

March 22, 2002

PATRICK R. DONAHOE
CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER AND
EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT

SUBJECT: Transmittal of Draft Management Advisory – Fact-Finding Review of
Actions and Decisions by Postal Service Management at the South Jersey
Processing and Distribution Center (Report Number LH-MA-02-004)

At your request,¹ we reviewed the actions taken and decisions made by Postal Service management during the anthrax contamination testing at the South Jersey Processing and Distribution Center in Bellmawr, New Jersey. The attached briefing report and timeline of events present the results of our fact-finding review (Project Number 02YG008LH001), which we discussed with you on February 28, 2002. Our objective, scope, and methodology are discussed in Appendix A.

Because there are no recommendations in this report, a written response is not necessary. We briefed the chief operating officer on the results of the review and he chose not to provide any written comments.

We appreciate the cooperation and courtesies provided by your staff during the review. If you wish to schedule an exit conference or have any questions, please contact Chris Nicoloff, director, Labor Management, at 214-775-9114, or me at (703) 248-2300.

Ronald K. Stith
Assistant Inspector General
for Core Operations

Attachment

¹Based on your December 10, 2001, letter to Congress, which was a follow-up letter to the November 16, 2001, congressional request to the postmaster general.

cc: Richard J. Strasser, Jr.
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Fact-Finding Review of Actions and Decisions by Postal Service Management at the South Jersey Processing and Distribution Center



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OVERALL CONCLUSION

Despite two key decisions based on verbal and preliminary information, the Postal Service effectively responded to the crisis at the South Jersey facility



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KEY FACTS

- October 31, 2001: Facility closed based on suspected case of anthrax
- November 2, 2001: Facility opened based on negative preliminary test results
- November 3, 2001: Wrong mail processing machine was decontaminated based on verbal notification of anthrax contamination
 - Facility was not closed
 - Employees offered work in another Postal Service facility or administrative leave



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KEY FACTS (Continued)

- November 6, 2001: Facility and district managers received written test results from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the correct machine was decontaminated



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CAUSE OF FACILITY BEING OPENED BASED ON PRELIMINARY NEGATIVE TEST RESULTS

- Verbal miscommunication
- Lack of Postal Service guidelines regarding (1) the requirement for written test results and (2) when a facility should be opened or closed
- National chaos and crisis



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CAUSE OF WRONG MACHINE GETTING DECONTAMINATED

- Verbal miscommunication
- Lack of Postal Service guidelines regarding the requirement for written test results
- National chaos and crisis



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CORRECTIVE ACTIONS

**Postal Service implemented new guidelines in
December 2001:**

- Requiring written communication of test
results from health experts to Postal Service
officials**
- Outlining decision-making responsibilities
and authority for closing facilities based on
bio-hazard threat**



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CONCLUSION

Postal Service effectively responded to the crisis:

- No employees were infected with anthrax**
- Communication to employees and unions was timely**
- Postal Service guidelines should prevent future decisions based on verbal and preliminary information**

Time Line of Events October 31 - November 8, 2001, and as of February 26, 2002

Ref.	Date	Event
A	October 31 Wednesday	Based on a suspected case of anthrax the South Jersey District manager closed the Postal Service facility.
B	November 1 Thursday	Anthrax testing conducted in the closed Postal Service facility.
C	November 2 Friday	Postal Service facility reopened based on preliminary negative test results.
D	November 3 Saturday	Postal Service verbally notified anthrax found, decontamination completed.
E	November 6 Tuesday	Postal Service realizes based on test results wrong area decontaminated, correct decontamination conducted.
F	November 6 Tuesday	Postal Service unions advise facility employees to take administrative leave because of misinformation about facility.
G	November 7 Wednesday	U.S. District Court issues order closing facility based on union allegation of unsafe work place.
H	November 8 Thursday	U.S. District Court dismisses case and facility reopened.
I	February 26 Tuesday	Postal Service facility, is negative for anthrax since November 6, 2001. Postal Service cost related to anthrax is \$982,430.

Sequence of Events at the South Jersey Processing and Distribution Center

- (A) On October 31, 2001, based on a suspected case of anthrax and discussions with health experts, the South Jersey District manager closed the South Jersey facility to expedite sampling/testing after an employee tested positive for anthrax antibodies. On this same day, employees and union representatives were informed about the suspected case of cutaneous anthrax and that the facility would be closed as a precautionary measure. The employees and union representatives were also informed that the Federal Bureau of Investigation would be testing the facility and that a medical unit would be available if employees wanted to be tested.
- (B) On November 1, 2001, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services, and a Postal Service contractor completed anthrax testing.
- (C) On November 2, 2001, a Federal Bureau of Investigation agent telephoned a Postal Inspector on the Interagency Anti-Terrorist Task Force with the Federal Bureau of Investigation and said preliminary test results indicated anthrax was not present in the facility. This Postal Inspector called the assistant inspector in charge who verbally provided this information to the district manager that same day, who in turn reopened the facility. The district manager made his decision after consulting with health officials.

