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# The Section 179 and Bonus Depreciation Expensing Allowances: Current Law and Issues for the 114<sup>th</sup> Congress

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February 25, 2016

Congressional Research Service

7-....

[www.crs.gov](http://www.crs.gov)

RL31852

## Summary

Expensing is the most accelerated form of depreciation. Section 179 of the Internal Revenue Code allows a taxpayer to expense (or deduct as a current rather than a capital expense) up to \$500,000 of the total cost of new and used qualified depreciable assets it buys and places in service in 2016, within certain limits. Firms unable to claim this allowance may recover the cost of qualified assets over longer periods, using the depreciation schedules from Sections 167 or 168. While the Section 179 expensing allowance is not targeted at smaller firms, the limits on its use effectively confine its benefits to such firms.

Section 168(k), which provides a so-called bonus depreciation allowance, allows taxpayers to expense 50% of the cost of qualified assets bought and placed in service in 2016. Taxpayers have the option of forgoing the bonus depreciation allowance and instead claiming unused alternative minimum tax credits, within certain limits; taxpayers choosing this option are required to recover the cost of the assets over longer periods using the straight-line method of depreciation.

Since 2002, the two allowances have been used primarily as tax incentives for stimulating the U.S. economy. Several studies have examined the economic effects of the 30% and 50% bonus depreciation allowances from 2002 to 2004 and from 2008 to 2010. Their findings indicated that accelerated depreciation is a relatively ineffective tool for stimulating the U.S. economy during periods of weak or negative growth.

Available evidence also suggests that the expensing allowances may have a minor effect at best on the level and composition of business investment and its allocation among industries, the distribution of the federal tax burden among different income groups, and the cost of tax compliance for smaller firms. The allowances have advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, an expensing allowance simplifies tax accounting, and a temporary allowance has the potential to stimulate increased small business investment in favored assets in the short run by reducing the user cost of capital and increasing the cash flow of investing firms. On the other hand, depending on its design, an expensing allowance may interfere with the efficient allocation of capital among investment opportunities by diverting capital away from more productive uses.

In December 2015, the House and the Senate agreed on a measure (H.R. 2029, Protecting Americans from Tax Hikes Act of 2015, or PATH Act, P.L. 114-113) to extend more than 90 business and individual tax preferences.

A number of the provisions were permanently extended, including the enhanced Section 179 expensing allowance that was available from 2010 to 2014. As a result, the maximum allowance is set at \$500,000, and the phaseout threshold at \$2 million, beginning in 2015 and thereafter. Both amounts are indexed for inflation starting in 2016. The act also removed the \$250,000 annual cap on expenditures for leasehold, retail, and restaurant property improvements that could be expensed under Section 179 and permanently added off-the-shelf software for business use to the roster of qualified property.

In addition, the PATH Act extended the bonus depreciation allowance from 2015 to 2019. From 2015 to 2017, the allowance is equal to 50% of the cost of qualified property acquired and placed in service during that period; the share drops to 40% for assets acquired and placed in service in 2018, and then to 30% for assets acquired and placed in service in 2019. No allowance may be claimed after 2019. The act retained the option to claim unused alternative minimum tax credits as a refundable credit in lieu of bonus depreciation and removed the dollar limit on the amount of the credit that may be claimed in a tax year. Finally, the act extended the bonus depreciation allowance to the cost of planting or grafting certain trees, vines, and plants that bear fruits or nuts.

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## Introduction

Under current tax law, firms may expense (or deduct as a current rather than a capital expense) up to \$500,000 of the total cost of new and used qualified assets they purchase and place in service in 2016 under Section 179 of the federal tax code. They also have the option under Section 168(k) of expensing half of the cost of qualified assets they acquire and place in service this year (or the following year in the case of assets with relatively long production schedules). Many of the assets that qualify for the Section 179 allowance also are eligible for the Section 168(k) allowance.

Expensing is the most accelerated form of depreciation. It has the potential to stimulate business investment by reducing the cost of capital for favored investments and increasing the cash flow of firms undertaking such investments. As a result, economists view the two allowances as significant investment tax subsidies, especially since firms are allowed to take advantage of both allowances in the same tax year.

The American Taxpayer Relief Act of 2012 (ATRA, P.L. 112-240) increased the maximum Section 179 allowance to \$500,000 and the phaseout threshold to \$2 million for qualified assets acquired and placed in service in 2012 and 2013. ATRA also extended the 50% bonus depreciation allowance from 2011 through 2013. Congress extended both allowances through 2014 by passing the Tax Increase Prevention Act of 2014 (P.L. 113-295). In the 114<sup>th</sup> Congress, the House and the Senate agreed on a bill (Protecting Americans from Tax Hikes Act of 2015 (or PATH Act), H.R. 2029, P.L. 114-113) that permanently set the maximum Section 179 allowance at \$500,000, and the phaseout threshold at \$2 million, and indexed both amounts for inflation beginning in 2016. The act also extended the bonus depreciation allowance through 2019, though at a decreasing rate.

This report examines the current status, legislative history, and main economic effects (including their efficacy as an economic stimulus tool) of the Section 179 and bonus depreciation allowances.

## Current Expensing Allowances

### Section 179

Section 179 of the Internal Revenue Code (IRC) gives firms in all lines of business and all sizes the option, within certain limits, of expensing the cost of new and used qualified property in the tax year when the assets are placed in service. Business taxpayers that cannot (or choose not to) claim the allowance may recover capital costs over longer periods and at slower rates by claiming depreciation deductions allowed under the Modified Accelerated Cost Recovery System (MACRS) or Alternative Depreciation System (ADS).

### Maximum Expensing Allowance

The maximum Section 179 expensing allowance is set at \$500,000 for qualified assets bought and placed in service in 2016 and thereafter. (**Table 1** shows the maximum allowance from 1987 to 2016.)

### Qualified Property

Under current law, new and used tangible property—as specified in IRC Section 1245(a)(3)—qualifies for the allowance if it is depreciable under IRC Section 168 (which contains the

MACRS) and acquired for use in the active conduct of a trade or business. With a few minor exceptions, this property consists of machinery and equipment used in manufacturing, mining, transportation, communications, the generation and transmission of electricity, gas and water distribution, and sewage disposal. Most buildings and their structural components (including heating and air conditioning units) do not qualify for the allowance. But an exception to this rule is made for the 2010 tax year and beyond: taxpayers were allowed to expense up to \$250,000 in each tax year from 2010 to 2014 and of any cost they incurred for qualified leasehold improvements and retail and restaurant improvement property; there is not limit on the amount of such improvements that may be expensed in 2015 and thereafter. Research and bulk storage facilities do qualify for the allowance, as do single-purpose agricultural structures, storage facilities for petroleum products, and railroad grading and tunnel bores. In addition, the cost of off-the-shelf computer software used in a business or trade that is acquired and placed in service from 2003 and thereafter may be expensed under Section 179.

### **Limitations on Use of the Section 179 Allowance**

Use of the allowance is subject to two limitations: an investment (or dollar) limitation and an income limitation.

