

## Evaluation and Approval of Advisory Contract – May 2019

### **FEDERATED ABSOLUTE RETURN FUND (THE “FUND”)**

At its meetings in May 2019, the Fund’s Board of Trustees (the “Board”), including a majority of those Trustees who are not “interested persons” of the Fund, as defined in the Investment Company Act of 1940 (the “Independent Trustees”), reviewed and unanimously approved the continuation of the Fund’s investment advisory and subadvisory contracts for an additional one-year term. The Board’s decision regarding these contracts reflects the exercise of its business judgment after considering all of the information received on whether to continue the existing arrangements.

At the request of the Independent Trustees, the Fund’s Chief Compliance Officer (the CCO) furnished to the Board in advance of its May 2019 meetings an independent written evaluation presenting on the topics discussed below. The Board considered the CCO’s independent written evaluation (the “CCO Fee Evaluation Report”), along with other information, in evaluating the reasonableness of the Fund’s management fee and in deciding to approve the continuation of the investment advisory and subadvisory contracts. The CCO, in preparing the CCO Fee Evaluation Report, has the authority to retain consultants, experts or staff as reasonably necessary to assist in the performance of his duties, reports directly to the Board, and can be terminated only with the approval of a majority of the Independent Trustees. At the request of the Independent Trustees, the CCO Fee Evaluation Report followed the same general approach and covered the same topics as that of the report that had previously been delivered by the CCO in his capacity as “Senior Officer,” prior to the elimination of the Senior Officer position in December 2017.

The Board also considered judicial decisions concerning allegedly excessive investment advisory fees in making its decision. Using these judicial decisions as a guide, the Board observed that the following factors may be relevant to an adviser’s fiduciary duty with respect to its receipt of compensation from a fund: (1) the nature and quality of the services provided by an adviser to a fund and its shareholders (including the performance of the fund, its benchmark, and comparable funds); (2) an adviser’s cost of providing the services (including the profitability to an adviser of providing advisory services to a fund); (3) the extent to which an adviser may realize “economies of scale” as a fund grows larger and, if such economies of scale exist, whether they have been shared with a fund and its shareholders or the family of funds; (4) any “fall-out” financial benefits that accrue to an adviser because of its relationship with a fund (including research services received from brokers that execute fund trades and any fees paid to affiliates of an adviser for services rendered to a fund); (5) comparative fee and expense structures (including a comparison of fees paid to an adviser with those paid by similar funds both internally and externally as well as management fees charged to institutional and other advisory clients of the adviser for what might be viewed as like services); and (6) the extent of care, conscientiousness and independence with which the fund’s board members perform their duties and their expertise (including whether they are fully informed about all facts the board deems relevant to its consideration of an adviser’s services and fees). The Board noted that the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) disclosure requirements regarding the basis for the Board’s approval of the Fund’s investment advisory and subadvisory contracts generally align with the factors listed above. The Board was aware of these factors and was guided by them in its review of the Fund’s investment advisory and subadvisory contracts to the extent it considered them to be appropriate and relevant, as discussed further below.

The Board considered and weighed these factors in light of its substantial accumulated experience in governing the Fund and working with Federated Equity Management Company of Pennsylvania (the “Adviser”) and its affiliates (collectively, “Federated”) on matters relating to the funds advised by Federated (each, a “Federated Fund”). The Independent Trustees were assisted in their deliberations by independent legal counsel.

In addition to the extensive materials that comprise and accompany the CCO Fee Evaluation Report, the Board received detailed information about the Fund and the Federated organization throughout the year, and in connection with its May meetings at which the Board’s formal approval of the advisory and subadvisory contracts occurred. In this regard, Federated provided much of this information at each regular meeting of the Board, and furnished additional information specifically in connection with the May meetings. In the months preceding the May meetings, the Board requested and reviewed written materials prepared by Federated in response to requests on behalf of the Independent Trustees encompassing a wide variety of topics. At the May meetings, in addition to meeting in separate sessions of the Independent Trustees without management present, senior management of the Adviser also met with the Independent Trustees and their counsel to discuss the materials presented and such additional matters as the Independent Trustees deemed reasonably necessary to evaluate the advisory and subadvisory contracts. Between regularly scheduled meetings, the Board also received information on particular matters as the need arose.

