

October 5, 1998

Katherine A. England
Assistant Director
Division of Market Regulation
Securities and Exchange Commission
450 Fifth Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20549
Mail Stop 10-1

Re: File No. SR-NASD-98-74 - Amendments to Rule 3110(f) Governing Predispute
Arbitration Agreements With Customers

Dear Ms. England:

Pursuant to Rule 19b-4, enclosed herewith is the above-numbered rule filing. Also enclosed is a 3-1/2" disk containing the rule filing in Microsoft Word 7.0 to facilitate production of the Federal Register release.

If you have any questions, please contact Laura Leedy Gansler, Office of General Counsel, NASD Regulation, Inc., at (202) 728-8275; e-mail ganslerl@nasd.com. The fax number of the Office of General Counsel is (202) 728-8264.

Very truly yours,

Joan C. Conley
Secretary

Attachment

SECURITIES AND EXCHANGE COMMISSION

Washington, D. C.

Form 19b-4

Proposed Rule Change

by

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SECURITIES DEALERS, INC.

Pursuant to Rule 19b-4 under the
Securities Exchange Act of 1934

1. Text of Proposed Rule Change

(a) Pursuant to the provisions of Section 19(b)(1) under the Securities Exchange Act of 1934 ("Act"), NASD Regulation, Inc. ("NASD Regulation") is filing with the Securities and Exchange Commission ("SEC" or "Commission") a proposed rule change to amend Rule 3110(f) of the National Association of Securities Dealers, Inc. ("NASD" or "Association") governing the use of predispute arbitration agreements with customers. Below is the text of the proposed rule change. Proposed new language is underlined; proposed deletions are in brackets.

RULES OF THE ASSOCIATION

3000. RESPONSIBILITIES RELATING TO ASSOCIATED PERSONS, EMPLOYERS, AND OTHERS' EMPLOYEES

3110. BOOKS AND RECORDS

(f) Requirements When Using Predispute Arbitration Agreements [With] for
Customer Accounts

(1) Any predispute arbitration agreement clause shall be highlighted and shall be immediately preceded by the following disclosure language [(printed) in outline form [as set forth herein) which shall also be highlighted].

This agreement contains a predispute arbitration clause. By signing an arbitration agreement, the parties agree as follows:

(A) [Arbitration is final and binding on the parties.] All parties to this agreement are giving up the right to sue each other in court, including the right to

a trial by jury, except as provided by the rules of the arbitration forum in which a claim is filed.

(B) [The parties are waiving their right to seek remedies in court, including the right to a jury trial.] Arbitration awards are generally final and binding; a party's ability to have a court reverse or modify an arbitration award is very limited.

(C) [Pre-arbitration discovery is generally more limited than and different from court proceedings.] The ability of the parties to obtain documents, witness statements and other discovery is generally more limited in arbitration than in court proceedings.

(D) [The arbitrators' award is not required to include factual findings or legal reasoning and any party's right to appeal or seek modification of rulings of the arbitrators is strictly limited.] The arbitrators do not have to explain the reason(s) for their award.

(E) The panel of arbitrators will typically include a minority of arbitrators who were or are affiliated with the securities industry.

(F) The rules of some arbitration forums may impose time limits for bringing a claim in arbitration. In some cases, a claim that is ineligible for arbitration may be brought in court.

(G) The rules of the arbitration forum in which the claim is filed, and any amendments thereto, shall be incorporated into this agreement.

(H) No choice-of-law provision contained in this agreement may limit the availability of punitive damages otherwise available under applicable state law and the rules of the arbitration forum.

(I) In some arbitration forums, where applicable state law permits the recovery of punitive damages, customers may not be able to obtain punitive damages equal to more than twice compensatory damages, or \$750,000, whichever is less, unless the parties agree to a greater amount.

(2) (A) [Immediately preceding the signature line,] In any agreement containing a predispute arbitration agreement, there shall be a highlighted statement [which shall be highlighted] that states that the agreement contains a predispute arbitration clause. The statement shall also indicate at what page and paragraph the arbitration clause is located.

(B) At the time of signing, a copy of the agreement containing any such clause shall be given to the customer who shall acknowledge receipt thereof on the agreement or on a separate document.

(3) [A copy of the agreement containing any such clause shall be given to the customer who shall acknowledge receipt thereof on the agreement or on a separate document.]

(A) A member shall provide a customer with a copy of any predispute arbitration clause or customer agreement executed between the customer and the member, or inform the customer that the member does not have a copy thereof, within ten business days of receipt of the customer's request.

(B) Upon request by a customer, a member shall provide the customer with the names of, and information on how to contact or obtain the rules of, all arbitration forums in which a claim may be filed under the agreement.

(4) [No agreement shall include any condition which limits or contradicts the rules of any self-regulatory organization or limits the ability of a party to file any claim in arbitration or limits the ability of the arbitrators to make any award.]

