because the value of the dividend per contract would be only \$7.50, and a nonstandard option is not adjusted if the value of the dividend per contract is less than \$12.50 even if the standard-size option is adjusted.

These examples also illustrate that, in general, the \$12.50 threshold is applied at the *option contract* level– *not* per share.<sup>1</sup>

Occasionally only nonstandard options exist. In these cases, since there is no standard-size option to refer back to, the application of the \$12.50 per contract threshold will determine whether an adjustment is made.

- Q. Who determines if a cash dividend is “non-ordinary”?
- A. OCC will make this determination. In doing so, OCC may consider the company’s characterization of the dividend but the company’s characterization is not binding. OCC may take into account other factors deemed appropriate including, but not limited to, the company’s stated dividend policy and payment history, prior option adjustments, and factors bearing on the maintenance of a fair and orderly market.
- Q. If a company accelerates the payment of its regular dividends, would such dividends be deemed non-ordinary and occasion an adjustment to options?
- A. No. If OCC determines such accelerated dividends are paid pursuant to the company’s regular dividend payment program, they would generally be classified as ordinary, irrespective of the company’s characterization of such dividends as “special” or similar designations. The same would

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<sup>1</sup> A threshold of .125 **per share** is used in determining contract adjustments for capital gains and other distributions for fund shares, as described in Interpretation .08 to Article VI, Section 11A of the OCC By-Laws.

be true regardless of whether a single regular dividend or multiple regular dividends are accelerated.

- Q. What if a company that previously paid no dividends initiates a regular dividend program – would the initial dividend be considered “non-ordinary” and therefore adjustable?
- A. No. The initial dividend would be paid pursuant to a policy under which the company intends to pay dividends on a regular basis. Therefore, it would not be deemed “non-ordinary” and adjustable.
- Q. What if a company announced a dramatic increase in a regular dividend? For example, what if a company’s last quarterly dividend was \$.20 and the current quarterly dividend was bumped to \$1.00 – wouldn’t that be a “non-ordinary”, one-time event that would call for an adjustment?
- A. No – most likely not. As mentioned earlier, we would start with the company’s description of its dividend. If the company has a quarterly dividend program and the company says this quarter’s dividend is \$1.00, then we anticipate the dividend would be deemed to be ordinary and not adjustable. However, as mentioned, the decisions of OCC are always made on a case-by-case basis, in light of the circumstances and facts as understood at the time.
- Q. What if a company declares a “variable dividend”? Does it matter if the dividend is paid in addition to a regular dividend? Since the value of the dividend changes from dividend to dividend would it be considered a “non-ordinary” dividend?
- A. If a company has a policy or practice of paying a “variable dividend” on a regular interval, the variable dividend generally would be considered an ordinary dividend and not adjustable, even if on occasion no variable dividend is paid because a company-established threshold for paying the variable dividend is not met and even if the amount of the dividend may drastically increase or decrease based on such company-established thresholds.
- Q. What about REITs, natural resource trusts, and similar companies that pay very irregular dividends? Such companies could pay no dividends for many months and then suddenly pay a dividend. Would that be considered a “non-ordinary”, adjustable dividend?
- A. No – most likely not. The kinds of companies mentioned in the question often have very regular dividend *policies* but will *actually* pay dividends only when certain conditions are met, or in response to market conditions. REITs, for example, are generally required to pay out profits to shareholders when and if profits are realized. They may determine dividends monthly, although the cash amount available for distribution may actually be zero in any given month. Thus, although the dividend payouts of such companies may be irregular, insofar as they occur *pursuant to the policy of the company*, they would be considered ordinary and not adjustable.
- Q. What if a company is reorganizing itself into a REIT and is required to pay out accumulated profits in a large dividend as it commences a dividend program. You said before that *initial* dividends would not normally call for adjustment. Would you adjust in this case?
- A. In our experience, companies reorganizing themselves into REITS or income trusts often designate this initial required pay-out as a “special” dividend. Precedent exists for adjusting for such dividends under OCC’s adjustment rules. Even if the company did not specifically characterize such a dividend as “special,” OCC may decide to deem them non-ordinary and adjust.
- Q. What if a company pays a dividend that is outside of its normal schedule of dividend payments but is required to maintain its tax status as a particular type of organization, such as a REIT?

A. If a company pays a dividend to maintain its tax status that is *not* paid pursuant to the policy of the company, or if the distribution is paid in addition to an ordinary dividend, it will most likely be considered non-ordinary and warrant an adjustment, particularly if the company characterizes the pay-out as a “special” or “one-time.”