The Board’s consideration of the investment advisory and subadvisory contracts included review of the CCO Fee Evaluation Report, accompanying data and additional information covering the following matters, among others: the Adviser’s and sub-adviser’s investment philosophy, revenue, profitability, personnel and processes; investment and operating strategies; the Fund’s short-term and long-term performance (in absolute terms, both on a gross basis and net of expenses, as well as in terms relative to its particular investment program and certain competitor or “peer group” funds and/or other benchmarks, as appropriate) and comments on the reasons for performance; the Fund’s investment objectives; the Fund’s

expenses, including the advisory fee and the overall expense structure of the Fund (both in absolute terms and relative to similar and/or competing funds), with due regard for contractual or voluntary expense limitations; the use and allocation of brokerage commissions derived from trading the Fund's portfolio securities (if any); and the nature, quality and extent of the advisory and other services provided to the Fund by the Adviser, subadviser and their affiliates. The Board also considered the preferences and expectations of Fund shareholders; the entrepreneurial and other risks assumed by the Adviser in sponsoring the Fund; the continuing state of competition in the mutual fund industry and market practices; the range of comparable fees for similar funds in the mutual fund industry; the Fund's relationship to the Federated Funds which include a comprehensive array of funds with different investment objectives, policies and strategies which are generally available for exchange without the incurrence of additional sales charges; compliance and audit reports concerning the Federated Funds and the Federated companies that service them (including communications from regulatory agencies), as well as Federated's responses to any issues raised therein; and relevant developments in the mutual fund industry and how the Federated Funds and/or Federated are responding to them. The Board's evaluation process is evolutionary. The criteria considered and the emphasis placed on relevant criteria change in recognition of changing circumstances in the mutual fund marketplace.

While mindful that courts have cautioned against giving too much weight to comparative information concerning fees charged by other advisers for managing funds with comparable investment programs, the Board has found the use of such comparisons to be relevant to its deliberations. In this regard, the Board was presented with, and considered, information regarding the contractual advisory fee rates, net advisory fee rates, total expense ratios and each element of the Fund's total expense ratio (i.e., gross and net advisory fees, custody fees, portfolio accounting fees and transfer agency fees) relative to an appropriate group of peer funds compiled by Federated using data supplied by independent fund ranking organizations (the "Peer Group"). The Board received a description of the composition and methodology used to select the Peer Group. The Board focused on comparisons with other similar mutual funds more heavily than non-mutual fund products or services because it is believed that they are more relevant. For example, other mutual funds are the products most like the Fund, in that they are readily available to Fund shareholders as alternative investment vehicles. Also, they are the type of investment vehicle, in fact, chosen and maintained by the Fund's investors. The range of their fees and expenses, therefore, appears to be a relevant indicator of what consumers have found to be reasonable in the marketplace in which the Fund competes.

The Board reviewed the contractual advisory fee rate, net advisory fee rate and other expenses of the Fund and noted the position of the Fund's fee rates relative to its Peer Group. In this regard, the Board noted that the contractual advisory fee rate was below the median of the relevant Peer Group and the Board was satisfied that the overall expense structure of the Fund remained competitive.

For comparison, the CCO reviewed the fees charged by Federated for providing advisory services to products other than the Federated Funds (e.g., institutional separate accounts and third-party unaffiliated mutual funds for which Federated serves as sub-adviser) (referenced to as "Comparable Funds/Accounts"). With respect to Comparable Funds/Accounts other than third-party mutual funds, the CCO concluded that they are inherently different products. Those differences include, but are not limited to, different types of targeted investors; different applicable laws and regulations; different legal structures; different average account sizes and portfolio management techniques made necessary by different cash flows and different associated costs; and the time spent by portfolio managers and their teams, as well as personnel in the Funds Financial Services, Legal, Compliance and Risk Management departments, in reviewing securities pricing, addressing different administrative responsibilities, addressing different degrees of risk associated with management and a variety of different costs. The CCO also reviewed the differences in the nature of the services required for Federated to manage its proprietary mutual fund business versus managing a discrete pool of assets as a sub-adviser to another institution's mutual fund, and that Federated generally performs significant additional services and assumes substantially greater risks in managing the Fund and other Federated Funds than in its role as sub-adviser to an unaffiliated third-party mutual fund. The CCO did not consider the fees for providing advisory services to Comparable Funds/Accounts to be determinative in judging the appropriateness of the Federated Funds' advisory fees.

