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COMPTROLLER GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES

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JUL 17 1973

*[Use of Protective Plastic Envelopes By Government Printing Office]*

The Honorable Robert H. Steele  
House of Representatives

Dear Mr. Steele:

In your letter of April 10, 1973, you asked us to examine into a constituent's statement that he had received ordinary correspondence from the Government Printing Office (GPO) in a protective plastic envelope. He believed that using a standard envelope would have been cheaper.

The correspondence referred to was mailed by GPO's Office of the Superintendent of Documents. GPO uses a variety of containers for mailing publications. GPO's policy is to use protective envelopes only for items which may be damaged in the mails, such as bound books, or which are of such volume and/or weight that they require containers stronger than standard envelopes.

Officials of the Office of the Superintendent of Documents said that standard envelopes packed with several publications rip and frequently burst if handled too roughly. To insure that items are received in good condition, GPO sought a container which would provide greater protection than a standard envelope for certain types of shipments. The mail-lite sealer--a paper envelope lined with a protective bubblelike plastic and sealed by heat--is currently used for this purpose.

GPO has used the mail-lite sealer, which replaced a "jiffy bag" protective mailer, since July 1972. GPO told us that it had switched to the mail-lite sealer because it had received many complaints about items damaged when mailed in jiffy bags.

Before replacing the jiffy bag, the Superintendent of Documents made a cost-effectiveness study. This study, which we did not verify, showed that the mail-lite sealer cost more than the jiffy bag but that the reduced costs of labor, tape,

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and postage more than offset the additional cost. GPO estimated, on the basis of the results of the study, that the mail-lite sealer would save about \$37,000 annually.

GPO's study showed that the two largest savings from using the mail-lite sealer were in labor and postage. A packer can seal the mail-lite sealer in 2 seconds, but it took him 12 seconds to fold the jiffy bag and seal it with tape. The mail-lite sealer weighs only one-third as much as the jiffy bag, and thus significant savings result from lower postage.

The amount of mail the Superintendent of Documents generates daily is significant. For example, at recent appropriation hearings the Superintendent of Documents said that he received from 10,000 to 40,000 orders every day, which resulted in millions of annual mailings. Most of this mail is sent in standard envelopes, cardboard cartons, or cardboard tubes. Our comparison of the estimated procurements of mail-lite sealers with the volume of order processed indicated that a very small percentage of the total mailings would be made in the sealers.

In deciding which container to use, the packer considers such factors as weight and bulk of the item or items to be shipped. To minimize the need for packers to use subjective judgment in deciding which containers to use, GPO officials have established flexible guidelines. Packers are instructed to use mail-lite sealers for orders that exceed \$2.50 and for bound volumes not in their own cartons. The \$2.50 rule of thumb is based on the premise that an order costing this amount could be bulky and could rip or burst a standard envelope. These officials also pointed out that packers may use the mail-lite sealers for orders costing less than \$2.50 if the order is bulky.

We watched the packers and noted that they used standard envelopes to mail what appeared to be thin, lightweight

B-169391

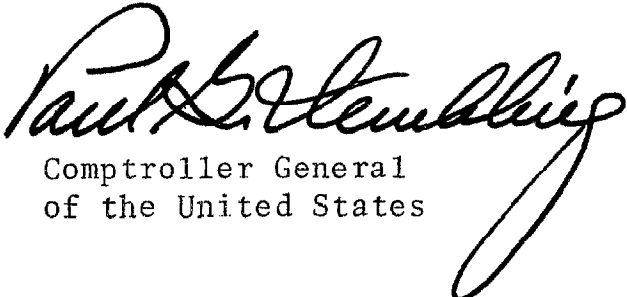
pamphlets. When they mailed large quantities of publications, they used either mail-lite sealers or cardboard cartons, depending on the quantity, volume, and weight of the publications.

According to an official in the Office of the Superintendent of Documents, the number of complaints about damaged publications requiring replacement has declined since GPO began using the mail-lite sealers. GPO generally uses the proper type of container. Considering that a large number of items are mailed daily it is probable that improper mailing containers are used from time to time.

The Superintendent of Documents has received many complaints from customers concerning ordering and mailing of publications, and he is taking actions designed to improve the situation.

We trust that this information is responsive to your needs. As you requested, we are returning the correspondence you forwarded with your letter.

Sincerely yours,

  
Acting Comptroller General  
of the United States

Enclosure