Under the dollar limitation, the maximum allowance a taxpayer is permitted to claim in a tax year is reduced, dollar for dollar but not below zero, by the amount by which the aggregate cost of the qualified property a firm buys and places in service during that year exceeds a phaseout threshold. That threshold is set at \$2,000,000 in 2016 and thereafter. (**Table 1** shows the expensing threshold since 1987.) As a result, a taxpayer may claim no Section 179 expensing allowance in 2016 when the total cost of qualified property it acquires and places in service that year equals or exceeds \$2,000,000.

The income limitation bars a taxpayer from claiming a Section 179 allowance greater than its taxable income (including wages and salaries) from the active conduct of a trade or business. The limitation is determined after the application of the investment limitation. So, if a company has \$20,000 in taxable income in 2016 from its business and may claim a Section 179 allowance of \$25,000 under the investment limitation, it could expense no more than \$20,000 of the cost of qualified property and recover the remaining \$5,000 under the MACRS or carry it forward to a future tax year when the company is able to deduct it under Section 179.

Taxpayers are not allowed to carry forward any allowance from the current tax year that cannot be used because of the investment limitation, but they may carry forward indefinitely allowances that cannot be used because of the income limitation.

### **Claiming the Allowance**

To claim the allowance, a taxpayer must specify on Form 4562 the items to which the election applies and the portion of the cost of each item that is deducted immediately. Historically, an election to claim the Section 179 allowance could be revoked only with the consent of the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). But Congress suspended this rule for tax years beginning in 2002 to 2014 and repealed it through the PATH Act for tax years beginning in 2015 and thereafter. Since the rule was suspended, taxpayers may revoke any part of an election to expense qualified property without the IRS's consent, regardless of whether the election was made on an original or amended return (IRS regulation 1.179-5). To revoke an election, a taxpayer has to submit an amended tax return for the tax year in question.

**Table I. Maximum Expensing Allowance and Investment Limitation from 1987 to 2016**

Year	Maximum Expensing Allowance	Investment Limitation
1987-1992	\$10,000	\$200,000
1993-1996	\$17,500	\$200,000
1997	\$18,000	\$200,000
1998	\$18,500	\$200,000
1999	\$19,000	\$200,000
2000	\$20,000	\$200,000
2001 and 2002	\$24,000	\$200,000
2003	\$100,000	\$400,000
2004	\$102,000 <sup>a</sup>	\$410,000 <sup>a</sup>
2005	\$105,000 <sup>a</sup>	\$420,000 <sup>a</sup>
2006	\$108,000 <sup>a</sup>	\$430,000 <sup>a</sup>
2007	\$125,000	\$500,000
2008 and 2009	\$250,000	\$800,000
2010 and thereafter	\$500,000 <sup>a</sup>	\$2,000,000

**Source:** Internal Revenue Service, revenue procedures dating back to 1987.

- a. The maximum allowance and investment limitation were both indexed for inflation from 2004 to 2006, and they are indexed for inflation from 2016 and beyond.

## Bonus Depreciation Allowance

Besides the Section 179 expensing allowance, businesses may also claim an additional first-year (or bonus) depreciation allowance under Section 168(k) for eligible property acquired and placed in service in 2016. The allowance is equal to 50% of the cost of qualified property acquired and placed in service that year. Under current law, the bonus depreciation rate is to remain at 50% in 2017 and then drop to 40% in 2018 and to 30% in 2019. No bonus depreciation may be claimed for tax years beginning in 2020 and thereafter.

This added allowance accelerates the depreciation of qualified property, lowering the cost of capital for investment in those assets and increasing the cash flow of businesses making such investments. Congress created the allowance, and later enhanced it, mainly to spur increased business investment during periods of negative or sluggish economic growth, such as the severe recession that lasted from late 2007 to mid-2009 and the relatively weak recovery that persisted into early 2014.

The initial bonus depreciation allowance was enacted in 2002 and was equal to 30% of the cost of property eligible for depreciation under the MACRS with recovery periods of 20 or fewer years, water utility property, off-the-shelf computer software, and qualified leasehold property. The property had to be acquired and placed in service between September 12, 2001, and December 31, 2004. (Eligible property with relatively long production times and certain non-commercial aircraft could be placed in service in 2005 and still qualify for the allowance.) Taxpayers claiming the allowance had to be the original user of the property. In addition, the allowance could be applied against the AMT with no adjustment.

In 2003, Congress raised the bonus depreciation allowance to 50% of the cost of qualified property acquired and placed in service in 2003 to 2005. It expired at the end of 2005. Congress reinstated it in 2007 for property acquired and placed in service in 2008 (or 2009 for property with long production times and certain aircraft). Owing to several subsequent extensions and enhancements, a bonus depreciation allowance of 50% or 100% was available for property acquired and placed in service in 2009 to 2015 (with an extension to 2016 for property with relatively long production times and qualified aircraft.)

Moreover, from 2016 to 2019, C and S corporations only are allowed to claim a refundable and accelerated AMT credit under Section 168(k)(4), instead of taking bonus depreciation for qualified property they acquire and place in service during that period. The method for calculating the credit is complicated, and the rules for electing it may vary for taxpayers in different circumstances. Taxpayers taking the credit are required to recover the cost of their bonus depreciation property using the straight-line method over the regular MACRS recovery period. The amount of the credit is equal to a taxpayer's "bonus depreciation amount (BDA)," which in turn is equal to 20% of the difference between the regular and bonus depreciation the company could claim in the year the property is placed in service and the total depreciation the company could claim that year without bonus depreciation. A company's BDA cannot exceed its "maximum increase amount (MIA)," which is the lower of (1) 50% of the firm's minimum tax credit under Section 53(b) for the first tax year ending after December 31, 2015, or (2) its minimum tax credit for the current year, as determined by the company's adjusted net minimum tax (as defined in Section 53(d)) for tax years ending before January 1, 2016.

There is a simple rationale for the credit: for companies that invest in bonus depreciation property, it is intended to provide roughly the same net tax benefit to a profitable corporation that pays the AMT as it does to a corporation with an NOL.

A somewhat different set of rules governed use of the accelerated credit in tax years that began before 2016. For tax years beginning on or after April 1, 2008 and before January 1, 2016, C corporations had the option under Section 168(k)(4) of cashing in some or all of their alternative minimum tax (AMT) and research tax credits carried over from tax years before 2006, in lieu of taking the bonus depreciation allowance. Corporations choosing the accelerated credit also had to use the straight-line method over MACRS recovery period for the bonus depreciation property to recover its cost. The credit was refundable and limited to a corporation's BDA. This amount was also equal to 20% of the difference between the bonus and regular depreciation a company could claim for the tax year the property was placed in service and the depreciation it could claim without bonus depreciation. And a taxpayer's BDA could not exceed its MIA. From 2008 to 2010, the MIA was the lower of (1) 6% of the sum of its carried-forward (or unused) AMT and research tax credits from tax years before 2006, or (2) \$30 million. For bonus depreciation property placed in service from 2011 to 2015, corporations could claim the accelerated credit for unused AMT credits from tax years before 2006 only. The credit was provided indirectly through an increase in the limitations on the use of the AMT credit (under Section 53(c)) and the research tax credit (under Section 38(c)); the increase was treated as a refundable overpayment of tax.