- (D) The assistant inspector in charge told us that on November 3, 2001, a different agent with the Federal Bureau of Investigation telephoned him with information that anthrax contamination was found near the area where the employee who had tested positive for anthrax antibodies worked. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation agent this was generally the information provided and they were waiting for the Inspection Service to contact them for specific details. However, the Postal Inspector did not contact the Federal Bureau of Investigation because he believed the initial information was detailed enough. On the same day, the Postal Inspector verbally relayed the information to the district manager, who cordoned off the area around the machine thought to have been contaminated. Shortly thereafter, a Postal Service contractor decontaminated the machine. According to the district manager, his decision to leave the facility open was based on guidance from health experts.

The area was cordoned off around the contaminated machine and employees were allowed to take administrative leave or work at another Postal Service facility. Also on November 3, 2001, the remaining New Jersey Laboratory test results from samples taken October 31, 2001, through November 1, 2001, were negative.

- (E) On November 6, 2001, an official with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention was at the facility to assess the quality of anthrax sampling. This official provided the state laboratory test results to the district manager and the South Jersey facility's manager of distribution operations. After reviewing the results, the manager of distribution operations recognized the wrong machine was decontaminated on November 3, 2001. District officials immediately had the contractor return to the facility to decontaminate the correct machine. The area around the contaminated machine was cordoned off, and employees on duty were brought to the administrative offices and informed of the situation. They were asked to remain there until they received clearance to return to work.
- (F) Also on November 6, 2001, the local American Postal Workers Union and the National Postal Mail Handlers Union representatives published a memorandum and advised employees to submit requests for administrative leave because they believed the facility was unsafe to work in due to misinformation provided by law enforcement.
- (G) On November 7, 2001, the New Jersey United States District Court closed the South Jersey facility based on a complaint filed by the American Postal Workers Union, contending that the potential for anthrax infection violated the workers' right to a safe working environment. During this closing, Postal Service employees worked in other New Jersey Postal Service facilities.
- (H) On November 8, 2001, the New Jersey United States District Court dismissed the case, and the facility reopened because an agreement was reached between the

American Postal Workers Union and the Postal Service to conduct precautionary testing for anthrax at the facility.

- (I) As of February 26, 2002, no evidence of anthrax has been found at this facility, and according to a South Jersey District official, the closing, testing, and decontamination activities at the facility cost the Postal Service about \$982,430.

Cause of Events

During this timeframe the Postal Service, law enforcement, and health agencies were challenged with responding to the threat of anthrax at multiple locations. This caused chaos, crisis, and communication problems. In addition, the Postal Service had inadequate guidelines concerning how to respond to the threat of anthrax in Postal Service facilities. Critical information was verbally communicated which we believe resulted in decisions that would have been different had the information been documented.

Corrective Actions

Since this series of events at the South Jersey facility, the Postal Service has implemented guidelines,² which address the issues in this report. Specifically, the guidelines discuss when and who decides that a facility should be closed or if an area should be cordoned off; and how information, such as positive anthrax test results, should be communicated. The guidelines do not, however, discuss when or who decides that a facility should be reopened. According to a Postal Service official, the decision to reopen a facility is made by Postal Service Headquarters' officials, in consultation with health experts.

Conclusions

We acknowledge in this crisis situation the Postal Service was able to successfully decontaminate the machine identified as testing positive for anthrax. As of February 2002, the Postal Service has expended approximately \$1 million for the closing, testing, and decontamination of the South Jersey facility.

We recognize the anxiety this situation caused employees at the facility. However, we have concluded that the actions taken by the Postal Inspection Service, Postal Service management, law enforcement, and health agencies were made with the intent of ensuring the safety and health of Postal Service employees and the public. Specifically, management communicated events to employees in a timely manner, employees were allowed to remain in the facility, work in other facilities, or take administrative leave. In

²The Interim Guidelines for Sampling, Analysis, Decontamination, and Disposal of Anthrax for U.S. Postal Service Facilities, dated December 4, 2001.

addition, employees were offered medical testing. Based on these actions by Postal Service management and discussions with union officials we could not determine any measurable harm had occurred. We also believe that the Postal Service's implemented interim guidelines should prevent a similar situation from occurring.

APPENDIX A

OBJECTIVE, SCOPE, AND METHODOLOGY

Our overall objective was to determine the facts surrounding the sampling and decontamination activities at the South Jersey Processing and Distribution Center. Specifically, to determine the chain of events that resulted in (1) the wrong machine being decontaminated, and (2) the two closings of the facility.

To accomplish our objective, we interviewed managers, supervisors, and employees at the South New Jersey Processing and Distribution Center in Bellmawr, New Jersey, to document the facts surrounding the sampling and decontamination activities at the facility. We also interviewed officials with the Postal Inspection Service, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, to determine their roles in the decontamination activities.

To understand the requirements for decontaminating Postal Service facilities and to evaluate the adequacy of the contractor's decontamination activities, we interviewed officials with the contractor—IT Group, Postal Inspection Service, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and New Jersey State Health Department.

We also reviewed court documents, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention publications, Postal Service guidelines, laboratory results, United States Code regulations, New Jersey State Law, and union memorandums to accomplish our objectives. We conducted our fact-finding review from December 2001 to March 2002.