(A) Except as otherwise provided by this Rule, no predispute arbitration agreement shall include any condition that:

(i) limits or contradicts the rules of any self-regulatory organization (except for limits on punitive damages that are consistent with NASD rules);

(ii) limits the ability of a party to file any claim in arbitration or to file any claim in court that could otherwise be filed under the rules of the forums in which a claim may be filed under the agreement;

(iii) limits the ability of arbitrators to make any award that would otherwise be available under the rules of the arbitration forum.

(B) No member may seek to enforce any limitation on the recovery of punitive damages unless the limitation is consistent with the rules of the arbitration forum where the claim is heard.

(C) No member may seek to enforce any choice-of-law provision unless there is a significant contact or relationship between the law selected and (i) the transaction at issue or (ii) between the law selected and one or more of the parties.

(5) [The requirements of subparagraph (1) through (4) shall apply only to new agreements signed by an existing or new customer of a member after September 7, 1989.] If a customer files a complaint in court against a member that contains claims that are subject to arbitration pursuant to a predispute arbitration agreement between the member and the customer, the member may seek to compel arbitration of the claims that are subject to arbitration. If the member seeks to compel arbitration of such claims, the member must agree to arbitrate all of the claims contained in the complaint if the customer so requests.

(6) All agreements shall include a statement that A No person shall bring a putative or certified class action to arbitration, nor seek to enforce any predispute arbitration agreement against any person who has initiated in court a putative class action; or who is a member of a putative class action who has not opted out of the class with respect to any claims encompassed by the putative class action until: (i) the class certification is denied; or (ii) the class is decertified; or (iii) the customer is excluded from the class by the court. Such forbearance to enforce an agreement to arbitrate shall not constitute a waiver of any rights under this agreement except to the extent stated herein.”

(7) [The requirements of subparagraph (6) shall apply only to new agreements signed by an existing or new customer of a member after October 28, 1993.] The provisions of this Rule shall become effective 120 days after it is approved. The provisions of subparagraph (3) shall apply to all members as of the effective date of this Rule regardless of when the customer agreement in question was executed.

* * *

(b) Not applicable.

(c) Not applicable.

2. Procedures of the Self-Regulatory Organization

(a) The proposed rule change was approved by the Board of Directors of NASD Regulation at its meeting on August 6, 1998, which authorized the filing of the rule change with the SEC. The Nasdaq Stock Market has been provided an opportunity to consult with respect to the proposed rule change, pursuant to the Plan of Allocation and Delegation of Functions by the NASD to its Subsidiaries. The NASD Board of Governors had an opportunity to review the proposed rule change at its meeting on August 6, 1998. No other action by the NASD is necessary for the filing of the proposed rule change. Section 1(a)(ii) of Article VII of the NASD By-Laws permits the NASD Board of Governors to adopt amendments to NASD Rules without recourse to the membership for approval.

The NASD will announce the effective date of the proposed rule change in a Notice to Members to be published no later than 60 days following Commission approval. The effective date will be 120 days following publication of the Notice to Members announcing Commission approval.

(b) Questions regarding this rule filing may be directed to Laura Leedy Gansler, Attorney, NASD Regulation, Office of General Counsel, at (202) 728-8275.

3. Self-Regulatory Organization's Statement of the Purpose of, and Statutory Basis for, the Proposed Rule Change

(a) Purpose

The purpose of the proposed rule change is threefold: to require additional disclosure in predispute arbitration agreements regarding the arbitration process, including possible limits on eligibility of claims and availability of punitive damages; to require member firms to provide

certain information regarding arbitration and predispute arbitration agreements to customers upon request; and to clarify the rule regarding use of choice-of-law provisions in predispute arbitration agreements.

Background

Many broker-dealers require that customers seeking to open accounts, particularly margin and option accounts or accounts with a checking or money market feature, agree in writing to arbitrate disputes concerning the account, typically in an SRO-sponsored forum. These agreements, called “predispute arbitration agreements,” are generally part of the non-negotiated customer agreement drafted by the firm.

To ensure that customers are advised about what they are agreeing to when they sign predispute arbitration agreements, Conduct Rule 3110(f) requires that such agreements contain highlighted disclosure about the differences between arbitration and litigation, including notice that by agreeing to arbitrate their disputes, customers may be waiving certain rights that would be available in court. Rule 3110(f) also requires that the agreement itself be highlighted, and that a copy of the agreement be given to the customer and acknowledged by the customer in writing.

Despite these precautions, investor representatives have expressed concern that many customers who sign predispute arbitration agreements still do not adequately understand what they are agreeing to. For example, some predispute arbitration agreements contain “choice-of-law” provisions that specify that the law of a certain state will govern disputes arising out of the agreement. In some cases, the member knows that the law of the chosen state may limit the ability of a customer to bring a claim or obtain an award, but the customer would not be aware of these restrictions from the face of the agreement. By signing an agreement that contained a choice-of-law provision, a customer might inadvertently waive certain rights and remedies.

