Robin Prager

Robin Prager: Good morning everyone.

Robin Prager: I'd like to begin by adding my own welcome to those of Joseph, Sandy, and Chairman Bernanke. It's really a pleasure for me to have the opportunity to be here today and participate in what I know will be a very interesting and productive meeting. Since joining the Federal Reserve Board 16 years ago, my work has focused primarily on issues relating to the structure of the financial services sector, the nature of competition both among banks, and between banks and other financial service providers, and factors affecting the performance of depository institutions. I have been particularly interested in understanding community banks and the special role they play in our financial system providing loans and other financial services to small businesses within their local communities.

About two years ago, the director of the Research Division asked me to become more involved in analyzing and providing policy support on small business finance issues. I gladly accepted this responsibility having no clue that the availability of credit to small businesses or the lack thereof, was about to become one of the hottest topics of discussion and debate in Washington. Economists and policymakers understanding of the credit conditions facing small businesses, is based largely on data collected in regulatory reports, and in surveys conducted by a number of different entities including private sector firms, trade associations and government agencies. These reports and surveys can be extremely valuable as they provide an opportunity to gather information from a large number of market participants in a systematic and statistically sound way.

However, as Chairman Bernanke noted a moment ago there are limits to what we can learn from these sources, supplementing the report and survey data with a kind of detailed, case specific information provided by participants in the series of meetings hosted by the Federal Reserve System over the last several months allows us to develop a much more complete and nuanced understanding of small business credit conditions. In some cases the stories we've heard at the meetings corroborated what we had already been seeing in the data. In other cases the meetings brought to light issues or problems of which we would not otherwise have been aware. This outcome is not surprising and it is indicative of the complementary nature of these alternative methods for acquiring information.

It is my hope that some of the issues that have been raised by participants in the systems small business meetings will help to shape the questions asked in future small business credit surveys. With that in mind, I would like to kick off today's discussion by briefly summarizing what some of the latest survey data suggests regarding the current state of credit conditions for small businesses, and highlighting some of the findings from the system's small business meetings. Overall, the survey data seemed to suggest that current economic conditions for small businesses though still quite challenging, are less dire than they were in 2009. The Federal Reserve's April

2010 Senior Loan Officer Opinion Survey (SLOOS), indicated that standards on CNI loans to small businesses were essentially unchanged in the first quarter, but that the terms on such loans most notably premiums on loans to riskier borrowers tightened somewhat. This first slide shows the trends over time for the net percent of respondents reporting tightening of standards, the blue line, increasing spreads, the green line, and increasing premiums on riskier loans to small businesses, the red line. As you can see, all of these indicators have been trending downward for several quarters. In addition, as shown in the next slide although a significant number of domestic banks continued to tighten standards on commercial real estate CRE loans, the net percent doing so has declined sharply since its peak in the fourth quarter of 2008.

At the same time modest net percentages of banks reported that demand for CNI loans from small firms, the blue line, and demand for CRE loans, the green line, had continued to weaken over the prior three months, though these percentages were well below those seen over the past few quarters. In sum, the SLOOS data suggests that both supply constraints and weakening demand have contributed to the decline in outstanding bank loans to small businesses mentioned by Chairman Bernanke earlier; but at the rate of deterioration in these metrics has diminished markedly in recent months.

Turning next to the National Federation of Independent Business or NFIBs small business economic trends, the May 2010 data show an increase in the index of small business optimism to a level which though still somewhat weak, is the highest it has been since the fall of 2008. Among the 36% of firms reporting that they had borrowing needs over the three months prior to the survey, slightly more than one-fifth; that is 8% of all firms indicated that their needs had not been satisfied. And for those firms that obtained short term loans in early 2010, the interest rates paid were on average fairly low by historical standards. The May NFIB data also indicate that only 3% of respondents cited financing in interest rates as their single most important problem, the green line on this graph, compared with 30% citing weak sales, the blue line. When considering these data I think it's important to recognize that even though a very small percentage of firms cite financing as their single most important problems, there are likely many more firms from which financing presents a significant challenge. The takeaway message from the NFIB survey seems to be that for America's small businesses, the worst is over but the road ahead is likely to be difficult.

