

**Legislative Recommendation #53****Clarify That Taxpayers May Raise Innocent Spouse Relief as a Defense in Collection Proceedings and Bankruptcy Cases<sup>1</sup>****PRESENT LAW**

Married taxpayers who file joint returns are jointly and severally liable for any deficiency or tax due. Spouses who live in community property states and file separate returns are generally required to report half the community income on their separate returns. IRC §§ 6015 and 66, sometimes referred to as the “innocent spouse” rules, provide relief from joint and several liability and from the operation of community property rules. Taxpayers seeking innocent spouse relief generally file Form 8857, Request for Innocent Spouse Relief. After reviewing the request, the IRS issues a final notice of determination granting or denying relief in whole or in part.

If a taxpayer files a petition within 90 days from the date the IRS issues its final notice of determination, the U.S. Tax Court has jurisdiction to determine the appropriate relief. The Tax Court’s jurisdiction to decide innocent spouse claims does not appear to be exclusive; IRC § 6015(e)(1)(A) provides that an individual may petition the Tax Court for review of an innocent spouse determination “in addition to any other remedy provided by law.”<sup>2</sup>

However, the Tax Court’s review is not *de novo*, but is limited to “(A) the administrative record established at the time of the determination, and (B) any additional newly discovered or previously unavailable evidence.”<sup>3</sup>

The Tax Court does not have jurisdiction over collection suits arising under IRC §§ 7402 or 7403 or over bankruptcy proceedings arising under Title 11 of the United States Code. Some federal courts with jurisdiction have considered taxpayers’ innocent spouse claims and determined that they are entitled to innocent spouse relief, which is consistent with IRC § 6015(e)(1)(A).<sup>4</sup> These courts have not limited the scope of their consideration of the innocent spouse claim.

However, other federal courts have held that the Tax Court’s jurisdiction to decide innocent spouse claims is exclusive and have declined to consider such claims in collection or bankruptcy cases.<sup>5</sup>

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- 1 Our recommendation that Congress clarify that taxpayers may seek innocent spouse relief in collection proceedings and bankruptcy cases addresses issues similar to those discussed in our recommendation that Congress clarify that taxpayers may seek innocent spouse relief in refund cases. See *Clarify That Taxpayers May Seek Innocent Spouse Relief in Refund Suits*, *infra*.
  - 2 Moreover, IRC § 6015(e)(3) provides that the Tax Court loses jurisdiction to the extent jurisdiction is acquired by the district court or the U.S. Court of Federal Claims in a refund suit, indicating that the Tax Court does not have exclusive jurisdiction over innocent spouse claims.
  - 3 IRC § 6015(e)(7). This provision was enacted by the Taxpayer First Act, Pub. L. No. 116-25, § 1203, 133 Stat. 981, 988 (2019). The National Taxpayer Advocate recommends revising IRC § 6015(e)(7) to remove this limitation on the Tax Court’s scope of review. See *Provide That the Scope of Judicial Review of Determinations Under IRC § 6015 Is De Novo*, *supra*.
  - 4 See, e.g., *United States v. Diehl*, 460 F. Supp. 1282 (S.D. Tex. 1976), *aff’d per curiam*, 586 F.2d 1080 (5th Cir. 1978) (IRC § 7402 suit to reduce an assessment to judgment); *In re Pendergraft*, 119 A.F.T.R.2d (RIA) 1229 (Bankr. S.D. Tex. 2017) (bankruptcy proceeding). See also *In re Bowman*, No. 20-11512 (Bankr. E.D. La. 2021), a bankruptcy proceeding in which the court decided it had jurisdiction to hear an innocent spouse issue, although it denied the debtor’s motion for summary judgment that she was entitled to such relief.
  - 5 *United States v. Boynton*, 99 A.F.T.R.2d (RIA) 920 (S.D. Cal. 2007) (IRC § 7402 suit to reduce an assessment to judgment); *United States v. Cawog*, 97 A.F.T.R.2d (RIA) 3069 (W.D. Pa. 2006) (IRC § 7403 suit to foreclose on federal tax liens); and *In re Mikels*, 524 B.R. 805 (Bankr. S.D. Ind. 2015) (bankruptcy proceeding). Moreover, if the innocent spouse claim is raised for the first time in a refund suit, then it is arguable that the IRS, although it may make a recommendation to the Justice Department about whether relief should be granted, does not make a “determination” that the Tax Court would have jurisdiction to review. If the IRS has not made a determination and IRC § 6015(e)(7) does not apply, the statute should not be construed as conferring exclusive jurisdiction on the Tax Court.

## REASONS FOR CHANGE

Inconsistent decisions about whether taxpayers may raise innocent spouse relief as a defense in collection suits and bankruptcy proceedings have created confusion and resulted in different treatment of similarly situated taxpayers. The effect of treating the Tax Court as having exclusive jurisdiction over innocent spouse claims may create economic hardships. If the federal courts that decide collection suits and bankruptcy proceedings cannot consider innocent spouse claims, taxpayers in those cases may be left without any forum in which to seek innocent spouse relief before a court enters a financially damaging judgment or, in rare cases, a taxpayer loses his or her home to foreclosure. In some cases, taxpayers forced to raise their innocent spouse claims in Tax Court will be deprived of a *de novo* scope of review that would be available in other federal courts.

Legislation is needed to clarify that the statutory language of IRC § 6015 conferring Tax Court jurisdiction “in addition to any other remedy provided by law” does not give the Tax Court exclusive jurisdiction to determine innocent spouse claims and that U.S. district courts and bankruptcy courts may also consider whether innocent spouse relief should be granted.<sup>6</sup>

## RECOMMENDATION

- Amend IRC §§ 6015 and 66 to clarify that taxpayers are entitled to raise innocent spouse relief as a defense in proceedings brought under any provision of Title 26 (including §§ 6213, 6320, 6330, 7402, and 7403) and in cases arising under Title 11 of the United States Code.

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<sup>6</sup> As noted above, IRC § 6015(e)(7) provides that “[a]ny review of a determination under this section shall be reviewed *de novo* by the Tax Court.” The National Taxpayer Advocate agrees that the standard and scope of Tax Court review of innocent spouse cases should be *de novo*. However, the new provision could be construed as conferring exclusive jurisdiction on the Tax Court to hear innocent spouse claims, which would be inconsistent with IRC § 6015(e)(1)(A). Such an interpretation would also be inconsistent with this recommendation relating to raising innocent spouse as a defense in collection suits and bankruptcy proceedings and with the recommendation to *Clarify That Taxpayers May Seek Innocent Spouse Relief in Refund Suits, infra*. For this reason, the National Taxpayer Advocate recommends clarifying that the scope and standard of review are *de novo* in innocent spouse cases adjudicated by the Tax Court “or other court of competent jurisdiction,” thereby avoiding the inference that the Tax Court has exclusive jurisdiction over innocent spouse claims. See *Provide That the Scope of Judicial Review of Determinations Under IRC § 6015 Is De Novo, supra*.