

Annual Limit on Elective Deferrals

Part I of this fact sheet describes the Internal Revenue Code's (IRC) annual limit on elective deferrals (tax-deferred and Roth contributions from your pay) and explains how this limit may affect Thrift Savings Plan (TSP) contributions made to the accounts of certain FERS employees.¹ Part II explains how this limit may affect federal employees covered by either FERS or CSRS,² as well as members of the uniformed services, who are contributing to the TSP and one or more other retirement plans.

Part I: Limits on Contributions to Your TSP Account

What are elective deferrals?

Elective deferrals are amounts that you ask your employer to deduct from your pay and contribute on your behalf to an employer-sponsored retirement plan. All tax-deferred traditional contributions that you elect to contribute to the TSP and all Roth after-tax contributions that you elect to contribute to the TSP are elective deferrals.

The combined total of your tax-deferred traditional and Roth after-tax contributions (excluding catch-up contributions) cannot exceed the elective deferral limit in any year.

Elective deferrals do not include Agency Automatic (1%) or Agency Matching Contributions because those contributions are not considered part of your pay.³ For members of the uniformed services, they do not include traditional contributions from tax-exempt pay earned in a combat zone.

What is the annual limit on elective deferrals?

Section 402 of the IRC limits the amount of income you may elect to defer under all employer-sponsored retirement plans during a tax year. (For most employees, a tax year is January 1 through December 31.) The elective deferral limit for 2018 is \$18,500.

What happens to my employee contributions when the annual limit is reached?

When the annual limit is reached, your employee contributions toward the elective deferral limit must be suspended for the remainder of the year. The TSP system will not allow any employee contribution to be processed that will cause the total amount of employee contributions for the year to exceed the annual limit. Your payroll office must ensure that your employee contributions automatically resume the first pay date in the following year.

What happens to my Agency Matching Contributions when the annual limit has been reached?

If you are a FERS employee, your Agency Matching Contributions are also suspended when the annual limit on elective deferrals has been reached. Agency Matching Contributions are based on the amount of employee contributions that you make each pay period. If there are no employee contributions in a pay period, there can be no Agency Matching Contributions.⁴

¹ In tax year 2018, this limit may also affect contributions made to the accounts of members of the Blended Retirement System (BRS).

² FERS refers to the Federal Employees Retirement System, the Foreign Service Pension System, and other equivalent federal retirement systems. CSRS refers to the Civil Service Retirement System, including CSRS Offset, the Foreign Service Retirement and Disability System, and other equivalent federal retirement systems.

³ In tax year 2018, some members of the uniformed services will be eligible for Service Automatic (1%) and Service Matching Contributions as BRS participants. These will also be excluded from the annual elective deferrals limit.

⁴ For tax year 2018, this also applies to BRS members who receive Service Matching Contributions.



What happens to my Agency Automatic (1%) Contributions when my employee contributions and Agency Matching Contributions are suspended?

If you are a FERS employee, your agency must continue to submit Agency Automatic (1%) Contributions even though your employee contributions and Agency Matching Contributions are suspended. As a FERS employee, you are entitled to receive Agency Automatic (1%) Contributions whether or not you make employee contributions.⁵

Does it make a difference if I reach the annual limit before the end of the year?

Yes. You should keep the annual contribution limit in mind when deciding how much you will contribute to your TSP account each pay period. If you reach the annual maximum too quickly, you could lose some Agency Matching Contributions because you only receive Agency Matching Contributions on the first 5% of your basic pay that you contribute **each pay period**. If you reach the annual limit before the end of the year, your contributions (and consequently your Agency Matching Contributions) will stop. (If you are **purposely making larger contributions** early in the year in an attempt to maximize your earnings, be aware that the amount you could lose in Agency Matching Contributions would, in all likelihood, be far greater than the value of the added earnings you might receive by making employee contributions sooner.)⁶

How can I make the maximum employee contribution and still receive the maximum Agency Matching Contribution each year?

To receive the maximum Agency Matching Contribution, you must contribute at least 5% of the basic pay you earn **each pay period** during the year. (The first 5% of your basic pay each pay period is matched — dollar-for-dollar on the first 3% and 50 cents on the dollar for the next 2%.)⁶

To determine a dollar amount you can contribute each pay period so that your contributions are spaced out over all the (remaining) pay dates in the year, use the How much can I contribute? calculator on the TSP website (tsp.gov) or the worksheet attached to this fact sheet.

If I make up employee contributions that my agency or service should have made in a previous year, will they count against this year's elective deferral limit?

No. Employee contributions are subject to the IRC elective deferral limit for the year in which the contributions should have been made. If, due to an error, your agency or service failed to make your employee contributions in a previous year and you make up those contributions this year, your makeup contributions will not count against this year's elective deferral limit.

What about catch-up contributions? Do they count against the regular IRC elective deferral limit?