Q. Fund share or ETF options have previously been adjusted in response to special dividends declared with respect to component securities of the fund. A notable instance was the Microsoft \$3.00 special dividend in 2004. How will these kinds of distributions be handled?

A. If a fund (ETF, HOLDR, etc.) is making a cash distribution which is identified (in whole or part) by the fund as attributable to a special dividend on a component security, then the appropriate amount of the cash distribution will also be considered a non-ordinary, adjustable distribution. For example, if an ETF is making a \$1.00 quarterly cash distribution, \$.25 of which is attributable to a special dividend on a component security, the OCC will normally consider \$0.25 of the aggregate distribution as a non-ordinary dividend and adjust for \$.25 (\$25.00 per 100 share option).

Q. How will the \$.125 per share adjustment threshold be applied to fund shares (e.g., ETFs)?

A. Pursuant to Interpretation .08 to Article VI, Section 11A of the OCC By-Laws, fund shares can be adjusted for capital gains distributions. OCC may also determine that fund distributions attributable to non-ordinary dividends on component securities of a fund should be considered non-ordinary and call for adjustment. These distributions, considered individually, may be less than \$.125 per share but greater than \$.125 when considered in aggregate. The \$.125 per share adjustment threshold will generally be applied to the aggregate of capital gains and other non-ordinary fund share distributions which have the same ex-date. For example, if a fund identifies a capital gains distribution of \$.05 per share and a distribution of \$.10 attributable to non-ordinary distributions on component securities (itemized singly or in aggregate), OCC will ordinarily make an adjustment of \$.15 (\$15 per 100 share option) to the terms of the option.

Investors are nevertheless reminded that all adjustment decisions are made on a case-by-case basis by OCC, including determinations of distributions as ordinary or non-ordinary.

Q. What if a company declares a non-ordinary dividend which is ex-distribution on the same date that a regular dividend is “ex”? Would these be considered one event or two separate events?

A. Two separate events.

Q. What if a company's regular quarterly dividend is a “return of capital”? Would that make it a non-ordinary, adjustable dividend?

A. No. Insofar as the dividend is still a regular quarterly dividend, it would not call for an adjustment. Ordinarily, the source of cash to be paid will not be determinative of the adjustment decision. In the past, however, determinations have been made to adjust for any dividends paid pursuant to a plan of liquidation – even regular dividends of the company included in the plan. OCC may follow this precedent in the future as well for companies undergoing liquidation.

### **Operational Matters**

Q. Will we have to wait until the official declaration date of a dividend before a decision is made about option adjustment?

A. Not necessarily. OCC intends to make adjustment decisions as soon as practicable. OCC may decide it is appropriate to base a decision on the company's press release or similar

announcement, in advance of the formal declaration date. Of course, if this is done, the adjustment decision would be appropriately conditional. For example, "if declared and paid as described in the press release, then...."

For example, suppose a company announces its intention in a press release to pay a special dividend, but this dividend is contingent on shareholder approval or other conditions. Until the conditions are met, it will not be officially declared. Under the policy, it will be easy to see if the dividend meets the size criterion: would it yield \$12.50 per contract? If "yes", then OCC may determine and announce it is a non-ordinary dividend if the dividend is approved by shareholders, and investors will immediately know an adjustment will occur if the dividend is actually declared.

Q. If an adjustment is called for, *how* will it be done?

A. There are two methods of adjustment: 1) simply reduce the strike prices by the amount of the dividend. This is the preferred method and will normally be used if the exact dividend amount is known in advance of the ex-date. 2) If the exact dividend amount is not known or if strike reduction would result in a strike of zero or less, then the amount of the dividend will be added as a cash component to the option deliverable. When this is done, an option symbol change normally occurs.

Adjustments will continue to be made on the ex-date for the cash dividend as determined by the appropriate market.

ALL CLEARING MEMBERS ARE REQUESTED TO IMMEDIATELY ADVISE ALL BRANCH OFFICES AND CORRESPONDENTS ON THE ABOVE.

For questions regarding this memo, please email the Investor Education team at [options@theocc.com](mailto:options@theocc.com). Clearing Member Firms of OCC may contact Member Services at 1-800-544-6091 or, within Canada, at 1-800-424-7320, or email [memberservices@theocc.com](mailto:memberservices@theocc.com).