Customers' perceptions of unfairness are heightened by the fact that, when customers must sign predispute arbitration agreements in order to open accounts, their participation in SRO-sponsored arbitration may be involuntary.

Consequently, in its 1996 report, Securities Arbitration Reform: Report of the Arbitration Policy Task Force to the Board of Governors, National Association of Securities Dealers, Inc. ("Task Force Report"), the Arbitration Task Force, chaired by David Ruder (formerly Chairman of the SEC and a former NASD Board member), recommended that members be required to provide more disclosure about arbitration to customers who sign predispute arbitration agreements, and that the use of certain provisions that limit rights and remedies be restricted.

Moreover, the NASD noted in its rule filings concerning the proposed eligibility and punitive damages rules that the NASD would amend Rule 3110(f) to require disclosure of the limitations contained in those rules. The proposed punitive damages and eligibility rules are currently pending approval at the SEC.

Proposed Amendments

Required Disclosure and Notice of Possible Restrictions on Eligibility and Punitive Damages

Currently, paragraph (f)(1) of Rule 3110 mandates certain disclosure language about the differences between litigation and arbitration that must be included in predispute arbitration agreements. The proposed amendments would simplify the existing language in some existing provisions, and would add new provisions.

Two of the most significant new provisions concern notice of possible limits in some arbitration forums on the time for bringing claims and the availability of punitive damages. Paragraph (f)(1)(F) would require disclosure that the rules of some arbitration forums may impose

time limits for bringing claims in arbitration, and that, in some cases, claims that are ineligible for arbitration may be brought in court. This provision is intended to give notice to customers of the NASD's proposed eligibility rule, as well as the rules in other forums. In addition, new paragraph (f)(1)(I) would state that, in some arbitration forums, punitive damages might be capped at the lesser of twice compensatory damages or \$750,000, unless the parties agree to a greater amount, and paragraph (f)(1)(H) would state that no choice-of-law provision in the agreement may limit the availability of punitive damages obtainable under the rules of the arbitration forum and applicable state law.

Applicability of Disclosure Requirements to New and Existing Account Agreements

Members would be required to add the new disclosure requirements to all new customer account agreements containing predispute arbitration agreements as of the effective date of the rule. The proposed rule does not require members to modify existing agreements with current customers.

Incorporation of Arbitration Forum Rules

Paragraph (f)(1)(G) would provide that the rules of the arbitration forum in which a claim is brought, and any amendments thereto, shall be incorporated into the agreement. The purpose of this provision is to ensure that the rules of a forum apply to cases brought in that forum, and to avoid having to execute new agreements each time a forum changes its rules. For example, if a customer filed a complaint in an NASD Regulation arbitration forum, the NASD's arbitration rules would apply in all respects to the agreement.

Requirement That Members Provide Copies of Customer Agreements and Information Regarding Arbitration Forums to Customers Upon Request

In some cases, customers have complained that they have not been able to obtain copies of

the predispute arbitration agreements they have signed from members in a timely manner, and that they had unequal access to information about the respective rules of the arbitration forums in which claims may be filed under a given agreement. Under the proposed amendments, paragraph (f)(3)(A) would require that, within ten days of receiving a request, members must provide a customer with a copy of any predispute arbitration agreement clause or agreement that the customer has signed, or inform the customer that the member does not have a copy of the agreement. In addition, paragraph (f)(3)(B) would require that, upon request of a customer, a member must provide the customer with the names of, and information on how to contact or obtain the rules of, all arbitration forums in which a claim may be filed under the agreement.

Restrictions on Provisions that Limit Rights and Remedies

Much of the criticism of predispute arbitration agreements has focused on the use of choice-of-law provisions. A choice-of-law provision specifies that the law of a certain state will govern disputes arising out of an agreement. In some cases, the law of a state might limit the availability of certain remedies, such as punitive damages, or the ability of a customer to bring a claim. For example, previously under New York law, courts could award punitive damages, but arbitrators could not. A customer who agreed to arbitrate disputes under New York law could inadvertently forfeit the ability to obtain punitive damages that might have been available in court. (New York law on this subject has begun to shift in favor of arbitrators being able to award punitive damages.) Customers have argued that it is unfair for members to include provisions in predispute arbitration agreements that limit the availability of remedies, particularly when the effects of the provisions are not explained in the agreement.

Currently, Rule 3110(f) prohibits any choice-of-law provision that limits or contradicts the rules of any self-regulatory organization, or that limits the ability of a party to file any claim in

arbitration or of arbitrators to make any award. However, the application of this provision has not always been consistent or clear, particularly concerning punitive damages. In addition, some investors have expressed concern that choice-of-law provisions select arbitrary jurisdictions that have no relationship to the customer or the transaction at issue.

