

Improve Assessment and Collection Procedures

#12 CONTINUE TO LIMIT THE IRS'S USE OF "MATH ERROR AUTHORITY" TO CLEAR-CUT CATEGORIES SPECIFIED BY STATUTE

Present Law

Before assessing a deficiency, the IRS is ordinarily required by Internal Revenue Code (IRC) § 6213(a) to send the taxpayer a notice of deficiency that gives the taxpayer 90 days (150 days if addressed to a taxpayer outside the U.S.) to contest it by filing a petition with the U.S. Tax Court (known as "deficiency procedures"). The taxpayer's ability to appeal a deficiency determination to the Tax Court before paying is central to the taxpayer's *right to appeal an IRS decision in an independent forum*.

As an exception to standard deficiency procedures, IRC § 6213(b)(1) authorizes the IRS to summarily assess and collect tax after 60 days, without first providing the taxpayer with a notice of deficiency or access to the Tax Court, when it is addressing "mathematical and clerical" errors (known as "math error authority"). Taxpayers who do not contest a math error notice within this shorter period lose the right to do so in court before paying. Under current law, the IRS may summarily assess 17 types of "mathematical or clerical error," which are codified at IRC § 6213(g)(2) in subparagraphs A-Q.

Reasons for Change

Congress generally requires the IRS to follow deficiency procedures to provide taxpayers with notice and a reasonable opportunity to challenge an adverse IRS tax adjustment. Math error authority, which provides fewer taxpayer protections, was authorized as a limited exception to regular deficiency procedures to allow the IRS to make adjustments in cases of clear taxpayer error, such as where a taxpayer incorrectly adds numbers or incorrectly transcribes a number from one form to another. Because taxpayers have fewer protections under math error procedures, the procedures are not intended to be used where a substantive disagreement may exist. When Congress has expanded the IRS's math error authority, it has done so consistent with that principle.

Because math error procedures are cheaper and simpler for the IRS than deficiency procedures, the Department of the Treasury on several recent occasions has requested that Congress grant it the authority to add new categories of "correctable errors" by regulation.⁷⁶

The National Taxpayer Advocate is concerned about the impact on taxpayer rights of giving the IRS broad authority to add new categories of math error. In our reports to Congress, we have documented circumstances

⁷⁶ See Department of the Treasury, *General Explanations of the Administration's Fiscal Year 2016 Revenue Proposals* 245-246 (Feb. 2015); Joint Committee on Taxation, JCS-1-19, *Description of Certain Revenue Provisions Contained in the President's Fiscal Year 2020 Budget Proposal* 62, 64 (July 8, 2019).

in which the IRS has used its existing math error authority to address discrepancies that go beyond simple arithmetic mistakes and have undermined taxpayer rights.⁷⁷

If the IRS uses math error authority to address more complex issues that require additional fact finding, its assessments are more likely to be wrong, and the IRS's computer-generated notices, which confuse many taxpayers in the simplest of circumstances, are likely to become even more difficult to understand. Shorter deadlines and confusing notices will prevent some taxpayers from responding timely. As a result, these taxpayers will lose their right to challenge the adjustments in court before paying. The IRS may also waste resources responding to calls and letters, reviewing additional documentation, and processing abatement requests from taxpayers whose returns were correct as filed. Thus, expanding math error authority into more complicated areas will burden taxpayers unnecessarily, erode taxpayer rights, and sometimes waste IRS resources.

Math error authority may be appropriate to use in instances where required schedules are omitted, or annual or lifetime dollar caps have been exceeded. It also may be appropriate to use where there is a discrepancy between a return entry and data available to the IRS from a reliable government database, such as records maintained by the Social Security Administration. But the IRS should not be the arbiter of that reliability. Rather, Congress should retain full authority, as it has until now, to determine whether the administrative "efficiency" of using math error authority in these instances outweighs the loss of the significant taxpayer protections that deficiency procedures provide.

Recommendations

- Continue to limit the IRS's use of "math error authority" to clear-cut categories specified by statute. Because the standard deficiency procedures created by Congress provide important taxpayer protections, the IRS should not be authorized to add new math error categories by regulation.
- Amend IRC § 6213(g) to authorize the IRS to summarily assess a deficiency due to "clerical errors" only pursuant to congressional authorization and only where: (i) there is a discrepancy between a return entry and reliable government data; (ii) the IRS's notice clearly describes the discrepancy and how to contest it; (iii) the IRS has researched all information in its possession that could help reconcile the discrepancy; (iv) the IRS does not have to evaluate documentation to make a determination; and (v) there is a low abatement rate for taxpayers who respond.
- Amend IRC § 6213(g) to provide that the IRS is not authorized to use any new criteria or data to make summary assessments unless the Department of the Treasury, in conjunction with the National Taxpayer Advocate, has evaluated and publicly reported on the reliability of the criteria or data for that intended use.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ See, e.g., National Taxpayer Advocate 2015 Annual Report to Congress 329-339 (Legislative Recommendation: *Math Error Authority: Authorize the IRS to Summarily Assess Math and "Correctable" Errors Only in Appropriate Circumstances*); National Taxpayer Advocate 2014 Annual Report to Congress 163-171 (Most Serious Problem: *Math Error Notices: The IRS Does Not Clearly Explain Math Error Adjustments, Making It Difficult for Taxpayers to Understand and Exercise Their Rights*); National Taxpayer Advocate 2013 Annual Report to Congress vol. 2, at 5 (*Do Accuracy-Related Penalties Improve Future Reporting Compliance by Schedule C Filers?*); National Taxpayer Advocate 2013 Annual Report to Congress vol. 2, at 92-93 (*Fundamental Changes to Return Filing and Processing Will Assist Taxpayers in Return Preparation and Decrease Improper Payments*); National Taxpayer Advocate 2011 Annual Report to Congress 74-92 (Most Serious Problem: *Expansion of Math Error Authority and Lack of Notice Clarity Create Unnecessary Burden and Jeopardize Taxpayer Rights*); National Taxpayer Advocate 2006 Annual Report to Congress 311 (Most Serious Problem: *IRS Implementation of Math Error Authority Impairs Taxpayer Rights*); National Taxpayer Advocate 2003 Annual Report to Congress 113 (Most Serious Problem: *Math Error Authority*); National Taxpayer Advocate 2002 Annual Report to Congress 25 (Most Serious Problem: *Math Error Authority*); National Taxpayer Advocate 2002 Annual Report to Congress 186 (Legislative Recommendation: *Math Error Authority*); National Taxpayer Advocate 2001 Annual Report to Congress 33 (Most Serious Problem: *Explanations on Math Error Authority*).

⁷⁸ For a more limited recommendation, see National Taxpayer Advocate 2015 Annual Report to Congress 329-339 (Legislative Recommendation: *Math Error Authority: Authorize the IRS to Summarily Assess Math and "Correctable" Errors Only in Appropriate Circumstances*).