A corporation was most likely to claim the initial version of the credit if it was both cash-strapped and at risk of incurring a net operating loss if it were to claim bonus depreciation. Since the maximum credit a corporation could take in tax years beginning on or after April 1, 2008 and before January 1, 2016 was \$30 million, it had to place in service in a tax year \$150 million in bonus depreciation property to equal that amount (20% of \$150 million = \$30 million). The corporation also needed \$500 million in unused AMT and research tax credits from tax years beginning before 2006 to reach the \$30 million ceiling (6% of \$500 million = \$30 million).



## Interaction with Other Depreciation Allowances, Including the Section 179 Allowance

In the case of assets that are eligible for both expensing allowances, a company must recover their cost in a prescribed order. The Section 179 expensing allowance has to be taken first, lowering the company's basis in the asset by that amount. The taxpayer then may apply the bonus depreciation allowance to the remaining basis amount, further reducing the company's basis in the property. Finally, the company is allowed to claim a depreciation allowance under the MACRS for any remaining basis, using the double declining balance method.

A simple example explains how this process works. Assume that the only investment a company makes in 2016 is the acquisition of 10 new machine tools at a total cost of \$700,000. Such a purchase qualifies for both the Section 179 expensing and bonus depreciation allowances for that year. Therefore, it may recover that cost for federal tax purposes as follows:

- First, the company claims a Section 179 expensing allowance of \$500,000 on its federal tax return for that year, lowering its basis in the property to \$200,000 (\$700,000 - \$500,000).
- Then it claims a bonus depreciation allowance of \$100,000 ( $\$200,000 \times 0.5$ ), further lowering its basis to \$100,000 ( $\$200,000 - \$100,000$ ).
- Next, the company is allowed a deduction for depreciation under the MACRS on the remaining \$100,000. Given that the MACRS recovery period for machine tools is five years and five-year property is depreciated using the double-declining-balance method, the company could claim an additional depreciation allowance equal to 20% of \$100,000, or \$20,000, under the half-year convention.
- The company then recovers the remaining basis of \$80,000 ( $\$100,000 - \$20,000$ ) by taking MACRS depreciation deductions over each of the next five years at rates of 32%, 19.2%, 11.52%, 11.52%, and 5.76%, respectively.
- As a result, the company may deduct for the 2016 tax year nearly 89% of the purchase price of the machine tools it buys and places in service that year.

## Legislative History of the Two Expensing Allowances

### Section 179

The Section 179 expensing allowance has been a permanent provision of the federal tax code since September 1958. It started out as a first-year depreciation allowance that Congress included in the Small Business Tax Revision Act of 1958 (P.L. 85-866). Its purpose was no different from its purpose today: to reduce the tax burden on small business owners, stimulate small business investment, and simplify tax accounting for smaller firms. The original deduction was limited to \$2,000 (or \$4,000 in the case of a married couple filing a joint return) of the cost of new and used business machines and equipment with a tax life of six or more years.

No change was made in the allowance until the enactment of the Economic Recovery Tax Act of 1981 (ERTA; P.L. 97-34). ERTA raised the expensing allowance to \$5,000 and laid down a timetable for a gradual increase in the allowance to \$10,000 by 1986. In spite of the 150% increase in the allowance for single filers, few firms took advantage of it. Some attributed the tepid response to the limitations on the use of an investment tax credit that ERTA established. A



business taxpayer could claim the investment tax credit only for the portion of an eligible asset's cost that was not expensed; so the full credit could be used only if the company claimed no expensing allowance. For many firms, the tax savings from the credit outweighed the tax savings from a combination of the credit and the allowance.

To reverse the rise in the federal budget deficit in the early 1980s, Congress passed the Deficit Reduction Act of 1984 (P.L. 98-369). Among other things, the act postponed from 1986 to 1990 the scheduled increase in the expensing allowance to \$10,000. Still, use of the allowance rose markedly following the repeal of the investment tax credit by the Tax Reform Act of 1986.

The allowance rose to \$10,000 in 1990, as scheduled, and remained at that level until the passage of the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1993 (OBRA93; P.L. 103-66). OBRA93 increased the allowance to \$17,500 (as of January 1, 1993) and created a variety of tax benefits for impoverished areas known as “enterprise” zones and “empowerment” zones (or EZs for both). The benefits included an enhanced expensing allowance for qualified assets placed in service in such a zone.<sup>1</sup> To be designated an EZ, an area had to meet certain eligibility criteria relating to population, poverty rate, and geographic size.

With the enactment of the Small Business Job Protection Act of 1996 (SBJPA, P.L. 104-188), the regular expensing allowance again embarked on timetable for scheduled increases. Specifically, the act allowed the allowance to rise to \$18,000 in 1997, \$18,500 in 1998, \$19,000 in 1999, \$20,000 in 2000, \$24,000 in 2001 and 2002, and \$25,000 in 2003 and thereafter.

The Community Renewal Tax Relief Act of 2000 (P.L. 106-554) added “renewal communities” (RCs) to the list of economic development areas and granted businesses located in them the same tax benefits available to businesses in EZs, including the enhanced expensing allowance. In addition, it added a premium to the regular allowance for qualified assets placed in service in economic development areas (including RCs) of \$35,000.

To lessen any economic losses associated with the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Congress established a variety of tax benefits through the Job Creation and Worker Assistance Act of 2002 (P.L. 107-147). The benefits were intended to encourage new business investment in the area in lower Manhattan in New York City that bore the brunt of the aerial attacks on the World Trade Center. Owners of firms in the “Liberty Zone” were allowed to claim the same enhanced expensing allowance for qualified investments that was available to small business owners in the EZs and RCs.

After the SBJPA, no changes were made in the regular allowance until the passage of JGTRRA. Under that act, the allowance rose four-fold to \$100,000 (as of May 6, 2003), stayed at that amount in 2004 and 2005, and then reset in 2006 and beyond at its level before JGTRRA (\$25,000). JGTRRA also raised the phaseout threshold to \$400,000 from May 2003 to the end of 2005, indexed the regular allowance and the threshold for inflation in 2004 and 2005, and added off-the-shelf software for business use to the list of depreciable assets eligible for expensing in the same period.

The American Jobs Creation Act of 2004 (AJCA; P.L. 108-357) extended the changes made by JGTRRA through the end of 2007.

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<sup>1</sup> Firms placing qualified assets in service in an EZ were allowed to claim a maximum allowance that was \$20,000 greater than the allowance available in other areas, with a phaseout threshold that was twice as large as that available in other areas.

In an effort to aid the recovery of the economies in the areas of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama devastated by Hurricane Katrina in 2005, Congress passed the Gulf Opportunity Zone Act of 2005 (P.L. 109-135). Among other things, the act created a “Gulf Opportunity Zone” (or GOZ) in those areas and offered a variety of tax incentives to boost business investment in the GOZ, including an enhanced expensing allowance for qualified assets purchased on or after August 28, 2005 and placed in service by December 31, 2007. This allowance could be as much as \$100,000 above the regular allowance, and the phaseout threshold was \$600,000 greater than that for the regular allowance. It also applied to a wider range of tangible depreciable assets than the regular Section 179 allowance did.

