

Greek banks face higher costs post-bailout as ECB ends waiver



Bloomberg/Athens

Greek lenders face higher financing costs after the European Central Bank said it will stop accepting the country's government debt as collateral from August 21, the day after the nation's bailout programme ends.

The ECB will remove a waiver exempting Greek bonds from a rule that all collateral must be investment grade. The exemption was conditional on Greece being compliant with an aid programme.

With Greek debt rated below investment grade by all rating companies, banks will have to replace as much as €3.5bn (\$4bn) of their liquidity with more expensive facilities, according to a person familiar with the matter.

The expectation is that lenders will turn to the interbank market and to the Greek central bank's Emergency Liquidity Assistance, the person said, asking not to be named because

the information is confidential. Greek ELA carries an interest rate 1.5 percentage points higher than the ECB's main refinancing rate, which is currently at zero.

"The Governing Council has decided that from 21 August 2018, the Eurosystem's standard criteria and credit quality thresholds should apply in respect of marketable debt instruments issued or fully guaranteed by the Hellenic Republic," an ECB statement said.

Greece is trying to stand on its own feet again after a decade of financial crises, more than €300bn in aid commitments from the euro area and International Monetary Fund. It remains Europe's most indebted country though, and the economy is still struggling to recover from losing more than a quarter of its output.

Yields on Greek bonds are rising again, with the 10-year note at about 4.2%, the highest since June 21 when euro-area finance ministers agreed on further debt-relief measures.

The ECB's waiver had been in place since June 2016. An earlier exemption was suspended in February 2015 when the newly elected government said it wouldn't meet the terms of the bailout program it inherited. The political wrangling that year almost saw Greece forced out of the currency bloc.

Bank of Greece governor Yannis Stournaras had repeatedly called for the government to apply for a precautionary credit line after the bailout. That could have allowed the waiver to be extended, and may have helped Greece gain access to the ECB's quantitative-easing programme.