To address these concerns, paragraph (f)(4) of the Rule would be amended to clarify that the prohibition against provisions that limit rights or remedies applies to provisions that attempt to limit punitive damages (beyond the NASD cap if it is approved) or to circumvent the eligibility rule. The amended rule would also state that no choice-of-law provision will be enforceable unless there is a significant contact or relationship between the law selected and the transaction at issue or the parties. This is consistent with the provisions of the proposed punitive damages rule, which states that arbitrators will apply the punitive damages standards of conduct of the state in which the requesting party is a citizen at the time the claim is filed, even if the parties signed a choice-of-law agreement that specifies the law of a different state. Agreements could still include choice of law provisions that would apply to issues other than punitive damages as long as the required nexus existed between the law selected and the customer or the transaction.

Non-Bifurcation Provision

The NASD's proposed eligibility rule contains certain provisions intended to prevent customers from having to bifurcate their claims, that is, from being forced to litigate their claims in two forums (court and arbitration) at the same time.¹ NASD Regulation also stated in the eligibility rule filing that it would amend Rule 3110(f) to include a provision prohibiting members

¹ Under the proposed eligibility rule, if the Director of Arbitration rules that the claims contained in a complaint are ineligible for arbitration because they are based on occurrences or events that took place more than six years before the complaint was filed, the customer may file the complaint in court. If the Director rules that some of the transactions are eligible for arbitration, the customer has the option either to pursue the eligible claims in arbitration and the ineligible claims in court, or to pursue both the eligible and ineligible claims in court.

from seeking to compel arbitration of some but not all of a customer's court-filed claims, in order to prevent members from forcing customers to litigate in two forums when they filed a complaint in court that contained both eligible and ineligible claims. Therefore, NASD Regulation is proposing to add a new paragraph (f)(5) to Rule 3110(f) that would require members seeking to compel arbitration of claims filed in court to agree to arbitrate all of the claims contained in the court-filed complaint, even if some of the claims would be ineligible for arbitration under the eligibility rule. The purpose of these provisions in the eligibility rule and Rule 3110(f) is to give the customer control over whether claims are bifurcated.

Effective Date Provisions

Paragraph (f)(6) would be amended to state that the provisions of the rule would become effective 120 days after the rule is approved. This is intended to provide firms adequate time to amend their customer agreement forms. The provisions of paragraph (f)(3) requiring the provision of predispute arbitration agreements and information about arbitration forums would apply upon the effective date regardless of when the agreement in question was executed.

Restriction of Rule to Customer Account Agreements

Some members of the NASD's National Arbitration and Mediation Committee ("NAMC") expressed concern that the rule, which currently applies to all predispute arbitration clauses in any agreement between member firms and customers, could be construed to apply to agreements between a member firm and large institutional clients with whom they had face-to-face negotiations over the terms of the agreement. In particular, firms were concerned that they would not be permitted to negotiate different punitive damages provisions with institutional clients. To address this concern, the rule would be amended to clarify that it only applies to customer accounts and not to other agreements between member firms and large institutional clients with

whom they had negotiated contract terms.

(b) Statutory Basis

NASD Regulation believes that the proposed rule change is consistent with the provisions of Section 15A(b)(6) of the Act, which requires, among other things, that the Association's rules must be designed to prevent fraudulent and manipulative acts and practices, to promote just and equitable principles of trade, and, in general, to protect investors and the public interest. The NASD believes that the proposed amendments to Rule 3110(f) will serve the public interest by providing customers with more complete information about the arbitration process.

4. Self-Regulatory Organization's Statement on Burden on Competition

NASD Regulation does not believe that the proposed rule change will result in any burden on competition that is not necessary or appropriate in furtherance of the purposes of the Act, as amended.

5. Self-Regulatory Organization's Statement on Comments on the Proposed Rule Change Received from Members, Participants, or Others

Written comments were neither solicited nor received.

6. Extension of Time Period for Commission Action

NASD Regulation does not consent at this time to an extension of the time period for Commission action specified in Section 19(b)(2) of the Act.

7. Basis for Summary Effectiveness Pursuant to Section 19(b)(3) or for Accelerated Effectiveness Pursuant to Section 19(b)(2)

Not applicable.

8. Proposed Rule Change Based on Rules of Another Self-Regulatory Organization or of the Commission

Not applicable.

9. Exhibit

1. Completed notice of proposed rule change for publication in the Federal Register.

Pursuant to the requirements of the Securities Exchange Act of 1934, NASD Regulation has duly caused this filing to be signed on its behalf by the undersigned thereunto duly authorized.

NASD REGULATION, INC.

