Mississippi Market Natural Foods Cooperative.

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From: lisa_msmarket [mailto:lisa_msmarket@earthlink.net]
Sent: Thursday, October 30, 2003 3:34 PM
To: Director - FASB
Cc: rdines@ncba.coop
Subject: Comments on Proposed FSP

October 30, 2003

Director, TA&I-FSP
Financial and Accounting Standards Board
401 Merritt 7
P.O. Box 5116
Norwalk, CT 06856-5116

Dear Director;

I am writing on behalf of the 5000 member-owners of Mississippi Market natural foods cooperative in St. Paul, Minnesota, to comment on Proposed FASB Staff Position No. FAS 150-c.

We support deferring the effective date of Statement 150 for mandatorily redeemable financial instruments of nonpublic entities for at least one year. It could take cooperative business and other nonpublic entities at least that long to make the changes in their capitalization plans and structures that this pronouncement might force them to make. Therefore, we request the Board consider deferring the effective date for these instruments two years to fiscal periods beginning after December 15, 2005.

While the Proposed FASB Staff Position only addressed the effective date for these instruments, we further request the Board clarify that member equity in a cooperative businesses is not mandatorily redeemable when the board of directors retains the authority to redeem that equity.

Members of a cooperative join primarily to receive the benefit from patronizing the business, not to receive a return on their investment. Members provide equity capital to the cooperative to finance its business operations, but they recognize that this equity is risk capital. The board of directors of a cooperative may choose to redeem equity to deceased members or others no longer doing business with them in order to keep ownership in the hands of members actively doing business with the cooperative. However, attempts to align ownership of the cooperative with its use by members are always subject to the fiduciary duty of the board of directors to the financial well-being of the entire cooperative.

Member equity, though, always retains the character of equity, and the board of directors has the discretion to redeem or not to redeem it. Courts have affirmed that the board of a cooperative can "exercise the discretion it has been granted to determine when the cooperative is financially able to redeem patronage equity," *Great Rivers Cooperative v. Farmland Industries*, 198 F.3d

685 (1999). The board does not have this discretion for debt owed by the cooperative. When a cooperative finds itself in bankruptcy, all of the creditors are paid before any of the equity held by members is redeemed.

Many accountants familiar with the policies and practices of cooperatives plan to continue presenting member equity in a cooperative as equity on its balance sheet. At least one accountant, though, has notified its cooperative client that it intends to reclassify member equity as a liability based on its interpretation of FAS 150. Since there appear to be divergent practices among accountants on this issue, the Board should clarify its position and hold that member equity is not mandatorily redeemable and will be treated as equity on a cooperative's balance sheet when the board of directors retains the authority to redeem that equity.

Reclassifying member equity in a cooperative as a liability on its balance sheet could also result in a legal obligation to redeem that equity. The authority of the cooperative's board of directors, now recognized by law, will be compromised, and member equity would truly become mandatory obligations of the cooperative. This would seriously impair the ability of cooperatives to raise and retain capital for their business operations.

Finally, the Minnesota Legislature just enacted into law a second new cooperative law known as Minnesota Chapter 308B. This cooperative law was enacted in large part because of the difficulties Minnesota cooperatives have experienced in raising member equity for cooperative modernization and expansion. A bill creating a similar law in Wisconsin will be introduced shortly in the Wisconsin Legislature. Requiring member equity to be classified as a liability, even before the Board of Directors has made the decision to redeem, will impair the cooperative's balance sheet and cause even greater difficulties in modernizing and expanding cooperatives.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely yours,

Gail Graham
General Manager
Mississippi Market Natural Foods Cooperative.