The Tax Increase Prevention and Reconciliation Act of 2005 (P.L. 109-222) extended the changes in the allowance made by JGTRRA through 2009.

Under the U.S. Troop Readiness, Veterans’ Care, Katrina Recovery, and Iraq Appropriations Act, 2007 (P.L. 110-28), Congress further extended those changes through 2010, raised the maximum allowance to \$125,000 and the phaseout threshold to \$500,000 for tax years beginning in 2007 to 2010, and indexed both amounts for inflation in that period. The act also extended through 2008 the special GOZ allowance.

In an effort to stimulate more business investment in the midst of a severe economic downturn, Congress increased the allowance to \$250,000 and the phaseout threshold to \$800,000 for qualified assets bought and placed in service in 2008 by passing the Economic Stimulus Act of 2008 (ESA, P.L. 110-185). Under the act, those amounts were supposed to reset at \$125,000 and \$500,000 in 2009 and 2010, with adjustments for inflation.

Several laws enacted during the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress modified the Section 179 expensing allowance. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (P.L. 111-5) extended the enhanced allowance created by the ESA through 2009, and the Hiring Incentives to Restore Employment Act of 2010 (P.L. 111-147) further extended it through 2010.

Under the Small Business Jobs Act of 2010 (P.L. 111-240), the expensing allowance increased to \$500,000, and the phaseout threshold to \$2 million, for tax years beginning in 2010 and 2011. Starting in 2012 and thereafter, the maximum allowance was scheduled to decrease to \$25,000 and the phaseout threshold to \$200,000. The act also expanded the definition of qualified property to include qualified leasehold improvement property, qualified retail improvement property, and qualified restaurant property; for the 2010 and 2011 tax years, a business could write off up to \$250,000 of the annual cost of such property under Section 179.

The Tax Relief, Unemployment Compensation Reauthorization, and Job Creation Act of 2010 (P.L. 111-312) increased the maximum allowance to \$125,000 and the phaseout threshold to \$500,000 for qualified assets acquired and placed in service in 2012, indexed those amounts for inflation, set the maximum allowance at \$25,000 and the phaseout threshold at \$200,000 for tax years beginning in 2013 and thereafter, and extended the eligibility of off-the-shelf computer software for the allowance through 2012.

As a result of the American Taxpayer Tax Relief Act of 2012, the maximum expensing allowance rose to \$500,000, and the phaseout threshold to \$2 million, in 2012 and 2013. The act also made purchases of off-the-shelf software eligible for the allowance in 2013 and extended through 2013 the maximum annual \$250,000 expensing allowance for qualified real property that first became available in 2010.

In December 2014, Congress extended through 2014 the Section 179 expensing allowance that was available in 2012 and 2013 by passing the Tax Increase Prevention Act of 2014 (P.L. 213-295).

Nearly one year later, Congress again extended the enhanced allowance from tax years beginning in 2012 and 2013. As a result of the Protecting Americans from Tax Hikes Act of 2015 (PATH Act, P.L. 114-113), the Section 179 expensing allowance is permanently set at \$500,000, and the phaseout threshold at \$2 million, starting in 2015. Both amounts are indexed for inflation beginning in 2016. Off-the-shelf computer software and leasehold, restaurant, and retail property improvements are permanently eligible for the allowance. And there no longer is a dollar limit on the amount of those improvements that can be expensed in a tax year.

## **Bonus Depreciation Allowance**

The Job Creation and Worker Assistance Act of 2002 (P.L. 107-147) created the bonus depreciation allowance. It was equal to 30% of a company's adjusted basis in new qualified property acquired after September 11, 2001 and placed in service by December 31, 2004. A one-year extension of that deadline was available for property with MACRS recovery periods of 10 or more years and lengthy production periods, as well as for certain aircraft.

A year later, through the Jobs and Growth Tax Relief Reconciliation Act of 2003 (P.L. 108-27), Congress raised the allowance to 50% of a company's adjusted basis in qualified property acquired after May 5, 2003 and placed in service before January 1, 2006. Once again, an extended deadline was available for property with relatively long production times.

Among other things, the Economic Stimulus Act of 2008 renewed the 50% bonus depreciation allowance that expired at the end of 2005. To claim the allowance, a taxpayer had to acquire qualified property after December 31, 2007 and place it in service before January 1, 2009.

Later in 2008, Congress passed the Housing Assistance Tax Act of 2008 (P.L. 110-289). It included a provision that gave C corporations only the option to exchange any bonus depreciation allowance they could claim for property acquired and placed in service between April 1 and December 31, 2008 for a refundable, accelerated tax credit equal to the lesser of \$30 million or 6% of the sum of any research and AMT credits carried forward from tax years before 2006.

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (P.L. 111-5) extended the 50% bonus depreciation allowance and the optional refundable credit through 2009.

Congress further extended the 50% allowance and the credit to qualified property acquired and placed in service in 2010 by passing the Small Business Jobs Act of 2010 (P.L. 111-240),

Under the Tax Relief, Unemployment Compensation Reauthorization, and Job Creation Act of 2010 (P.L. 111-312), the bonus depreciation allowance increased to 100% for qualified property acquired after September 8, 2010 and placed in service before January 1, 2012. The act also established a 50% allowance for property acquired and placed in service in 2012 and allowed corporations to claim a refundable credit for unused AMT credits (but not unused research credits) from tax years before 2006, in lieu of a bonus depreciation allowance for any qualified property they placed in service that year.

The American Taxpayer Relief Act of 2012 (ATRA) extended the 50% bonus depreciation allowance through 2013. ATRA also extended the optional refundable through 2013 for AMT credits carried forward from tax years before 2006.

The Tax Increase Prevention Act of 2014 (TIPA) extended through 2014 the bonus depreciation allowance that was available in 2013.

In December 2015, Congress passed the Protecting Americans from Tax Hikes Act of 2015 (PATH Act, P.L. 114-113). Among other things, it extended the bonus depreciation allowance from 2014 through 2019. In 2015 to 2017, the allowance is equal to 50% of the acquisition cost of

qualified property placed in service during that period; the rate is scheduled to drop to 40% in 2018, and then to 30% in 2019. No allowance is available for qualified property acquired and placed in service in 2020 and thereafter. The act also extended through 2019 the optional refundable credit. Unlike the credit that was available from 2008 to 2015, there is no upper dollar limit on the amount that can be claimed in lieu of the bonus depreciation allowance. The credit a corporation may claim is equal to its bonus depreciation amount; this amount, in turn, cannot exceed the lower of 50% of the corporation's AMT credit under Section 53(b) for its first tax year ending in 2016, or the AMT credit for the current tax year calculated by taking into account only the adjusted new minimum tax (as defined in Section 53(d)) for tax years ending before January 1, 2016. In addition, the PATH Act extended the bonus depreciation allowance to domestic planted or grafted trees or vines that bear fruits or nuts and have a pre-production period of over two years from the time of planting or grafting to the time of bearing fruits or nuts.

## **Economic Effects of the Section 179 and Bonus Depreciation Allowances**

Many lawmakers have viewed the Section 179 expensing and bonus depreciation allowances as effective policy tools for promoting the growth of small firms and stimulating the economy during periods of slow or negative growth. And many business owners think of the allowances as a valuable and desirable instrument for increasing their cash flow and simplifying tax accounting.