BY: _____
Joan C. Conley, Secretary

Date: October 5, 1998

SECURITIES AND EXCHANGE COMMISSION
(Release No. 34- , File No. SR-NASD-98-74)

Self-Regulatory Organizations; Notice of Filing of Proposed Rule Change by National Association of Securities Dealers, Inc. Relating to Amendments to NASD Rule 3110(f) Governing Use of Predispute Arbitration Agreements with Customers

Pursuant to Section 19(b)(1) of the Securities Exchange Act of 1934 ("Act"), 15 U.S.C. 78s(b)(1), notice is hereby given that on , NASD Regulation, Inc. ("NASD Regulation") filed with the Securities and Exchange Commission ("SEC" or "Commission") the proposed rule change as described in Items I, II, and III below, which Items have been prepared by NASD Regulation. The Commission is publishing this notice to solicit comments on the proposed rule change from interested persons.

I. SELF-REGULATORY ORGANIZATION'S STATEMENT OF THE TERMS OF SUBSTANCE OF THE PROPOSED RULE CHANGE

NASD Regulation is proposing to amend Rule 3110(f) of the Rules of the National Association of Securities Dealers, Inc. ("NASD" or "Association"), to: require additional disclosure in predispute arbitration agreements regarding the arbitration process, including possible limits on eligibility of claims and availability of punitive damages; require member firms to provide certain information regarding arbitration and predispute arbitration agreements to customers upon request; and clarify the rule regarding use of choice of law provisions in predispute arbitration agreements. Below is the text of the proposed rule change. Proposed new language is in italics; proposed deletions are in brackets.

..*

RULES OF THE ASSOCIATION

3000. RESPONSIBILITIES RELATING TO ASSOCIATED PERSONS, EMPLOYERS, AND OTHERS' EMPLOYEES

3110. BOOKS AND RECORDS

(f) Requirements When Using Predispute Arbitration Agreements [With] for
Customer Accounts

(1) Any predispute arbitration agreement clause shall be highlighted and shall be immediately preceded by the following disclosure language [(printed] in outline form [as set forth herein) which shall also be highlighted].

This agreement contains a predispute arbitration clause. By signing an arbitration agreement, the parties agree as follows:

(A) [Arbitration is final and binding on the parties.] All parties to this agreement are giving up the right to sue each other in court, including the right to a trial by jury, except as provided by the rules of the arbitration forum in which a claim is filed.

(B) [The parties are waiving their right to seek remedies in court, including the right to a jury trial.] Arbitration awards are generally final and binding; a party's ability to have a court reverse or modify an arbitration award is very limited.

(C) [Pre-arbitration discovery is generally more limited than and different from court proceedings.] The ability of the parties to obtain documents, witness statements and other discovery is generally more limited in arbitration than in court proceedings.

(D) [The arbitrators' award is not required to include factual findings or legal reasoning and any party's right to appeal or seek modification of rulings of the arbitrators is strictly limited.] The arbitrators do not have to explain the reason(s) for their award.

(E) The panel of arbitrators will typically include a minority of arbitrators who were or are affiliated with the securities industry.

(F) The rules of some arbitration forums may impose time limits for bringing a claim in arbitration. In some cases, a claim that is ineligible for arbitration may be brought in court.

(G) The rules of the arbitration forum in which the claim is filed, and any amendments thereto, shall be incorporated into this agreement.

(H) No choice-of-law provision contained in this agreement may limit the availability of punitive damages otherwise available under applicable state law and the rules of the arbitration forum.

(I) In some arbitration forums, where applicable state law permits the recovery of punitive damages, customers may not be able to obtain punitive damages equal to more than twice compensatory damages, or \$750,000, whichever is less, unless the parties agree to a greater amount.

(2) (A) [Immediately preceding the signature line,] In any agreement containing a predispute arbitration agreement, there shall be a highlighted statement [which shall be highlighted] that states that the agreement contains a predispute arbitration clause. The statement shall also indicate at what page and paragraph the arbitration clause is located.

(B) At the time of signing, a copy of the agreement containing any such clause shall be given to the customer who shall acknowledge receipt thereof on the agreement or on a separate document.

(3) [A copy of the agreement containing any such clause shall be given to the customer who shall acknowledge receipt thereof on the agreement or on a separate document.]

(A) A member shall provide a customer with a copy of any predispute arbitration clause or customer agreement executed between the customer and the member, or inform the customer that the member does not have a copy thereof, within ten business days of receipt of the customer's request.

(B) Upon request by a customer, a member shall provide the customer with the names of, and information on how to contact or obtain the rules of, all arbitration forums in which a claim may be filed under the agreement.

(4) [No agreement shall include any condition which limits or contradicts the rules of any self-regulatory organization or limits the ability of a party to file any claim in arbitration or limits the ability of the arbitrators to make any award.]