Another source of information regarding credit market conditions for businesses is the Duke University CFO magazine Orderly Global Business Outlook Survey. The most recent survey concluded last month and generated responses from about 1100 CFO's, more than 500 of whom were from the U.S. Overall, the survey suggests that business conditions in the U.S. are improving but at a very slow rate. U.S. CFOs responding to the survey reported no net change in borrowing conditions compared with the fall of 2009. Among small firms those with fewer than 500 employees, a modest net percent reported a worsening of borrowing conditions over the same period. In addition, just over one-third of all CFOs and an identical fraction of small firm

CFOs reported that their company had restricted capital spending below the desired level over the past year due to funding difficulties.

Now, I would like to switch gears and talk about some of the things we learned from the Federal Reserve systems series from more than 40 small business meetings across the country. Both small businesses and banks reported that a variety of factors have contributed to a contraction in the supply of credit to small businesses. Meeting participants generally acknowledged that underwriting standards have tightened relative to those that have prevailed prior to the recession. The specific forms of tightening that were mentioned most often included stronger collateral requirements, greater attention to cash flow and higher personal credit thresholds for business owners. A key question that remains unanswered is whether this tightening represents a return to normal underwriting standards following a period of easy money, or whether the pendulum has swung too far leading too excessively high standards that are constraining the ability of creditworthy borrowers to obtain the funding they need to grow their businesses.

Much attention has focused recently on the effects of capital constraints on the ability of banks to meet loan demand, and the need to devise policies that can help alleviate those constraints. However, meeting participants reported that labor constraints are also an important factor. A number of banks noted that their experienced staff members including loan officers have been stretched very thin spending much of their time dealing with problem loans and trying to keep up with regulatory changes.

As a result, senior bank employees have had less time available for processing loan applications and some banks have become less willing to engage in the labor intensive activity of making small loans to smaller less sophisticated businesses. Some small businesses noted that credit availability has been particularly constrained in areas that have experienced bank failures. This is an issue that a colleague and I have been concerned about since mid 2008 when the number of bank failures began to rise precipitously. We have been tracking the geographic areas affected by bank failures. This map shows the number of failed institutions with a branch presence in each state over the period from July 1, 2008 through March 31, 2010. A few states, Georgia, Florida, Illinois and California, stand out as having been particularly hard hit. Zooming in to a more local level, it is clear that within each of these states, failures have been concentrated in a small number of metropolitan areas. The potential impact of bank failures on the availability of credit to firms in these global areas is particularly worrisome.

A number of bankers participating in the meetings stated that increased regulatory scrutiny of small business loans and uncertainty surrounding assumptions used in classifying assets have limited their ability to lend. And several bankers indicated that concerns about regulators responses have led them to be extremely cautious about lending to small businesses that have good prospects but are tainted by less than perfect credit, a recent history of uneven cash flow or reduced collateral values. To address these issues and others related to small business lending, the Federal Reserve and other financial institution regulatory agencies issued a policy statement in February 2010 supporting prudent lending to small business borrowers. The picture emerging from our meetings regarding demand for small business loans is somewhat mixed. On the one hand, some small businesses and banks reported that demand for small business credit has declined. They indicated that many small firms see little reason to borrow because weak sales, declining asset values and uncertainty about near term business prospects have caused them to postpone any plans they may have had for capital expenditures, inventory buildup or expansion of operations.

On the other hand many credit unions and community development financial institutions noted an increase in demand for small business loans, and many small businesses reported having difficulty obtaining or renewing credit. Reductions in lines of credit combined with declining sales have left some small businesses struggling to meet intermediate term financing needs. Many small businesses are finding it difficult to refinance their loans especially those associated with commercial real estate. Firms requiring small dollar loans less than 200,000 dollars for having trouble finding lenders willing to participate in this relatively high cost market segment. And financing for startups is virtually impossible to obtain.

These brief summaries of both the survey data and the stories heard in more than 40 meetings held across the country over the past few months though far from complete, illustrates a value of obtaining information about credit market conditions from a variety of different sources. As Joseph indicated earlier our goals for today are to address the key themes and issues that emerge from the systems series of meetings and to consider next steps for addressing the financing needs of small businesses. We are quite fortunate to have a very distinguished group of speakers and panelists to guide us through this process. These individuals bring a wide range of expertise and diverse viewpoints to the questions at hand. I personally am looking forward to hearing what all of them have to say. Thank you.