Following such evaluation, and full deliberations, the Board concluded that the fees and expenses of the Fund are reasonable and supported renewal of the Fund's investment advisory and subadvisory contracts.

The Board considered the nature, extent and quality of the services provided to the Fund by the Adviser and the resources of the Adviser and its affiliates dedicated to the Fund. In this regard, the Board evaluated, among other things, the Adviser's personnel, experience, track record, financial resources, overall reputation and willingness to invest in personnel and infrastructure that benefit the Fund. In addition, the Board reviewed the qualifications, backgrounds and responsibilities of the portfolio management team primarily responsible for the day-to-day management of the Fund and the Adviser's ability and experience in attracting and retaining qualified personnel to service the Fund. The Board noted the investment research and company engagement capabilities of the Adviser and its affiliates. The Board also noted the compliance program of the Adviser and the compliance-related resources provided to the Fund by the Adviser, including the Adviser's commitment to respond to rulemaking initiatives of the SEC. The Fund's ability to deliver competitive performance when compared to its

Peer Group was also deemed to be relevant by the Board as a useful indicator of how the Adviser is executing the Fund's investment program. The Adviser's ability to execute this program was one of the Board's considerations in reaching a conclusion that the nature, extent and quality of the Adviser's investment management services warrant the continuation of the investment advisory and subadvisory contracts.

In evaluating the Fund's investment performance, the Board considered performance results in light of the Fund's investment objective, strategies and risks, as disclosed in the Fund's prospectus. The Board considered detailed investment reports on the Fund's performance that were provided to the Board throughout the year and in connection with the May meetings. The CCO also reviewed information regarding the performance of other mutual funds in the Peer Group, noting the CCO's view that comparisons to fund peer groups may be helpful, though not conclusive, in evaluating the performance of the Adviser in managing the Fund. The Board considered, in evaluating such comparisons, that in some cases there may be differences in the funds' objectives or investment management techniques, or the costs to implement the funds, even within the same Peer Group.

The Fund's performance fell below the median of the relevant Peer Group for the one-year, three-year and five-year periods covered by the CCO Fee Evaluation Report. The Board discussed the Fund's performance with the Adviser and recognized the efforts being taken by the Adviser in the context of other factors considered relevant by the Board.

Following such evaluation, and full deliberations, the Board concluded that the performance of the Fund supported renewal of the Fund's investment advisory and subadvisory contracts.

The Board also received financial information about Federated, including information regarding the compensation and ancillary (or "fall-out") benefits Federated derived from its relationships with the Federated Funds. This information covered not only the fees under the investment advisory contracts, but also fees received by Federated's subsidiaries for providing other services to the Federated Funds under separate contracts (e.g., for serving as the Federated funds' administrator and distributor). In this regard, the Board considered that certain Federated subsidiaries provide distribution and shareholder services to the Federated Funds, for which they may be compensated through distribution and servicing fees paid pursuant to Rule 12b-1 plans or otherwise. The information also detailed any indirect benefit Federated may derive from its receipt of research services from brokers who execute Federated Fund trades. In addition, the Board considered the fact that, in order for a Federated fund to be competitive in the marketplace, the Adviser and its affiliates frequently waived fees and/or reimbursed expenses and have disclosed to Federated Fund investors and/or indicated to the Board their intention to do so in the future. Moreover, the Board receives regular reporting as to the institution, adjustment or elimination of these voluntary waivers.

The Board considered Federated's previous reductions in contractual management fees to certain Federated Funds in response to the CCO's recommendations in the prior year's CCO Fee Evaluation Report.

