

Guide to US Federal Estate Tax



US Federal Estate Tax

US Federal Estate Tax can arise in Irish estates, even if the level of US assets held is relatively modest.

The US levies Federal Estate Tax on all of the assets of the deceased if he was a US citizen, or held a US passport or green card on the date of death (once the value of the estate exceeds a set threshold; US\$11,580,000 for individuals in 2020).

Other persons come within the charge to US tax if they hold assets located in the US (such as shares in US multinationals) with a value of US\$60,000 or more.

In recent years an increasing number of Irish estates have had to deal with US Estate Tax simply because the deceased held US shares, either because he worked for a US company and received employee shares, or because a US company was regarded as a good investment. In many such cases the deceased would have been unaware of any US tax exposure.

Unlike Ireland, the US does not allow spouse relief in all cases. If US assets pass from a US citizen to a spouse who is not a US citizen relief will not be available. If both spouses are US citizens an exemption will apply.

Ireland US Double Taxation Agreement

Ireland and the United States have a Double Taxation Agreement ("DTA") which is one of the older agreements, having come into force just over 60 years ago (on 20 December 1951).

The DTA covers inheritance tax (but does not apply to gift tax), and it covers US Federal Estate Tax. It does not apply to any estate tax that may be levied by individual States in the US.

Under the DTA the taxable status of an asset depends on its location (or situs). If an asset is located in Ireland it is primarily taxable in Ireland, and the US will give a credit for the

Irish tax paid on that asset. If the asset is located in the United States then tax will be primarily payable in the US and the Irish Revenue will allow a credit for the US tax paid.

The DTA contains a specialised set of rules to determine the situs of assets, and the taxing rights of Ireland and the US (see the Revenue Situs Rules chart below). In general assets such as real property and shares are taxable in the country in which the asset is located or where the company is incorporated. Assets such as bank accounts are taxable in the jurisdiction in which the deceased was domiciled at the date of death.

In most cases when Irish estates have an exposure to US Federal Estate Tax, the tax arises on shares in US companies. Under the DTA such shares are deemed to be located in the US, giving the US primary taxing rights in regard to these assets.

Class of Property	Situs of Property for Taxation
Immovable property (such as land and houses)	Place it is located
Tangible moveable property (such as currency, negotiable bill of exchange, promissory notes)	Place where it is located at the time of death or, if in transit, at the place of destination
Debts due to the deceased, secured or unsecured (for example, bank accounts, mortgages, dividends, shares in Government or municipal corporations)	Place of domicile of the deceased at the time of death
Shares or stock in a corporation (except Governmental or municipal corporation)	Place where or under the law of which the corporation was created
Policies of insurance and assurance	Place of domicile of the deceased at the time of death
Ships and aircraft (includes shares of these)	Place of registration
Goodwill of business	Place where business carried on
Patents, trademarks and designs	Place of registration
Copyright, franchises and rights of licences to use any copyrighted material, patent, trademark or design	Place where the rights are exercisable
Rights or causes of action ex delicto surviving for the benefit of an estate of a decedent	Place where such rights or causes of action arose
Judgment debt	Place where judgment is recorded

In practice the registrar of a US company is unlikely to release the shares held by the deceased to the personal representative of the Estate without being provided with IRS Form 5173 (Estate Tax Closing Document). There is no set de minimus below which the registrar cannot request this form, and our experience is that Registrars of US companies will not release shares without prior clearance from the Inland Revenue Service (“IRS”).

In some cases banks in the US will seek a tax clearance certificate from the IRS in regard to US bank accounts. Under the Ireland US Double Taxation Treaty for Inheritance tax bank accounts are treated as being located in the State of domicile of the deceased (and this is reflected in the IRS Manual), so if the deceased was domiciled in Ireland the bank accounts are treated as an Irish asset.

Current Regime for US Federal Estate Tax

The current top rate of FET is 40%, with an estate exemption of US\$11,580,000 (in 2020) for US citizens and US\$60,000 for non resident aliens.

The administration of US Estate Tax returns can be a relatively slow process with average return processing time of up to a year.

FET in 2010

The tax rules brought into effect by the Bush Administration in 2001 expired in 2009 and US Federal Estate Tax lapsed for 2010. Special rules were introduced so the executors of an estate could elect for CGT treatment (i.e. taking a stepped up version of the deceased’s base cost which passes to the beneficiary) by 17 January 2012 or opt for paying Federal Estate Tax under new 2010 rules.

US Tax Compliance

The US Federal Estate Tax return and tax are normally due within 9 months of the date of death of the deceased. If a return is filed late, and/or the tax liability is paid late, interest and penalties will be charged by the IRS. Taxpayers can apply for a 6 month “pay and file” extension but this extension must be applied for within 9 months of the date of death. This extension will prevent the estate from penalties but interest will still be charged on the late payment of tax. If there are mitigating circumstances the IRS may consider some abatement of the interest and penalties.



FATCA

In 2012, Ireland entered into an information sharing agreement with the United States. The Intergovernmental Agreement is based on US legislation known as the “Foreign Account Tax Compliance Act” or “FATCA”.

The purpose of the Agreement is to enable the US government to identify US taxpayers who hold assets offshore. Once the offshore assets are identified, the IRS can crosscheck the tax returns for the individual to ascertain if US tax is being operated on income or gains arising from such assets.

From a federal estate tax perspective, there is no direct effect on the individuals who own the accounts but the IRS will be aware of the details of any relevant accounts.

Conclusion

It is worth noting that US Federal Estate Tax differs from Irish CAT due to the fact that it is a tax on estates rather than on beneficiaries.

Under the Irish CAT system the tax is payable by a beneficiary by reference to a valuation date which in many cases can arise over a year or more after the date of death.

In many cases the deadline for filing a US FET return will have passed by the time the Irish CAT return is filed, giving rise to an exposure to US interest and penalties. Estate practitioners should consider the US tax position when identifying the non-Irish assets in preparing the Inland Revenue Affidavit.

O’Hanlon Tax Limited provides a service of preparation and filing US Federal Estate Tax returns. For more information in regard to this service please contact OHT.

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Caveat: These notes are intended as a general guide to US Federal Estate Tax. OHT has endeavoured to provide an accurate commentary but the notes cannot cover all circumstances. OHT recommends that formal tax advice be obtained before any steps are taken that may have a tax effect.