But many economists take a more balanced view of those allowances. In their view, the disadvantages of the allowances outweigh their advantages. Specifically, they maintain that the allowances have the potential to promote an inefficient allocation of capital among domestic industries and alter the distribution of the federal tax burden among income classes. At the same time, many economists acknowledge that expensing can reduce the cost of tax compliance, especially for smaller firms. These effects correspond to three traditional criteria used by economists to evaluate actual or proposed tax policies: efficiency, equity, and simplicity.

Each effect is examined below. The discussion begins with a review of what is known about the effectiveness of the Section 179 expensing and bonus depreciation allowances as a policy instrument for economic stimulus.

### **Accelerated Depreciation as a Policy Tool for Economic Stimulus**

Since 2003, Congress has passed eight bills that either temporarily enhanced the Section 179 expensing allowance and its phaseout threshold or included a temporary or permanent extension of an already enhanced allowance. And since 2002, nine bills have been enacted that extend or enhance the bonus depreciation allowance. In both cases, each extension or enhancement was largely intended to spark increases in business investment. When Congress first took these steps in the early 2000s, many assumed these measures would boost short-term business investment in qualified assets. This expectation rested on the understanding that expensing lowered the user cost of capital for investment in qualified property and expanded the cash flow of companies making such investments.

The user cost (or rental price) of capital influences business investment decisions. It combines the opportunity cost of an investment (i.e., the highest pre-tax rate of return a company could earn by investing in a low-risk asset like a U.S. Treasury bond) with its direct costs, such as depreciation,

the actual cost of the asset, and income taxes.<sup>2</sup> In effect, the user cost of capital determines the after-tax rate of return an investment must earn in order to be profitable—and thus worth undertaking. In general, the larger the user cost of capital, the fewer projects companies can profitably undertake, and the lower their desired capital stock. In theory, when a change in tax law decreases the user cost of capital, businesses can be expected to increase the amount of capital they wish to own, boosting business investment in the short run, all other things being equal.

How does expensing affect the user cost of capital? As the most accelerated form of depreciation, expensing lowers this cost by reducing the tax burden on the returns to an eligible investment. This reduction can be considerable.<sup>3</sup> Expensing the cost of an asset is equivalent to the U.S. Treasury providing the firm with a tax rebate equal to the firm's marginal tax rate multiplied by the cost of the asset.

Several studies have indicated that investment in equipment is somewhat sensitive to changes in the user cost of capital. Estimates of the price elasticity of demand for equipment (which measures the percentage change in spending on equipment divided by the percentage change in its user cost of capital) range from -0.25 to -0.66; some economists argue that the elasticity is probably close to -0.50,<sup>4</sup> though a 2014 study of the impact of bonus depreciation that took into effect frictions in the financing of investment came up with a much larger elasticity estimate: 1.6.<sup>5</sup> An elasticity of that size means that a 10% decline in the user cost of capital should result in a 16% rise in business spending on equipment in the short run, all other things being equal.

Another significant influence on the investment behavior of firms is cash flow.<sup>6</sup> There are several reasons why a company may prefer to finance new investments from retained earnings. It may wish to limit the company's exposure to external debt and the risk of default it carries. Or the company may have little or no choice but to rely on retained earnings since it has limited access

<sup>2</sup> The user cost of capital is the real rate of return an investment project must earn to break even. In theory, a firm will undertake an investment provided the after-tax rate of return exceeds the user cost of capital. Rosen has expressed this cost in terms of a simple equation. Let  $C$  stand for the user cost of capital,  $a$  for the purchase price of an asset,  $r$  for the after-tax rate of return,  $d$  for the economic rate of depreciation,  $t$  for the corporate tax rate,  $z$  for the present value of depreciation deductions flowing from a \$1 investment, and  $k$  for the investment tax credit rate. Then  $C = a \times [(r + d) \times (1 - (t \times z) - k)] / (1 - t)$ . Under expensing,  $z$  is equal to one. By inserting assumed values for each variable in the equation, one sees that  $C$  increases as  $z$  gets smaller. Thus, of all possible methods of depreciation, expensing yields the lowest user cost of capital. For more details, see Harvey S. Rosen, *Public Finance*, 6<sup>th</sup> Ed (New York: McGraw-Hill/Irwin, 2002), pp. 407-409.

<sup>3</sup> In a 1995 study, Douglas Holtz-Eakin compared the cost of capital for an investment under two scenarios for cost recovery. In one, the corporation making the investment used expensing to recover the cost of the investment; and in the other, the cost was recovered under the schedules and methods permitted by the modified accelerated cost recovery system. He further assumed that the interest rate was 9%, the inflation rate 3%, and the rate of economic depreciation for the asset acquired through the investment 13.3%. Not only did expensing substantially reduce the cost of capital, its benefit was proportional to the firm's marginal tax rate. Specifically, Holtz-Eakin found that at a tax rate of 15%, expensing lowered the cost of capital by 11%; at a tax rate of 25%, the reduction was 19%; and at a tax rate of 35%, the cost of capital was 28% lower. See Douglas Holtz-Eakin, "Should Small Businesses Be Tax-Favored?" *National Tax Journal*, September 1995, p. 389.

<sup>4</sup> See Jonathan Gruber, *Public Finance and Public Policy* (New York: Worth Publishers, 2005), p. 675; and CRS Report R41034, *Business Investment and Employment Tax Incentives to Stimulate the Economy*, by (name redacted) and (name redacted).

<sup>5</sup> Eric Zwick and James Mahorn, *Tax Policy and Heterogeneous Investment Behavior*, working paper 21876, National Bureau of Economic Research (Cambridge, MA: Jan. 2016), p. 32.

<sup>6</sup> In the realm of business finance, the term "cash flow" can take on different meanings. Here it denotes the difference between a firm's revenue and its payments for all the factors or inputs used to generate its output, including capital equipment.



to debt and equity markets. Younger firms investing in the development of new technologies may encounter difficulty raising needed capital in debt or equity markets when the owners know more about the potential growth in demand for their services and products than investors and lenders do. For companies in such a situation, the cost of internal funds would be lower than the cost of external funds; so they would be better off financing new investments out of retained earnings. Expensing can increase a profitable firm's cash flow in the short run because it allows the firm to deduct the full cost of qualified assets in the tax year when they are placed in service, reducing its tax liability.

In the case of cash flow's importance as a driver of business investment, however, what makes sense in theory has proven difficult to measure or verify in practice. The actual contribution of an increase in cash flow to business investment (especially small business investment) remains unclear. Some studies have found a significant positive correlation between changes in a firm's net worth and its investment spending.<sup>7</sup> This correlation was strongest for firms with limited or no access to debt and equity markets. Yet these findings do not prove that firms with relatively high amounts of retained earnings invest more than firms with relatively low or negative amounts. A strong correlation between two factors does not necessarily mean that one caused the other. In the case of cash flow and business investment, a plausible explanation for the correlation was that firms with relatively high cash flows invested more, on average, than firms with relatively low cash flows for reasons that have nothing to do with the relative cost of internal and external funds.<sup>8</sup> What can be said with certainty is that the relationship between cash flow and business investment is complicated, and that additional research is needed to assess the effects of the former on the latter.