No. Catch-up contributions are payroll deductions that participants who are age 50 or older may be eligible to make in addition to regular employee contributions. You need to make a separate election to request them, and they do not count against the IRC elective deferral limit. However, each year, the IRC limits the total amount of regular and catch-up contributions an employee can make. (For example, in 2018, total contributions cannot exceed \$24,500: \$18,500 in regular contributions, and \$6,000 in catch-up contributions.) See the fact sheet, *Catch-Up Contributions*, for more information.

How does the TSP apply the limits if I contribute to both a civilian and a uniformed services TSP account?

The elective deferral limit applies to the total contributions you make during the year to both accounts. During the year, the TSP will apply the limit to each account separately and will not allow you to contribute an amount to either account that exceeds the limit. In January, the TSP will check to see whether your combined contributions to both accounts exceeded that limit and, if so, it will then return any excess contributions, along with attributable earnings on those contributions. The TSP will return excess contributions and earnings first from the contributions you made to your uniformed services TSP account. If you made both traditional and Roth contributions during the year, the excess contributions and earnings returned to you will include a proportional amount from your Roth and traditional balances.

⁵ For tax year 2018, this also applies to a BRS member's Service Automatic (1%) Contributions.

⁶ Also applies to BRS members who receive Service Matching Contributions in tax year 2018.

The TSP will apply the same process to catch-up contributions made to both accounts that exceed the separate catch-up contribution limit.

Note: Tax-exempt contributions made to the **traditional** balance of a uniformed services account while deployed to a designated combat zone do not count toward the IRC elective deferral limit. However, any **Roth** TSP contributions are subject to the limit even if they are contributed from tax-exempt pay. Also, Roth catch-up contributions made while earning tax-exempt pay **will count** toward the catch-up contribution limit.

Worksheet to Maximize the Amount of Agency Matching Contributions

Example. The example below applies to a FERS employee who is paid biweekly using a 27-week pay schedule. The employee made an election that is effective December 10, 2017. For his agency, the pay date for that pay period is January 2, 2018, which is the first pay date for 2018. In this example, the employee's biweekly contribution should not exceed \$686 each pay period. If the employee was paid monthly, the contribution should not exceed \$1,542 per month to ensure maximum Agency Matching Contributions.⁷

Your estimate. For Item 1, enter the IRC elective deferral limit for the year in which your new election will be effective.

For Item 2, log into My Account at tsp.gov to find the total amount of your year-to-date elective deferrals. (This is the total amount of your employee contributions minus any traditional contributions from tax-exempt pay.)

For Item 4, count the number of pay dates remaining in the calendar year, beginning with the pay date following the end of the first full pay period after you make your election.

| | Example | Your Estimate |
|---|----------------------------------|---------------|
| 1. Enter the IRC elective deferral limit for 2018. | 1. \$ <u>18,500.00</u> | \$ _____ |
| 2. Enter all elective deferrals made in 2018 prior to the effective date of your new election. | 2. \$ <u>0.00</u> | \$ _____ |
| 3. Subtract Line 2 from Line 1. | 3. \$ <u>18,500.00</u> | \$ _____ |
| 4. Enter the number of salary payments you will receive in 2018 from which your new election will be deducted. | 4. <u>27</u> ⁸ | _____ |
| 5. Divide Line 3 by Line 4. | 5. \$ <u>685.19</u> | \$ _____ |
| 6. Round up the result in Line 5 to the next dollar to determine the whole dollar amount you should contribute each pay date for the rest of the year (which you will enter on your Form TSP-1 or TSP-U-1). | 6. \$ <u>686.00</u> ⁹ | \$ _____ |

⁷ This example also applies to BRS members who receive Service Matching Contributions in tax year 2018.

⁸ Some payroll offices will have 26 pay periods in 2018. You can confirm the number of pay periods with your agency or service.

⁹ In this example, the last contribution of the year will be decreased to \$664 by the employee's agency so that the employee will not exceed the elective deferral limit for the year.

Part II: Participating in the TSP and Another Tax-Deferred Retirement Plan

The following questions relate to excess deferrals (see definition below) made to both the TSP and another tax-deferred retirement plan as described under sections 401(k), 403(b), 408(k), or 501(c)(18) of the Internal Revenue Code (IRC). Certain federal employees can participate in such plans **in addition** to the TSP, in which case the elective deferral limit applies to the combined total of all elective deferrals made to any plan for the year. Because tax rules are complex, you may wish to consult a tax advisor if you exceed the elective deferral limit.

What is an excess deferral?

An excess deferral is the amount of your contributions to tax-deferred plans that exceeds the relevant annual limit on elective deferrals (regular contributions) and, if you are age 50 or older, catch-up contributions.

What if I am contributing to more than one plan and my combined contributions exceed the annual limit?

You may request a refund of any excess deferrals from one or more of the plans in which you participate. Each plan then has the option of returning your excess deferrals, plus associated earnings, by April 15 of the year following the year in which the deferrals were made.

What happens if any of the limits are exceeded by contributing to both my civilian and my uniformed services TSP account?

