

Your Postal Podcast 34th Edition Transcript

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Richard Watkins: Welcome to Your Postal Podcast. This is Richard Watkins of the Postal Service's Western Area Corporate Communications Center. In this edition, we'll learn about some tumbling obstacles to mail delivery; and a sheriff's posse with an annual obligation to deliver the mail, and we'll also provide you with a look at the latest news about upcoming changes for the Postal Service.

Tumble Weed Segment

Watkins: They're spherical and they're thorny -- and on one cold and windy February day in Arizona -- they were a thorn in the side for a carrier trying to deliver the mail. Peter Hass has details about some unusual obstacles.

Hass: To "neither snow, nor rain," one can probably safely add "tumbling tumbleweeds" to the mix of nature's negotiable hurdles when it comes to delivering mail.

But what about a stationary wall of tumbleweeds? Chino Valley Arizona Highway Contract Route Carrier Linda Nick describes what she saw on a recent morning as she approached her first deliveries on Road Five North:

Linda Nick: I've never seen anything like that before -- the tumbleweeds have never been this bad.

Hass: Wind gusts of up to 60 miles an hour uprooted hundreds if not thousands of tumbleweeds from the ranchlands surrounding the highway. The wall of tumbleweeds was higher than eight feet in some places -- and twice as deep, according to Chino Valley Postmaster David Hyslip.

David Hyslip: They took a two-lane road and they pretty much made it into a one-lane road. So I mean it came from the fence line, which probably is a good 15 feet if not more from the edge of the roadway. So from the fence all the way halfway into the roadway were tumbleweeds.

Hass: The city used bulldozers and a dump truck to remove the giant walls of tumbleweeds the next morning -- in time for Nick to deliver the mail as she has in the past. And the understanding dozen of her 468 customers whose deliveries were impacted by the weeds didn't raise a fuss, she says.

They had seen the enemy -- and it was brush.

Watkins: Staying with the "Wild West" theme, Peter Hass also followed a group of Arizona cowboys who have recreated the role of Pony Express riders for more than half a century.

Pony Express Segment

Peter Hass: Last month, hundreds of youngsters and those young at heart lined the highway at the halfway point of Arizona's 53rd annual Hashknife Pony Express ride, awaiting the arrival of a special mail delivery that takes place once a year.

Following an escort from the local sheriff, the horses thunder across the pavement of the main highway through town and then round the corner into the Payson Post Office parking lot. Onlookers' cheers mix with the riders' yells of "Hashknife," as the 40 men deliver their mailbags from this stretch of the three-day, 220-mile journey.

Every winter, the riders start at the Holbrook Post Office, where they are sworn in as official letter carriers; their canvas mailbags filled with specially-postmarked cards and letters. Swing Boss Jim "Doozy" Dusenberry explained the history of the ride.

Jim Dusenberry: "We're actually the Navajo County Sheriff's Posse. We are a search and rescue posse, which is our main function. If you get lost out there, we will hopefully find you. This is our once a year deal, it's our 53rd annual Hashknife Pony Express. We are sworn-in as official U.S. Postal carriers, and we carry mail from all over the world, and we hand-stamp every one of them. We carry about 20,000 to 30,000 letters every trip. Once it gets down into Scottsdale then it will go out through the regular Postal Service.

Hass: The hashknife, Dusenberry said, is the brand used on the Northern Arizona ranch owned by former Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt -- the brand depicts a curved blade with a T-shaped handle, which was used by cooks on a chuck wagon to cut beef for hash.

Dusenberry: The funny part about the Pony Express a lot of people don't know is that it really only ran for six months. We are the world's largest official continuous pony express ride. The original pony express ride, like I said, was from Missouri to California and lasted for six months. The railroad ran it out of business.

Hass: The riders complete their trek every year in downtown Scottsdale, their horses surrounding a massive bronze statue honoring the event and its participants over the past half-century.

At the end of the trail, having helped deliver the letters safe and sound another year, Hashknife Trail Boss Dave Alford thanked the Postal Service for its help with the ride.

Dave Alford: Carrying the U.S. Mail is an absolute honor and a privilege for these riders, and we take it very seriously. We guard the mail because it's the U.S. Mail it's very important to us. And that's the first thing, without any mail we won't have a ride. So without the help from the United States Postal Service this would never happen. So it's an honor to carry the mail and thank the United States Postal Service for helping us make this happen every year.

Transportation Segment

WATKINS: And now, here's a roundup of recent Postal Service headlines:

On March 2nd, Postmaster General Patrick Donahoe told a congressional subcommittee that despite taking aggressive steps to reduce costs, the U.S. Postal Service will not survive as a self-financing entity without significant changes to current law.

Donahoe pointed out that during the last two fiscal years the Postal Service has reduced costs by 9 billion dollars. Despite these efforts, the Postal Service still lost a staggering 8-point-five billion dollars in 2010. And, it lost 329 million dollars in the first quarter of this fiscal year -- typically the most profitable quarter of the year.

Donahoe conceded that some of the losses can be attributed to Americans' changing modes of communication, but that postal losses are the result of an inflexible business model due to the laws that govern the Postal Service. He cited the requirement for the Postal Service to prefund retiree health benefits in the amounts of approximately \$5.5 billion per year.

Donahoe warned that, "Without changes in applicable laws, at the close of this fiscal year -- in seven months -- the Postal Service will be insolvent, as we will be unable to meet all of our financial obligations."

Should such a situation arise, Donahoe said, "We will pay the employees and deliver the mail. We'll make sure that we pay our suppliers. The thing we will not do is be able to pay the Federal Government. That will have to be negotiated."

Donahoe told the subcommittee that he is aligning every aspect of the Postal Service around four key strategies: Strengthening the business-to-consumer channel by innovating to enhance the value of the mail; Improving the customer experience by making every transaction a positive one; Competing for the package business; and Becoming leaner, faster, and smarter by simplifying rules and streamlining its network.

Finally, on Sunday, April 17th, the price of some mailing services will change. This will be the first price change in nearly two years and will have minimal impact on retail customers who will continue to pay only 44 cents for a First-Class stamp.

First-Class Mail additional ounces will increase from 17 to 20 cents; postcards will go up a penny to 29 cents, and letters to Canada and Mexico will move to 80 cents. Letters to other international destinations will remain unchanged at 98 cents.

The 1.7 percent average increase to postage taking effect in April is at or below the rate of inflation, as measured by the Consumer Price Index. Detailed pricing information is available online at usps.com/prices.

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