So in theory, expensing should boost business investment in qualified assets relative to a baseline scenario with no expensing. This raises the question of how effective and cost-effective the enhanced Section 179 and bonus depreciation allowances have been in stimulating business investment, especially during the severe recession of 2007 to 2009.

Several studies have looked at the effect of the allowances on business investment. Their findings indicate that the allowances did spur a rise in business investment in equipment and standardized software. But the findings differ over the extent of this increase, among other things.

According to the results of a 2005 study by Matt Knittel from the Department of the Treasury, small businesses did not increase their use of the Section 179 expensing allowance and the bonus depreciation allowance after both were made more generous in 2003.<sup>9</sup> Specifically, Knittel found that the share of small firms claiming the Section 179 allowance changed little from 2001 or 2002 to 2003, when it rose from \$25,000 to \$100,000. Similarly, 39% of non-corporate business owners and 54% of small corporations claimed bonus depreciation in 2002, but these share decreased to 33% for passthrough business owners and 49% for small corporations in 2003, even though the bonus depreciation allowance rose from 20% of the cost of qualified assets in 2002 to 30% in 2003.

A 2006 study by Darrel Cohen and Jason Cummings found that although over half of all C and S corporations claimed bonus depreciation in 2002 to 2004, no more than 10% of those companies deemed the allowances an important consideration in determining the timing or amount of

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<sup>7</sup> For a review of the recent literature on this topic, see R. Glenn Hubbard, "Capital Market Imperfections and Investment," *Journal of Economic Literature*, vol. 36, March 1998, pp. 193-225.

<sup>8</sup> Harvey S. Rosen and Ted Gayer, *Public Finance*, 8<sup>th</sup> edition (New York: McGraw-Hill Irwin: 2008), p. 448.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew Knittel, "Small Business Utilization of Accelerated Tax Depreciation: Section 179 Expensing and Bonus Depreciation," *National Tax Journal Proceedings-2005, 98<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference*, 2005, pp. 273-286.

qualifying investments.<sup>10</sup> These findings raised the possibility that many of the investments that benefited from bonus depreciation would have been undertaken without it. In addition, the study showed that bonus depreciation had no effect on investment in short-lived assets, such as computer hardware and software.

In another 2006 study, Christopher House and Matthew Shapiro estimated that bonus depreciation had a minor impact on gross domestic product and employment in 2002 and 2003. According to their findings, bonus depreciation probably led to a cumulative increase in GDP of 0.07% to 0.14%, and in total employment of 100,000 to 200,000 workers, in that period.<sup>11</sup> House and Shapiro also found that the allowance had its largest impact on investment in long-lived equipment.

In another study, which was published in 2007, Knittel found that the take-up rate for the bonus depreciation allowance from 2002 to 2004 was substantially below 100% among corporations.<sup>12</sup> The take-up rate measures the share of eligible investment for which the allowance was claimed. According to the results of the study, the take-up rate ranged from 54% in 2002 to 61% in 2004 for C corporations and from 65% in 2002 to 70% in 2004 for S corporations. Though the analysis did not investigate why such so many corporations opted to forgo bonus depreciation when they could have taken it, Knittel cited two possible reasons. First, a large number of corporations had net operating losses from 2002 to 2004, and bonus depreciation would have offered little or no immediate benefit to companies with such losses, or to companies that had loss or credit carryforwards or claimed new credits. Second, many states disallowed bonus depreciation allowances for the purpose of computing state income tax liability, and that may have deterred some companies from claiming it. Knittel also found that the take-up rate was highest for industries where a small number of companies accounted for most of the investment in long-lived assets, such as telecommunications.

But a 2014 study of the impact of bonus depreciation on business investment by Eric Zwick and James Mahon came up with strikingly different results.<sup>13</sup> Using a model that accounted for “frictions” or imperfections in capital markets, they estimated that the allowance increased investment in qualifying assets by 10.4% from 2001 to 2004, and by 16.9% from 2008 to 2010. These estimates are much greater than the results of other studies of bonus depreciation and its impact on business investment. Zwick and Mahon noted that their analysis produced higher estimates of the effects of the allowance because it allowed for financial frictions, which cause firms to “sharply discount future deductions, making bonus depreciation more appealing. The study also found that small firms were much more responsive to bonus depreciation than larger firms, and that firms facing cash constraints were more responsive to the incentive than firms that had adequate access to capital to finance new investments in bonus depreciation property.

There are several reasons why the allowances are likely to have had a modest impact on the U.S. economy as a whole over the past 12 or 13 years.

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<sup>10</sup> Darrel S. Cohen and Jason Cummins, *A Retrospective Evaluation of the Effects of Temporary Partial Expensing*, Federal Reserve Board, Finance and Economics Discussion Series, Working Paper No. 2006-19 (Washington: April 2006), <http://www.federalreserve.gov/pubs/feds/2006/200619/200619pap.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Christopher House and Matthew D. Shapiro, *Temporary Investment Tax Incentives: Theory with Evidence from Bonus Depreciation*, National Bureau of Economic Research, working paper no. 12514 (Cambridge, MA: September 2006), p. 2. <http://www.nber.org/papers/w12514>.

<sup>12</sup> Matthew Knittel, *Corporate Response to Accelerated Depreciation: Bonus Depreciation for Tax Years 2002-2004*, Department of the Treasury, Office of Tax Analysis, Working Paper 98 (Washington: May 2007), <http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/tax-policy/tax-analysis/Documents/ota98.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Eric Zwick and James Mahom, *Tax Policy and Heterogeneous Investment Behavior*, NBER working paper 21876.



First, the design of each allowance limits their impact on the level of overall economic activity. Neither allowance applies to investments in inventory, structures, and land. And the Section 179 allowance phases out once a company's total investment in qualified assets in a tax year exceeds a specified dollar amount (\$2 million in 2016).

Second, spending on the assets eligible for the two expensing allowances tends to account for a relatively small slice of U.S. business investment. One measure of this relationship is the value of depreciation allowances claimed by businesses in a tax year. According to IRS data, corporations claimed a total of \$609.8 billion in depreciation allowances in 2009. Of that amount, Section 179 allowances amounted to \$7.8 billion (or 1.3% of the total amount) and bonus depreciation allowances to \$137.4 billion (or 22.5% of the total amount).<sup>14</sup> In total, the two allowances represented less than 24% of total corporate depreciation allowances that year.

Third, expensing is likely to generate less of a stimulus when an economy is mired in a recession than when it is expanding. This is because business investment generally is driven more by current economic conditions and the short-term outlook for sales and earnings than it is by tax considerations. An increase in an expensing allowance when the economy is contracting and many companies are burdened with excess capacity may affect the timing of some planned investments, but is unlikely to spur a permanent increase in the capital stock. Some companies may accelerate planned investments to take advantage of a temporary investment tax subsidy like expensing, but that does not mean that any short-term increase in net investment would reflect an increase in the desired capital stock of the many companies experiencing declines in profits or financial losses.