(A) Except as otherwise provided by this Rule, no predispute arbitration agreement shall include any condition that:

(i) limits or contradicts the rules of any self-regulatory organization (except for limits on punitive damages that are consistent with NASD rules);

(ii) limits the ability of a party to file any claim in arbitration or to file any claim in court that could otherwise be filed under the rules of the forums in which a claim may be filed under the agreement;

(iii) limits the ability of arbitrators to make any award that would otherwise be available under the rules of the arbitration forum.

(B) No member may seek to enforce any limitation on the recovery of punitive damages unless the limitation is consistent with the rules of the arbitration forum where the claim is heard.

(C) No member may seek to enforce any choice-of-law provision unless there is a significant contact or relationship between the law selected and (i) the transaction at issue or (ii) between the law selected and one or more of the parties.

(5) [The requirements of subparagraphs (1) through (4) shall apply only to new agreements signed by an existing or new customer of a member after September 7, 1989.]
If a customer files a complaint in court against a member that contains claims that are subject to arbitration pursuant to a predispute arbitration agreement between the member and the customer, the member may seek to compel arbitration of the claims that are subject to arbitration. If the member seeks to compel arbitration of such claims, the member must agree to arbitrate all of the claims contained in the complaint if the customer so requests.

(6) All agreements shall include a statement that A No person shall bring a putative or certified class action to arbitration, nor seek to enforce any predispute arbitration agreement against any person who has initiated in court a putative class action; or who is a member of a putative class action who has not opted out of the class with

respect to any claims encompassed by the putative class action until: (i) the class certification is denied; or (ii) the class is decertified; or (iii) the customer is excluded from the class by the court. Such forbearance to enforce an agreement to arbitrate shall not constitute a waiver of any rights under this agreement except to the extent stated herein.”

(7) [The requirements of subparagraph (6) shall apply only to new agreements signed by an existing or new customer of a member after October 28, 1993.] The provisions of this Rule shall become effective 120 days after it is approved. The provisions of subparagraph (3) shall apply to all members as of the effective date of this Rule regardless of when the customer agreement in question was executed.

* * *

II. SELF-REGULATORY ORGANIZATION'S STATEMENT OF THE PURPOSE OF, AND STATUTORY BASIS FOR, THE PROPOSED RULE CHANGE

In its filing with the Commission, NASD Regulation included statements concerning the purpose of and basis for the proposed rule change and discussed any comments it received on the proposed rule change. The text of these statements may be examined at the places specified in Item IV below. NASD Regulation has prepared summaries, set forth in Sections (A), (B), and (C) below, of the most significant aspects of such statements.

(A) Self-Regulatory Organization's Statement of the Purpose of, and Statutory Basis for, the Proposed Rule Change

Purpose

The purpose of the proposed rule change is threefold: to require additional disclosure in predispute arbitration agreements regarding the arbitration process, including possible limits on eligibility of claims and availability of punitive damages; to require member firms to provide certain information regarding arbitration and predispute arbitration agreements to customers upon

request; and to clarify the rule regarding use of choice-of-law provisions in predispute arbitration agreements.

Background

Many broker-dealers require that customers seeking to open accounts, particularly margin and option accounts or accounts with a checking or money market feature, agree in writing to arbitrate disputes concerning the account, typically in an SRO-sponsored forum. These agreements, called “predispute arbitration agreements,” are generally part of the non-negotiated customer agreement drafted by the firm.

To ensure that customers are advised about what they are agreeing to when they sign predispute arbitration agreements, Conduct Rule 3110(f) requires that such agreements contain highlighted disclosure about the differences between arbitration and litigation, including notice that by agreeing to arbitrate their disputes, customers may be waiving certain rights that would be available in court. Rule 3110(f) also requires that the agreement itself be highlighted, and that a copy of the agreement be given to the customer and acknowledged by the customer in writing.

Despite these precautions, investor representatives have expressed concern that many customers who sign predispute arbitration agreements still do not adequately understand what they are agreeing to. For example, some predispute arbitration agreements contain “choice-of-law” provisions that specify that the law of a certain state will govern disputes arising out of the agreement. In some cases, the member knows that the law of the chosen state may limit the ability of a customer to bring a claim or obtain an award, but the customer would not be aware of these restrictions from the face of the agreement. By signing an agreement that contained a choice-of-law provision, a customer might inadvertently waive certain rights and remedies. Customers’ perceptions of unfairness are heightened by the fact that, when customers must sign

predispute arbitration agreements in order to open accounts, their participation in SRO-sponsored arbitration may be involuntary.