In January, the TSP will check to see whether your combined contributions to both accounts exceeded any of the limits. To do so, the TSP will add up the traditional (pre-tax) and Roth (after-tax) contributions made to both accounts. (Note: Traditional tax-exempt contributions made to your uniformed services account while deployed to a designated combat zone do not count toward the elective deferral limit.) The TSP will then return any contributions that exceeded the applicable limit, along with attributable earnings on those contributions before April 15. You do not need to take any action. Please do not submit a Form TSP-44, *Request for Refund of Excess Employee Contributions*.

Elective deferrals (and their earnings) in your uniformed services account will be returned before those in your civilian account. If you made both traditional and Roth contributions during the year, the excess elective deferrals (plus their earnings) returned to you will include a proportional amount from your traditional and Roth balances.

How does the TSP's refund process work?

In January, the TSP will attach Form TSP-44, *Request for Refund of Excess Employee Contributions*, to this fact sheet for eligible participants to complete and send to the TSP for processing. If you submit this form in a timely manner, the TSP will return the excess deferrals and associated earnings to you.

To request a refund of excess deferrals and associated earnings, you must submit the latest version of Form TSP-44 (previous versions are obsolete and will not be processed). To know whether you have the most recent version of the form, look in the upper right-hand corner (under the form name) for the tax year. If you are requesting the return of excess contributions you made in 2017, the form should say Tax Year 2017.

The form must be faxed or postmarked and mailed to the address provided on the form no later than **March 15 of the year after the excess deferrals were made**. The TSP will then process the refund by April 15. To ensure that your form is received in time to process it, the TSP recommends that you fax the form to the number in the form's instructions no later than March 15. The TSP will remove Form TSP-44 from this fact sheet on the website after March 15. If you have questions, you can reach the TSP at 1-877-968-3778. (Outside the U.S. and Canada, call 404-233-4400.)

What are the tax consequences if I contribute more than the annual limit in any tax year?

Excess deferrals are treated as income in the year in which you made the contributions, whether or not they are refunded to you. The total amount of deferred income is reported by each employer in Box 12 on your IRS Form W-2. If you have made traditional excess deferrals, you must report the total amount of the excess on your individual income tax return as taxable wages for the year in which you made the excess deferrals. Roth excess deferrals are also taxable wages for the year in which you made the excess deferrals, but the amount you are required to report is already included as income in Box 1 of your Form W-2.

If you elect to receive excess deferrals as a refund from the TSP, you will receive IRS Form 1099-R, *Distributions from Pensions, Annuities, Retirement or Profit-Sharing Plans, IRAs, Insurance Contracts, etc.*, which will indicate the amount of the excess that was refunded to you. This distribution will also be reported to the IRS. If you have already filed your individual tax return for the year in which the excess was contributed and this amount was not included as taxable wages, you will need to file an amended tax return.

How are the earnings on excess deferrals treated for tax purposes?

Earnings distributed with excess deferrals are considered taxable income **in the year in which they are distributed** (unlike the excess deferrals themselves, which are considered taxable income **in the year in which they are contributed**). If you have Roth contributions as part of your excess deferrals, you will owe taxes on the Roth earnings as well, even if you already meet the IRS requirements to receive Roth earnings tax-free (i.e., it has been 5 years since January 1 of the year you made your first Roth contribution, and you are at least age 59½ or permanently disabled).

You will receive a separate IRS Form 1099-R indicating the amount of the earnings. You must report this amount as income in the year in which the distribution is made. This distribution will also be reported to the IRS.

What happens to the Agency Matching Contributions that were associated with the excess deferrals that were returned to me?

Your agency will be notified that you have requested to have your excess deferrals and associated earnings returned to you. Your agency is then required to remove from the TSP the Agency Matching Contributions associated with these excess deferrals. If your agency fails to remove the Agency Matching Contributions from your account within one year of the date the contributions were made, the TSP will remove them and use them to offset TSP administrative expenses.¹⁰

Is a distribution of excess deferrals considered an early withdrawal and thus subject to the IRS tax penalty?

If the distribution is made by April 15 of the tax year following the year in which the excess deferral was made, it will not be considered an early withdrawal.

What happens if the distribution is not made by April 15 of the following tax year?

After April 15 of the following tax year, you cannot request to have the excess amount refunded. Instead, the distribution will remain in your account. **If the distribution is traditional (pre-tax)**, you will be taxed twice on it—once in the year in which the excess deferral is made, and then again when you separate and withdraw your account. (If the withdrawal is premature, the IRS early withdrawal penalty may also apply.) Earnings on the excess deferrals are taxed only once, when you withdraw the account.

If the distribution is Roth and it is not made by the April 15 deadline, your Roth excess deferrals will not be treated as after-tax contributions. This means that the double-taxation rule above will also apply to excess Roth contributions. You will also owe taxes on the earnings attributable to your excess Roth contributions, even if you already meet the qualified distribution requirements.

Please note: As stated above, if the TSP does not receive your request or it is not postmarked by March 15, your request will not be processed; accordingly, you will not receive a distribution from the TSP of your excess deferrals.

¹⁰ Also applies to BRS members who receive Service Matching Contributions in tax year 2018.