Fourth, an investment tax subsidy like expensing offers no immediate benefit to companies suffering net operating losses. In this case, accelerated depreciation simply enlarges the loss for the current tax year.

Fifth, the benefit from the Section 179 expensing and bonus depreciation allowances depends on the length of a qualified asset's recovery period. The House-Shapiro study found that the bonus depreciation allowances enacted for 2002 and 2003 boosted business investment, but the increase was concentrated among long-lived equipment. And the Cohen-Cummins study concluded that the same provisions had no effect on investment in eligible short-lived assets. This difference in effect stems from the fact that the net present value of the tax benefit was proportional to the recovery period of qualified assets.

The forces constraining the potential stimulus from Section 179 expensing and bonus depreciation affected its cost-effectiveness as a means of boosting economic activity between 2002 and 2015. Other approaches might have produced better results, especially those that would have quickly put more money in the hands of the unemployed. A 2010 analysis by the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) supported this notion. It estimated that increasing financial aid to the unemployed would have increased GDP from \$0.70 to \$1.90 for each \$1.00 of budgetary cost from 2010 to 2015; by contrast, allowing full or partial expensing of investment costs would have raised GDP from \$0.20 to \$1.00 for each \$1.00 of budgetary cost.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> See <http://www.irs.gov/uac/SOI-Tax-Stats-Corporation-Depreciation-Data>.

<sup>15</sup> Congressional Budget Office, *Policies for Increasing Economic Growth and Employment in the Short Term*, Statement of Douglas W. Elmendorf, Director, before the Joint Economic Committee, February 9, 2010, table 1, p. 11.

## Efficiency Effects

Efficiency lies at the core of economic theory and analysis. It refers to the allocation of resources in an economy and how that allocation affects the welfare of consumers and of producers. An allocation of resources is considered efficient when it yields the greatest possible economic surplus (which is the total value to consumers of the goods and services they purchase minus the total cost to sellers of providing the goods and services), given existing constraints on the supply of labor and capital and the productivity of that capital. But when the allocation turns inefficient, some of the possible gains from exchanges among buyers and sellers are not realized. For example, an allocation of resources is deemed inefficient when most suppliers of a good fail to produce it at the lowest marginal cost permitted by current technology. In this case, a shift in supply from high-cost producers to low-cost producers, driven by consumers seeking greater value, would lower the economic cost of providing the good, perhaps increasing any economic surplus.

Expensing is equivalent to exempting from taxation the normal returns on investment. As such, it would be the preferred method of capital cost recovery under a consumption tax, such as a flat tax or a value-added tax. But under an income tax, expensing becomes a tax preference or benefit because it allows those normal returns to go untaxed. When this happens, new opportunities for tax arbitrage open up. Expensing allows taxpayers to borrow funds to purchase new depreciable assets, deduct the full cost of those assets in the year they are placed in service, and deduct interest payments on the debt incurred to acquire the assets.

How does the expensing allowance affect the allocation of capital within an economy? In theory, all taxes, except lump-sum taxes, generate inefficient economic outcomes, because they influence the decisions of consumers and producers in ways that leave one group or the other, or both, worse off. Non-lump-sum taxes have this effect because they distort the economic choices facing individual and business taxpayers, leading them to allocate resources on the basis of how taxes affect the costs and benefits of the goods and services they buy and sell, rather than according to their actual costs and benefits. Such a distortion entails what economists call a deadweight loss: a condition where the amount of revenue raised by a tax is less than the loss of economic welfare associated with it.

The Section 179 expensing and bonus depreciation allowances have the potential to distort the allocation of resources in an economy by driving a wedge between the return on investment in favored assets and the return on investment in all other assets. Other things being equal, expensing increases the after-tax rates of return for favored assets relative to the after-tax rates of return for all other assets. As a result, it could encourage inefficient levels of investment in favored assets, at least in the short run, depriving more productive investments, but with lower after-tax rates of return, of needed capital.

In general, how beneficial is expensing to companies? One way to illustrate its potential tax benefit is to show how expensing affects the marginal effective tax rate on the returns to an investment. This rate encapsulates the tax provisions that affect the returns on an investment and is calculated by subtracting the expected after-tax rate of return on a new investment from the expected pre-tax rate of return and dividing by the pre-tax rate of return. Under expensing, the pre-tax and after-tax rates of return are the same for the investment, which means that expensing produces a marginal effective tax rate of 0%.

This equivalence between pre- and after-tax rates of return reflects a key effect of expensing: it reduces the total after-tax return over the life of an eligible asset and its total cost by the same

factor: an investor's marginal tax rate.<sup>16</sup> For example, if a non-corporate small business owner's income is taxed at a rate of 35%, and the entire cost of a depreciable asset is expensed, the federal government effectively becomes a partner in the investment with a 35% interest. Through the tax code, the federal government assumes 35% of the cost of the asset by allowing its entire cost to be deducted in the first year of use, but it shares in 35% of the income earned by the investment in subsequent years, assuming no change in the owner's tax rate. By the same token, expensing allows the small business owner to receive 65% of the returns from the investment over its lifetime but to bear only 65% of the cost.

Is there evidence that the two Section 179 expensing and bonus depreciation allowances have caused shifts in the size and composition of the domestic capital stock in recent decades? This question is difficult to answer, largely because no studies have been done that assess the impact of either allowance on capital formation in the period they have been available. Given that the expensing allowance lowers the cost of capital and can boost the cash flow of firms claiming it, and that investment in many of the assets eligible for the allowance seems at least somewhat sensitive to changes in the cost of capital, it would be reasonable to conclude that the allowance may have caused domestic investment in those assets to be greater than it otherwise would have been.<sup>17</sup>

But it can also be argued that much of this additional investment would have taken place in any event, and that the main effect of expensing is to accelerate the timing of those investments so the firms making them can take advantage of the tax subsidy.<sup>18</sup> Most economists would agree that investment in the assets eligible for the Section 179 expensing allowance is driven more by expectations for future growth in sales and profits by firms that purchase these assets, the nature of the assets, and conditions in debt and equity markets than by tax considerations.<sup>19</sup> This view finds some support in the available data on use of the expensing allowance: although 22% of corporations filing federal tax returns claimed the allowance from 1999 through 2003, the total value of Section 179 property placed in service was equal to 5% of gross domestic investment in equipment and computer software.<sup>20</sup>

When seen through the lens of economic theory, expensing has efficiency effects that may worsen the deadweight loss associated with the federal tax code. Under the reasonable assumption that the amount of capital in the economy is fixed in the short run, a tax subsidy like the allowance is likely to divert some capital away from relatively productive uses and into tax-favored ones. According to standard economic theory, in an economy devoid of significant market failures and ruled by competitive markets, a policy of neutral or uniform taxation of capital income minimizes the efficiency losses associated with business income taxation. But the Section 179 allowance

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<sup>16</sup> Raquel Meyer Alexander, "Expensing," in *The Encyclopedia of Taxation and Tax Policy*, Joseph J. Cords, Robert D. Ebel, and (name redacted), eds. (Washington: Urban Institute Press, 2005), p. 129.

<sup>17</sup> Two studies from the 1990s found that a 1% decline in the user cost of capital was associated with a rise in business equipment spending of 0.25% to 0.66%. See CRS Report RL31134, *Using Business Tax Cuts to Stimulate the Economy*, by (name redacted).

