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November 20, 2001

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The Honorable David M. Walker
Comptroller General
U.S. General Accounting Office
441 G St, NW
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Walker:

We are writing to request that the General Accounting Office convene a conference in December to examine how process or system changes in the operations of the Postal Service could enhance the security of the mail.

We have been working together to assist the Postal Service as it develops its plan to improve the security of the mail. The challenge facing the Postal Service is large: it must develop a plan to safeguard the mail at the same time that it tries to respond to the recent anthrax attacks and to cope with the precipitous drop in postal revenues triggered by the attacks. We believe GAO's involvement could make a significant contribution to the development of a sound plan by the Postal Service.

At our request, the National Academy of Sciences convened a panel of experts on November 14 to examine one important aspect of this issue: the irradiation technology being considered by the Postal Service to sanitize the mail. This conference was extremely helpful. It provided a forum for the Postal Service to receive advice from leading experts about some of the technological hurdles that the Postal Service faces in using irradiation technologies to secure the mail.

There is another important aspect of this issue that needs additional attention. This is the role that process or system changes could play in improving the security of the mail. There are a wide range of changes in postal operations that could potentially increase security. For example, we understand that prior to September 11, the Postal Service had begun investigating systems to improve the tracking of parcels, such as the use of bar codes that contain information identifying the shipper. With some adaptations, these systems may be able to enhance security by eliminating (or significantly reducing) the anonymity of the mailer. Likewise, we are aware of proposals to require the use of "smart stamps" that could be tracked through the mail. Such "smart stamps" could identify the buyer of the stamp, which would also eliminate the anonymity of the sender.

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There are several potential advantages to these process or system changes. Some of them may be easier and faster to implement (and involve fewer technological challenges) than mail irradiation. Even if they are not able to eliminate the need for irradiation technologies, they may be able to significantly reduce the quantity of mail needing irradiation. Perhaps most important, they may also contribute to the efficiency and quality of postal operations. The secondary effects of irradiation technologies appear to be mostly negative, such as increased delays and adverse impacts on some types of mail contents. In contrast, the secondary effects of process and system changes appear to be mainly positive, offering the Postal Service the possibility of modernizing and transforming its operations while simultaneously increasing security.

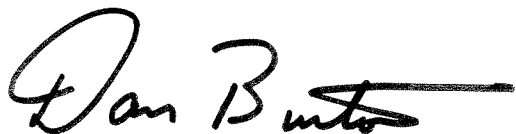
We believe GAO could play an essential role in helping the Postal Service evaluate process and system changes in improving mail security. For this reason, we ask that GAO convene an immediate conference with appropriate experts in postal operations. The purpose of the conference should be to provide advice to the Postal Service and the committees that oversee it about the role that process and system changes should play in a plan to improve mail security.

We also urge you to work with the National Academy of Sciences in planning and conducting this conference. The postal technology conference held by the Academy on November 14 could be an appropriate model for the conference on postal operations. In addition, the Academy may be able to help you identify relevant experts.

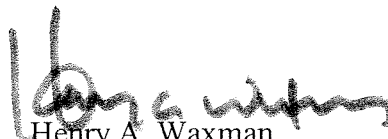
The Postal Service is facing an immediate crisis in responding to the threat of bioterrorist attacks through the mails. For this reason, we request that the GAO conference be scheduled as expeditiously as possible. Ideally, the conference would be convened sometime during the week of December 3.

We look forward to discussing these issues with you in greater detail.

Sincerely,



Dan Burton
Chairman



Henry A. Waxman
Ranking Minority Member