Consequently, in its 1996 report, Securities Arbitration Reform: Report of the Arbitration Policy Task Force to the Board of Governors, National Association of Securities Dealers, Inc. (“Task Force Report”), the Arbitration Task Force, chaired by David Ruder (formerly Chairman of the SEC and a former NASD Board member), recommended that members be required to provide more disclosure about arbitration to customers who sign predispute arbitration agreements, and that the use of certain provisions that limit rights and remedies be restricted.

Moreover, the NASD noted in its rule filings concerning the proposed eligibility and punitive damages rules that the NASD would amend Rule 3110(f) to require disclosure of the limitations contained in those rules. The proposed punitive damages and eligibility rules are currently pending approval at the SEC.

Proposed Amendments

Required Disclosure and Notice of Possible Restrictions on Eligibility and Punitive Damages

Currently, paragraph (f)(1) of Rule 3110 mandates certain disclosure language about the differences between litigation and arbitration that must be included in predispute arbitration agreements. The proposed amendments would simplify the existing language in some existing provisions, and would add new provisions.

Two of the most significant new provisions concern notice of possible limits in some arbitration forums on the time for bringing claims and the availability of punitive damages. Paragraph (f)(1)(F) would require disclosure that the rules of some arbitration forums may impose time limits for bringing claims in arbitration, and that, in some cases, claims that are ineligible for

arbitration may be brought in court. This provision is intended to give notice to customers of the NASD's proposed eligibility rule, as well as the rules in other forums. In addition, new paragraph (f)(1)(I) would state that, in some arbitration forums, punitive damages might be capped at the lesser of twice compensatory damages or \$750,000, unless the parties agree to a greater amount, and paragraph (f)(1)(H) would state that no choice-of-law provision in the agreement may limit the availability of punitive damages obtainable under the rules of the arbitration forum and applicable state law.

Applicability of Disclosure Requirements to New and Existing Account Agreements

Members would be required to add the new disclosure requirements to all new customer account agreements containing predispute arbitration agreements as of the effective date of the rule. The proposed rule does not require members to modify existing agreements with current customers.

Incorporation of Arbitration Forum Rules

Paragraph (f)(1)(G) would provide that the rules of the arbitration forum in which a claim is brought, and any amendments thereto, shall be incorporated into the agreement. The purpose of this provision is to ensure that the rules of a forum apply to cases brought in that forum, and to avoid having to execute new agreements each time a forum changes its rules. For example, if a customer filed a complaint in an NASD Regulation arbitration forum, the NASD's arbitration rules would apply in all respects to the agreement.

Requirement That Members Provide Copies of Customer Agreements and Information Regarding Arbitration Forums to Customers Upon Request

In some cases, customers have complained that they have not been able to obtain copies of the predispute arbitration agreements they have signed from members in a timely manner, and

that they had unequal access to information about the respective rules of the arbitration forums in which claims may be filed under a given agreement. Under the proposed amendments, paragraph (f)(3)(A) would require that, within ten days of receiving a request, members must provide a customer with a copy of any predispute arbitration agreement clause or agreement that the customer had signed, or inform the customer that the member does not have a copy of the agreement. In addition, paragraph (f)(3)(B) would require that, upon request of a customer, a member must provide the customer with the names of, and information on how to contact or obtain the rules of, all arbitration forums in which a claim may be filed under the agreement.

Restrictions on Provisions that Limit Rights and Remedies

Much of the criticism of predispute arbitration agreements has focused on the use of choice-of-law provisions. A choice-of-law provision specifies that the law of a certain state will govern disputes arising out of an agreement. In some cases, the law of a state might limit the availability of certain remedies, such as punitive damages, or the ability of a customer to bring a claim. For example, previously under New York law, courts could award punitive damages, but arbitrators could not. A customer who agreed to arbitrate disputes under New York law could inadvertently forfeit the ability to obtain punitive damages that might have been available in court. (New York law on this subject has begun to shift in favor of arbitrators being able to award punitive damages.) Customers have argued that it is unfair for members to include provisions in predispute arbitration agreements that limit the availability of remedies, particularly when the effects of the provisions are not explained in the agreement.

Currently, Rule 3110(f) prohibits any choice-of-law provision that limits or contradicts the rules of any self-regulatory organization, or that limits the ability of a party to file any claim in arbitration or of arbitrators to make any award. However, the application of this provision has

not always been consistent or clear, particularly concerning punitive damages. In addition, some investors have expressed concern that choice-of-law provisions select arbitrary jurisdictions that have no relationship to the customer or the transaction at issue.

To address these concerns, paragraph (f)(4) of the Rule would be amended to clarify that the prohibition against provisions that limit rights or remedies applies to provisions that attempt to limit punitive damages (beyond the NASD cap if it is approved) or to circumvent the eligibility rule. The amended rule would also state that no choice-of-law provision will be enforceable unless there is a significant contact or relationship between the law selected and the transaction at issue or the parties. This is consistent with the provisions of the proposed punitive damages rule, which states that arbitrators will apply the punitive damages standards of conduct of the state in which the requesting party is a citizen at the time the claim is filed, even if the parties signed a choice-of-law agreement that specifies the law of a different state. Agreements could still include choice of law provisions that would apply to issues other than punitive damages as long as the required nexus existed between the law selected and the customer or the transaction.

