

Fed won't raise rates before mid-2013, and is prepared to ease further

The data: The Federal Reserve announced today that economic conditions “are likely to warrant exceptionally low levels for the federal funds rate at least through mid-2013.” Voting against this were Richard Fisher, Narayana Kocherlakota, and Charles Plosser, “who would have preferred to continue to describe economic conditions as likely to warrant exceptionally low levels for the federal funds rate for an extended period.” In addition, the Fed pledged to “maintain its existing policy of reinvesting principal payments from its securities holdings.” Finally, the “Committee discussed the range of policy tools available to promote a stronger economic recovery in a context of price stability” and pledged that it “is prepared to employ these tools as appropriate.”

Interpretation & outlook: The Fed, like most other market participants, has been surprised by the latest weakening of the US economy. According to the statement “economic growth so far this year has been considerably slower than the Committee had expected. [...] Moreover, downside risks to the economic outlook have increased.” That led the FOMC to make two important changes in the statement’s language: First, the Fed provided a more explicit time frame for how long it intends to keep its target rate at 0-¼%. Accordingly it won’t start raising rates before mid-2013. Previously the Fed had only said that it would keep interest rates low for “an extended period”. The idea is that such a change “would presumably lower longer-term rates by an amount related to the revision in policy expectations.”¹ We do not think, however, that this step does much to alter economic or financial conditions, because markets had already postponed their rate hike expectations to late 2012/early 2013, and long-term rates are currently at historically low levels. Moreover, this commitment reduces the Fed’s flexibility; probably the main reason why three FOMC members voted against this move. The second important change was that the statement explicitly mentioned that the Committee “is prepared to employ [...] tools [available to promote a stronger economic recovery] as appropriate.” So far the Fed only pledged that “it will act as needed”. The important buzzword here is “prepared”. To show why, we have a look back at 2010:

- August 10, 2010 (FOMC statement): “The Committee [...] will employ its policy tools as necessary”
- August 27, 2010 (Chairman Bernanke in Jackson Hole): “The Committee is prepared to provide additional monetary accommodation ...”²
- September 21, 2010 (FOMC statement): “The Committee [...] is prepared to provide additional accommodation ...”
- November 4, 2011 (FOMC statement): “The Committee intends to purchase a further \$600 billion of longer-term Treasury securities.”

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¹ Bernanke, B., *Monetary Policy Objectives and Tools in a Low-Inflation Environment*, speech in Boston, October 15, 2010.

² Bernanke, B., *The Economic Outlook and Monetary Policy*, speech in Jackson Hole, August 27, 2010.

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That means that the buzzword “prepared” was introduced into the Fed language by Chairman Bernanke in Jackson Hole and reiterated in the statement of the September 21 FOMC meeting. One meeting later, the Fed announced QE2. This time, the US central bank even seems to be one step further than a year ago, as “prepared” was already used before the Jackson Hole meeting. The Fed is, therefore getting close to another round of monetary easing – despite today’s dissenters. Additional stimulus, however, does not necessarily imply another large-scale asset-purchase program (QE3). In his press conference after the June meeting, Chairman Bernanke laid out four ways the Fed could use to ease further, if needed: (i) Do more security purchases (QE3); (ii) cut the interest on excess reserves; (iii) structure the securities in different ways (extending the maturity structure of the holdings by selling short-term Treasuries and buying longer-term ones), or (iv) give guidance on the balance sheet (saying how long the Fed intends to wait until it starts selling its asset holdings).³ We think the Chairman might once again use the Jackson Hole conference (August 26, 10ET) to explain in more detail, which of the easing options he and the other FOMC members prefer in the current environment. Stay tuned.

³ See: *What options does the Fed have?*, Economic Flash, August 8, 2011.

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