Federated furnished information, requested by the CCO, that reported revenues on a fund-by-fund basis and made estimates of the allocation of expenses on a fund-by-fund basis, using allocation methodologies specified by the CCO. The CCO noted that, while these cost allocation reports apply consistent allocation processes, the inherent difficulties in allocating costs continues to cause the CCO to question the precision of the process and to conclude that such reports may be unreliable, since a single change in an allocation estimate may dramatically alter the resulting estimate of cost and/or profitability of a Federated Fund and may produce unintended consequences. The allocation information, including the CCO's view that fund-by-fund estimations may be unreliable, was considered in the evaluation by the Board.

The Board and the CCO also reviewed information compiled by Federated comparing its profitability information to other publicly held fund management companies, including information regarding profitability trends over time. In this regard, the CCO concluded that Federated's profit margins did not appear to be excessive. The CCO also noted that Federated appeared financially sound, with the resources necessary to fulfill its obligations under its contracts with the Fund.

The CCO Fee Evaluation Report also discussed the notion of possible realization of "economies of scale" as a fund grows larger, the difficulties of calculating economies of scale at an individual fund level, and the extent to which potential scale benefits are shared with shareholders. In this regard, the Board considered that Federated has made significant and long-term investments in areas that support all of the Federated Funds, such as personnel and processes for the portfolio management, shareholder services, compliance, internal audit and risk management functions, as well as systems technology (including technology relating to cybersecurity) and that the benefits of these investments (as well as any economies of scale, should they exist) were likely to be shared with the Federated Fund family as a whole. The Board noted that Federated's investments in these areas are extensive. In addition, the Board considered that the Adviser and its affiliates have frequently waived fees and/or reimbursed expenses and that this has allowed potential economies of scale to be shared with shareholders. The Board also considered that such waivers and reimbursements can provide protection from an increase in expenses if a Federated Fund's assets decline. Federated, as it does throughout the year, and specifically in connection with the Board's review of the advisory and subadvisory contracts, furnished information relative to revenue sharing or adviser-paid fees. Federated and the CCO noted that this information should be viewed to determine if there was an incentive to either not apply breakpoints, or to apply breakpoints at higher levels, and should not be viewed to determine the

appropriateness of advisory fees. The Board also noted the absence of any applicable regulatory or industry guidelines on this subject, which (as discussed in the CCO Fee Evaluation Report) is compounded by the lack of any common industry practice or general pattern with respect to structuring fund advisory fees with “breakpoints” that serve to reduce the fee as a fund attains a certain size.

The CCO stated that his observations and the information accompanying the CCO Fee Evaluation Report supported a finding by the Board that the management fee for the Fund was reasonable. Under these circumstances, no changes were recommended to, and no objection was raised to the continuation of, the Fund’s investment advisory and subadvisory contracts. The CCO also recognized that the Board’s evaluation of the Federated Funds’ advisory and subadvisory arrangements is a continuing and on-going process that is informed by the information that the Board requests and receives from management throughout the course of the year and, in this regard, the CCO noted certain items for future reporting to the Board or further consideration by management as the Board continues its on-going oversight of the Federated Funds.

In its decision to continue an existing investment advisory contract, the Board was mindful of the potential disruptions of the Fund’s operations and various risks, uncertainties and other effects that could occur as a result of a decision to terminate or not renew an investment advisory contract. In particular, the Board recognized that many shareholders have invested in the Fund on the strength of the Adviser’s industry standing and reputation and with the expectation that the Adviser will have a continuing role in providing advisory services to the Fund. Thus, the Board’s approval of the investment advisory contract reflected the fact that it is the shareholders who have effectively selected the Adviser by virtue of having invested in the Fund. The Board concluded that, in light of the factors summarized above, including the nature, quality and scope of the services provided to the Fund by the Adviser and its affiliates, continuation of the investment advisory and subadvisory contracts were appropriate.

The Board based its decision to approve the investment advisory and subadvisory contracts on the totality of the circumstances and relevant factors and with a view to past and future long-term considerations. Not all of the factors and considerations identified above were necessarily relevant to the Fund, nor did the Board consider any one of them to be determinative. With respect to the factors that were relevant, the Board’s decision to approve the continuation of the contract reflects its view that Federated’s performance and actions provided a satisfactory basis to support the decision to continue the existing arrangements.