Non-Bifurcation Provision

The NASD's proposed eligibility rule contains certain provisions intended to prevent customers from having to bifurcate their claims, that is, from being forced to litigate their claims in two forums (court and arbitration) at the same time.¹ NASD Regulation also stated in the eligibility rule filing that it would amend Rule 3110(f) to include a provision prohibiting members from seeking to compel arbitration of some but not all of a customer's court-filed claims, in order

¹ Under the proposed eligibility rule, if the Director of Arbitration rules that the claims contained in a complaint are ineligible for arbitration because they are based on occurrences or events that took place more than six years before the complaint was filed, the customer may file the complaint in court. If the Director rules that some of the transactions are eligible for arbitration, the customer has the option either to pursue the eligible claims in arbitration and the ineligible claims in court, or to pursue both the eligible and ineligible claims in court.

to prevent members from forcing customers to litigate in two forums when they filed a complaint in court that contained both eligible and ineligible claims. Therefore, NASD Regulation is proposing to add a new paragraph (f)(5) to Rule 3110(f) that would require members seeking to compel arbitration of claims filed in court to agree to arbitrate all of the claims contained in the court-filed complaint, even if some of the claims would be ineligible for arbitration under the eligibility rule. The purpose of these provisions in the eligibility rule and Rule 3110(f) is to give the customer control over whether claims are bifurcated.

Effective Date Provisions

Paragraph (f)(6) would be amended to state that the provisions of the rule would become effective 120 days after the rule is approved. This is intended to provide firms adequate time to amend their customer agreement forms. The provisions of paragraph (f)(3) requiring the provision of predispute arbitration agreements and information about arbitration forums would apply upon the effective date regardless of when the agreement in question was executed.

Restriction of Rule to Customer Account Agreements

Some members of the NASD's National Arbitration and Mediation Committee ("NAMC") expressed concern that the rule, which currently applies to all predispute arbitration clauses in any agreement between member firms and customers, could be construed to apply to agreements between a member firm and large institutional clients with whom they had face-to-face negotiations over the terms of the agreement. In particular, firms were concerned that they would not be permitted to negotiate different punitive damages provisions with institutional clients. To address this concern, the rule would be amended to clarify that it only applies to customer accounts and not to other agreements between member firms and large institutional clients with whom they had negotiated contract terms.

Statutory Basis

NASD Regulation believes that the proposed rule change is consistent with the provisions of Section 15A(b)(6) of the Act, which requires, among other things, that the Association's rules must be designed to prevent fraudulent and manipulative acts and practices, to promote just and equitable principles of trade, and, in general, to protect investors and the public interest. The NASD believes that the proposed amendments to Rule 3110(f) will serve the public interest by providing customers with more complete information about the arbitration process.

(B) Self-Regulatory Organization's Statement on Burden on Competition

NASD Regulation does not believe that the proposed rule change will result in any burden on competition that is not necessary or appropriate in furtherance of the purposes of the Act, as amended.

(C) Self-Regulatory Organization's Statement on Comments on the Proposed Rule Change Received from Members, Participants, or Others

Written comments were neither solicited nor received.

III. DATE OF EFFECTIVENESS OF THE PROPOSED RULE CHANGE AND TIMING FOR COMMISSION ACTION

Within 35 days of the date of publication of this notice in the Federal Register or within such longer period (i) as the Commission may designate up to 90 days of such date if it finds such longer period to be appropriate and publishes its reasons for so finding or (ii) as to which the self-regulatory organization consents, the Commission will:

- A. by order approve such proposed rule change, or
- B. institute proceedings to determine whether the proposed rule change should be disapproved.

IV. SOLICITATION OF COMMENTS

Interested persons are invited to submit written data, views, and arguments concerning the foregoing. Persons making written submissions should file six copies thereof with the Secretary, Securities and Exchange Commission, 450 Fifth Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20549. Copies of the submission, all subsequent amendments, all written statements with respect to the proposed rule change that are filed with the Commission, and all written communications relating to the proposed rule change between the Commission and any person, other than those that may be withheld from the public in accordance with the provisions of 5 U.S.C. 552, will be available for inspection and copying in the Commission's Public Reference Room. Copies of such filing will also be available for inspection and copying at the principal office of the NASD. All submissions should refer to the file number in the caption above and should be submitted by [insert date 21 days from the date of publication].

For the Commission, by the Division of Market Regulation, pursuant to delegated authority, 17 CFR 200.30-3(a)(12).

Jonathan G. Katz
Secretary