<sup>18</sup> There is some anecdotal evidence to support this supposition. At a recent hearing held by the House Small Business Subcommittee on Tax, Finance, and Exports, Leslie Shapiro of the Padgett Business Services Foundation stated that expensing "may be an incentive in making decisions to buy new equipment, but it's not the dominant force." His firm provides tax and accounting services to over 15,000 small business owners. See Heidi Glenn, "Small Business Subcommittee Weighs Bush's Expensing Boost," *Tax Notes*, April 7, 2003, p. 17.

<sup>19</sup> See Roger W. Ferguson, Jr., "Factors Influencing Business Investment," speech delivered on October 26, 2004, available at <http://www.federalreserve.gov/boarddocs/speeches/2004/20041026/default.htm>.

<sup>20</sup> Various data on business claims for the expensing allowance were obtained via email from the Statistics of Income Division at IRS on March 21, 2006.

encourages investment in a specific set of assets by relatively small firms. As such, it represents a departure from the norm of neutral taxation.

In addition, expensing distorts the incentives to expand facing companies. Like any subsidy targeted at firms of a certain size, the Section 179 allowance gives smaller firms an incentive to limit their growth so they can continue to benefit from the allowance. Such an unintended effect is the result of the steady rise in the marginal effective tax rate on the income earned by qualified assets over the allowance's phaseout range (\$500,000 to \$2 million in 2016).<sup>21</sup> Douglas Holtz-Eakin, a former director of the Congressional Budget Office, has called this incentive effect a "tax on growth by small firms."<sup>22</sup>

## Equity Effects

Equity is another basic concept in economic analysis. It generally refers to the distribution of income among the individuals or households.

In the field of public finance, equity usually denotes the distribution of after-tax household income among individuals ranked by income. Economists who analyze the equity effects of income taxes focus on two kinds of equity: horizontal equity and vertical equity. A tax is horizontally equitable if it imposes similar burdens on individuals with similar incomes or living standards. And a tax system is vertically equitable if the burdens it imposes vary according to an individual's or household's ability to pay. The principle of vertical equity provides the intellectual foundation for a progressive income tax system. Under such a system, an individual's tax liability, measured as a fraction of income, rises with income.

The current federal income tax system may lean more in the direction of vertical equity than horizontal equity. Many individuals with similar incomes before taxes end up in the same tax bracket. But because of existing tax preferences (e.g., deductions, preferential rates, deferrals, exclusions, exemptions, and credits), a substantial number of individuals with similar before-tax incomes end up being taxed at different effective rates. At the same time, the income received by those with relatively high pre-tax incomes is generally taxed at higher rates than the incomes of those with relatively low pre-tax incomes.

How does the expensing allowance affect vertical and horizontal equity?

To answer this question, it is necessary to consider who the main recipients of the tax benefits associated with the expensing allowance are and how those benefits affect the recipients' federal income tax burden. The main direct tax benefit from the allowance is a reduction in the *marginal effective tax rate* on the income earned by assets eligible for expensing. How much of a reduction depends on the proportion of an asset's cost that is expensed. As was noted earlier, if the entire cost is expensed, then the marginal effective rate on the returns falls to zero.

Yet the allowance does not change the *actual marginal rates* at which this income is taxed. Accelerated depreciation, such as the Section 179 expensing allowance, does not reduce the federal taxes paid on the stream of income earned by an asset over its useful life. Rather, it delays or defers the payment of taxes on that income by enabling firms to take a larger share of

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<sup>21</sup> Jane Gravelle of CRS has estimated that, with a corporate tax rate of 28% and a rate of inflation of 3%, the marginal effective tax rate on the income earned by assets eligible for the expensing allowance is 36% in the phase-out range for the allowance. By contrast, under the same assumptions, the marginal effective tax rate on the income earned by qualified assets is 0% for each dollar of investment in those assets up to \$430,000.

<sup>22</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Finance, *Small Business Tax Incentives*, hearings on S. 105, S. 161, S. 628, S. 692, S. 867, and H.R. 1215, 104<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., June 7, 1995 (Washington: GPO, 1995), pp. 11-12.

depreciation deductions for the asset in its first year or two of use than would be possible under the MACRS. This front loading of depreciation allowances increases the present discounted value of the tax savings from depreciation.

Most assets eligible for the Section 179 allowance are held by smaller firms. Therefore, any gains in profits due to the allowance go to small business owners. Since the tax benefits associated with capital income tend to be concentrated in upper-income households, it might be argued that the expensing allowance tilts the federal income tax away from vertical equity. The allowance lowers the effective tax burden on small business income relative to other sources of income. While this effect makes investment in qualified assets more attractive, it does not change the fact that the allowance itself has no effect on the taxes paid by small business owners over time on the income from eligible assets. Over the useful life of such an asset, the stream of depreciation deductions remains the same, regardless of whether its cost is expensed or not. As a result, it seems fair to conclude that the allowance has no measurable effect on the distribution of after-tax incomes.

## Tax Administration

Yet another policy issue raised by expensing allowances concerns their impact on the cost of tax compliance for business taxpayers.

Most public finance economists would agree that a key element of a desirable income tax system is relatively low costs for administration and compliance. Research indicates that those costs hinge on three factors: (1) the records that must be kept in order to comply with tax laws, (2) the complexity of those laws, and (3) the types of income subject to taxation.

Most public finance economists would also agree that the current federal income tax system fails this test on all counts. In their view, the costs of collecting income taxes and enforcing compliance with the tax laws are needlessly high, and the primary cause is the growing complexity of the federal tax code.

Many small business owners have long complained about the costs imposed on them by the record keeping and filings required by the federal income tax. The expensing allowance addresses this concern by simplifying tax accounting for depreciation. It takes less time and less paperwork to write off the entire cost of a depreciable asset in its first year of use than to write off that cost over a longer period using permissible depreciation schedules. But this advantage does come with a cost of its own: the rules governing the use of the allowance do add a layer of complexity to the tasks of administering and complying with the tax code.

Tax simplification is a long-standing policy objective for many small business owners. A reason is the relatively high cost the typical small firm bears in complying with federal tax laws. This cost was examined in a 2001 study prepared for the Office of Advocacy at the Small Business Administration. The study estimated that the cost per U.S. employee for tax compliance in 2000 was \$665 for all firms, \$1,202 for firms with fewer than 20 employees, \$625 for firms with 20 to 499 employees, and \$562 for firms with 500 or more employees.<sup>23</sup> This result demonstrated that the cost to firms of tax compliance is inversely proportional firm size. Joel Slemrod noted in a 2004 study of the cost of compliance for small businesses in that “as a fraction of any of a number of size indicators, the costs are lower for larger companies.”<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> W. Mark Crain and Thomas D. Hopkins, *The Impact of Regulatory Costs on Small Firms* (Washington: Office of Advocacy, Small Business Administration, 2001), p. 32.

<sup>24</sup> Joel Slemrod, “Small Business and the Tax System,” in *The Crisis in Tax Administration*, Henry J. Aaron and Joel Slemrod, eds. (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2004), p. 81.

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