May 26, 2015

The Honorable Robert Taub
Chairman, Postal Regulatory Commission
901 New York Avenue NW, Suite 200
Washington, D.C. 20268

Dear Chairman Taub:

As the United States Postal Service (USPS) works to increase the accuracy of its mail tracking system through the use of digital tools, we remain concerned about the significant delays to rural delivery service and the accuracy of the Postal Service’s reported rural mail delivery times. Ensuring timeliness and measuring accuracy are critically important but are limited by a lack of digital mail monitoring in rural facilities. Therefore, we urge the Postal Regulatory Commission (PRC) to study the availability of digital mail tracking services in rural areas and examine the three different categories of all market-dominant mail classes in order to understand to what degree the Postal Service’s updated delivery standards are actually being met in rural America.

The Postal Service plays a key role in the lives of many families throughout Montana, North Dakota, and rural America. For generations, these rural communities have relied on the timeliness and predictability of their mail service -- not only to receive post cards and letters, but also to get their newspapers, pay their bills, and receive their prescription medications. Degradation of this service severely impacts these citizens’ way of life, and there is already evidence that delivery is being delayed. An October 2014 Government Accountability Office report (GAO-14-828R) found that revised delivery standards have increased delivery time for some First-Class Mail and periodicals, “notably by reducing mail with a 1-day standard.” For businesses and organizations that rely on timely service -- such as news publications, pharmacies and state and local governments -- delayed delivery means increased costs.

The study we are requesting would require the PRC to report on the three different categories of rural mail delivery of all market-dominant classes, including: mail service between two rural communities when at least one mail processing operation is required, origin-entered mail from urban areas to rural communities, and origin-entered mail from rural communities to an urban area that is not directly served by the nearest mail processing plant. The Postal Service should have the measurement tools in place to capture this data, particularly through the use of tracking via 3-digit zip code areas and of first and last-mile delivery times. These reports should be made public semi-annually.
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While conducting this study, it is important that the PRC examine whether each rural post office or processing center is equipped with the necessary tracking equipment to accurately measure delivery standards. Given that the Postal Service is requesting replacements for its current service measurement systems, we believe this study would provide both an adequate measure of its current capabilities and identify weaknesses within the system that need to be addressed in any upgrade effort.

Recent changes to USPS delivery standards coupled with processing plant closures and consolidations have had a devastating impact on the quality of service in rural America. The vast distances each piece of mail must travel between its first-mile to its last has been significantly lengthened. We will continue to push for a return to the July 1, 2012 delivery standards, and firmly believe that the continued closure and consolidation of mail processing plants across the country hinders letter carriers’ ability to ensure timely delivery. This diminishes the Postal Service’s competitiveness and relevancy in a twenty-first century business environment.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter. We appreciate your consideration of this request and look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Jon Tester  
U.S. Senator

Heidi Heitkamp  
U.S. Senator