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ONE HUNDRED SEVENTH CONGRESS

# Congress of the United States

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May 22, 2002

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The Honorable John E. Potter  
Postmaster General and CEO  
United States Postal Service  
475 L'Enfant Plaza, SW  
Washington, DC 20060

Dear Mr. Postmaster General:

Just over six months ago, at least four letters containing anthrax spores led to eleven confirmed cases of inhalation anthrax and five deaths. Twenty-three postal facilities were contaminated, two facilities remain closed today, and about 1.8 million pieces of mail required decontamination. More than 8,000 postal employees were offered antibiotics for their own protection. Throughout this devastating ordeal, hundreds of thousands of postal employees stayed on the job, proving their determination to maintain the mail system and protect our nation's culture and economy.

As part of our oversight of the Postal Service response, we requested that the General Accounting Office evaluate options available to the Postal Service for enhancing the security of the mail. We are writing to share the results of the first GAO report on this subject, "Diffuse Security Threats: Technologies for Mail Sanitization Exist, But Challenges Remain."

The report focuses on irradiation technology. Soon after the anthrax attacks, the Postal Service made arrangements for an E-beam facility in Lima, Ohio, to irradiate mail potentially contaminated with anthrax. The use of irradiation was then expanded to cover all mail to certain government zip codes. USPS also signed contracts to purchase eight additional irradiation machines for installation in postal facilities. This was the first application of irradiation technology to sanitize mail.

At one point last year, the Postal Service was actively considering the idea of irradiating a large fraction of the nation's mail every day. It is now clear that such an enormous undertaking is not imminent. On March 6, the Postal Service released its Emergency Preparedness Plan, which described numerous present and future technologies and set a general framework to assure mail security over the next decade. The report indicated that unanswered questions about the deployment of irradiation technology need to be resolved before any additional purchases of

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irradiation equipment are contemplated. It also suggested that mail irradiation may be just a small part of the long-term strategy to enhance mail security. Other approaches include strategies to reduce the anonymity of the mail, detect threats quickly, and minimize the harm of any exposure.


At our request, GAO has examined the technological premises and logistical hurdles to mail irradiation in the U.S. Postal System. GAO interviewed postal officials and industry experts, reviewed technical literature, and visited existing irradiation facilities. Key findings of the report include:


- Irradiation of the mail can kill anthrax spores.
- Two available technologies for irradiation have different benefits and drawbacks. E-beam technology is efficient but cannot penetrate large parcels. X-ray technology penetrates much further, but wastes considerable energy in the process.
- The installation of irradiation technology in postal centers will require extensive planning, training, interaction with regulatory authorities, and environmental safeguards.
- Irradiation can affect the contents of mail. For example, irradiation can kill plants, alter drugs, destroy lab samples, and render film unusable.
- Equipment and related costs for irradiating mail nationwide could cost up to \$4.2 billion over a ten-year period. This estimate does not include all costs of adapting the Postal Service's processes to such large-scale irradiation.
- Based on these concerns and others, the Postal Service needs to conduct a thorough assessment of the benefits, risks, logistics, and costs of mail irradiation before purchasing additional equipment.

In general, GAO concurs with the Postal Service's decision to study irradiation technology more thoroughly before making any additional purchases. As the Postal Service moves ahead in its security plan, we hope that this and other GAO studies prove helpful to informing your efforts.

Over the coming months, we look forward to working with the Postal Service to enhance mail security.

Sincerely,

  
Henry A. Waxman  
Ranking Minority Member

  
Danny K. Davis  
Ranking Minority Member  
Subcommittee on Civil Service,  
Census and Agency Organization