



## Statement

# Statement of the Federal Housing Finance Agency on Certain Super-Priority Liens

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Today, the Federal Housing Finance Agency (FHFA) is alerting homeowners, financial institutions, and state authorities of the agency's concerns with state-level actions that threaten the first-lien status of single-family loan owned or guaranteed by Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac. In particular, FHFA is concerned about state actions to create super-priority liens in two instances: 1) through certain energy retrofit financing programs structured as tax assessments and 2) through granting priority rights in foreclosure proceedings for homeowner associations. In issuing this statement, FHFA is acting in furtherance of its statutory obligations as regulator and conservator of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac.

The existence of these super-priority liens increases the risk of losses to taxpayers. Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, while operating in conservatorship, currently support the housing finance market by purchasing, guaranteeing, and securitizing single-family mortgages. One of the bedrock principles in this process is that the mortgages supported by Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac must remain in first-lien position, meaning that they have first priority in receiving the proceeds from selling a house in foreclosure. As a result, any lien from a loan added after origination should not be able to jump in line ahead of a Fannie Mae or Freddie Mac mortgage to collect the proceeds of the sale of a foreclosed property. However, as is detailed below, FHFA is concerned by some liens being advanced to "super-priority" status over Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac first-lien mortgages.

### Energy Retrofit Financing Programs Structured as Tax Assessments

While FHFA fully supports energy retrofit financing programs to allow homeowners to improve energy efficiency, these programs must be structured to ensure protection of the core financing for the home and, therefore, cannot undermine the first-lien status of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac mortgages. Some entities and localities are advancing the argument that single-family energy retrofit financing programs that are structured to make loans through the homeowner's property tax assessment and require that borrowers repay their loans as part of their property tax bill should have priority over all other loans, including pre-existing Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac

mortgages.<sup>1</sup> One such program is known as the Property Assessed Clean Energy (PACE) program, which often provides loans as first-liens and is offered in California and in some other states. Localities offering these PACE loans threaten to move existing Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac mortgages to a second lien position and increase the risk of loss to the Enterprises and, by extension, to taxpayers.

In issuing this statement, FHFA wants to make clear to homeowners, lenders, other financial institutions, state officials, and the public that Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac's policies prohibit the purchase of a mortgage where the property has a first-lien PACE loan attached to it. This restriction has two potential implications for borrowers. First, a homeowner with a first-lien PACE loan cannot refinance their existing mortgage with a Fannie Mae or Freddie Mac mortgage. Second, anyone wanting to buy a home that already has a first-lien PACE loan cannot use a Fannie Mae or Freddie Mac loan for the purchase. These restrictions may reduce the marketability of the house or require the homeowner to pay off the PACE loan before selling the house.

FHFA believes it is important for states and municipalities to understand these restrictions before continuing to offer the programs. Additionally, FHFA believes that borrowers should fully understand these restrictions prior to taking out a first-lien PACE loan.

In addition to aggressive enforcement of these existing policies, FHFA is continuing to explore other possible remedies and legal actions to protect the Enterprises' lien position in response to first-lien PACE programs.

#### Homeowner Association Priority Status

FHFA is aware that, in certain jurisdictions, liens for unpaid homeowner association ("HOA") dues may be deemed to be senior to preexisting mortgage liens on a homeowner's property. As a result, on December 5, 2014, FHFA and Fannie Mae filed an action in federal court in Nevada, seeking a determination that a HOA's foreclosure sale is invalid and contrary to federal law to the extent that it purports to extinguish Fannie Mae's property rights. *Federal National Mortgage Association v. SFR Investments Pool 1, LLC*, No. 2:14-cv-02046 (D. Nev. December 5, 2014). FHFA has also intervened in *Saticoy Bay, LLC Series 1702 Empire Mine v. Federal National Mortgage Assoc.*, No. 2:14-cv-01975 (D. Nev.), seeking a declaration that a prior HOA foreclosure sale is invalid to the extent that it purports to extinguish Fannie Mae's property interests.

These FHFA actions are based on federal law which precludes involuntary extinguishment of liens held by Fannie Mae or Freddie Mac while they are operating in conservatorships and bars holders of other liens, including HOAs, from taking any action that would extinguish a Fannie Mae or Freddie Mac lien, security interest or other property interest. Specifically, Title 12 USC Section 4617(j)(3) states that "[no] property of the Agency shall be subject to lev attachment, garnishment, foreclosure, or sale without the consent of the Agency, nor shall any involuntary lien attach to the property of the Agency." FHFA is authorized, as conservator, to bring this suit because Enterprise lien interests in collateral constitute property protected by this provision.

FHFA has an obligation to protect Fannie Mae's and Freddie Mac's rights, and will aggressively do so by bringing actions to void foreclosures that purport to extinguish Enterprise property interests in a manner that contravenes federal law.

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1 PACE financing programs can be structured as secondary liens that stand behind the original mortgage and do not threaten the priority status of Enterprise loans.

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The Federal Housing Finance Agency regulates Fannie Mae, Freddie Mac and the 12 Federal Home Loan Banks. These government-sponsored enterprises provide more than \$5.6 trillion in funding for the U.S. mortgage markets and financial institutions.

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