# Fiscal Year 2025 Peak Season Preparedness

# **AUDIT REPORT**



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# Highlights

# **Background**

Each year, the U.S. Postal Service experiences an increase in package volume during peak mailing season — Thanksgiving through New Year's Eve — which can significantly strain the Postal Service's processing and distribution networks. To help handle this increase, the Postal Service creates peak season initiatives. These initiatives are meant to help the Postal Service have the right amount of personnel, resources, and package capacity throughout its processing, transportation, and delivery networks to address weather and increased volume conditions in facilities.

#### What We Did

We evaluated the Postal Service's preparedness for the fiscal year (FY) 2025 peak season. We also conducted fieldwork at processing and distribution centers and associated offices to assess best practices and lessons learned from past peak preparations.

#### What We Found

We found the Postal Service developed its FY 2025 peak season preparedness initiatives to build upon the successes it had during prior peak seasons. Specifically, the Postal Service's FY 2025 peak season initiatives spanned multiple functions, including processing and distribution, logistics, and retail and delivery operations.

In processing, we identified the increase in packages — especially the growing number of manually processed, oversized packages that require more space in facilities — as one risk to peak season operations. To mitigate this risk, processing and distribution operations are using new facilities and clearing floor space in existing facilities for package staging and to deploy new, larger capacity machines, to increase the percentage of machinable packages. In logistics, we identified risks related to changing contracts for air capacity and moving more package volume to surface transportation. To mitigate these risks, logistics will use pre-planned trucks, conduct simulations, and develop an option to use mass solicitations for additional drivers. In delivery and retail, there is a risk of too little space, too few employees, and too few vehicles to deliver the increased mail volume. To mitigate this, retail and delivery operations has a plan to identify sites that may need additional resources, a plan to create extra package runs, and options to rent additional truck and facility space.

# **Recommendations and Management's Comments**

If the Postal Service's initiatives are implemented as planned and volume forecasts are accurate, it should be prepared for peak season; therefore, we did not issue a recommendation. While we did not make a recommendation, the Postal Service agreed with our finding that if initiatives are implemented as planned and volume forecasts are accurate, it should be prepared for peak season. The Office of Inspector General (OIG) considers management's comments to the finding responsive, which can be seen in their entirety in Appendix B.

# Transmittal Letter



November 21, 2024

**MEMORANDUM FOR:** DANE A. COLEMAN

VICE PRESIDENT, PROCESSING AND MAINTENANCE OPERATIONS

ROBERT CINTRON

VICE PRESIDENT, LOGISTICS

**ELVIN MERCADO** 

VICE PRESIDENT, DELIVERY OPERATIONS

FROM: Kelly Thresher

Deputy Assistant Inspector General

for Field Operations

SUBJECT: Audit Report – Fiscal Year 2025 Peak Season Preparedness

(Report Number 24-132-R25)

This report presents the results of our audit of Fiscal Year 2025 Peak Season Preparedness.

We appreciate the cooperation and courtesies provided by your staff. If you have any questions or need additional information, please contact John Littlejohn, Director, Seasonal Performance and Postal Regulatory Commission, or me at 703-248-2100.

Attachment

cc: Postmaster General

VP Retail and Post Office Operations

Corporate Audit Response Management

# Results

# Introduction/Objective

This report presents the results of our self-initiated audit of the Fiscal Year 2025 Peak Season Preparedness (Project Number 24-132). Our objective was to evaluate the U.S. Postal Service's preparedness for the fiscal year (FY) 2025 peak mailing season. See Appendix A for additional information about this audit.

# **Background**

Each year, increased mail package volume during the Postal Service's peak mailing season — Thanksgiving through New Year's Eve¹ — significantly strains the Postal Service's processing and distribution network. While letter and flat volume is decreasing year over year, package volume significantly increases for machinable and non-machinable packages, called non-machinable outsides² (NMO). This volume growth typically requires the Postal Service to create preparedness plans to increase processing and distribution capacity, staffing, and transportation.

In prior audit reports,<sup>3</sup> we highlighted how Postal Service management developed a year-round strategy to prepare for peak season by implementing permanent operational changes. These initiatives included the efficient use of employee complement and increase in package sorting machines. As an example, these initiatives, coupled with seasonal plans for the FY 2024 peak season, were intended to lessen the strain that the volume increase on the Postal Service network experienced during the FY 2023 peak mailing season.

As noted in our previous peak season performance audit, the Postal Service successfully implemented initiatives during the FY 2024 peak season.

Specifically, the Postal Service met some processing

and distribution goals, all logistics goals, and most retail and delivery goals. Despite the successful implementation of most initiatives during the FY 2024 peak season, service performance declined for most market dominant products and all competitive products. For example, First-Class Mail and Ground Advantage decreased by 5.4 percentage points and percentage points, respectively, compared to the previous peak season.

In accordance with the Postal Service's Delivering for America 10-year strategic plan,<sup>4</sup> the Postal Service continues to transform its network. One change was adding additional square footage by creating Regional Processing and Distribution Centers (RPDC), which centralize metro-area originating processing operations in a single building, with crossdocking and other functionality as required in the region.<sup>5</sup> During the FY 2025 peak season, the Postal Service will operate four RPDCs. Working in conjunction with RPDCs, the Postal Service has deployed Local Processing Centers (LPC), which are smaller processing facilities that connect RPDCs to delivery operations. LPCs sort letter and flat mail for delivery units.<sup>6</sup> Some LPCs also process packages for delivery.

Consolidation efforts are underway for delivery operations, as well, by combining several delivery units into Sorting and Delivery Centers (S&DC). As of October 2024, there were 97 S&DCs throughout the nation, which were created to consolidate facilities and conduct some package processing within the delivery unit. Some S&DCs have over 100 carriers.

Another change was to decrease reliance on air transportation and move more volume to surface transportation. A new product, Ground Advantage,<sup>7</sup> was introduced in July 2023 as a competitively priced option for customers to ship packages. In addition,

For purposes of this report, we used the weeks of November 11, 2023 - January 5, 2024

<sup>2</sup> Large, oddly shaped, and heavy packages that cannot run on mechanized equipment.

<sup>3</sup> Fiscal Year 2022 Peak Season Preparedness (Report Number 21-206-R22, dated November 19, 2021), Service Performance During the Fiscal Year 2022 Peak Mailing Season (Report Number 22-039-R22, dated June 23, 2022), Fiscal Year 2023 Peak Season Preparedness (Report Number 22-163-R23), Service Performance During the Fiscal Year 2023 Peak Mailing Season (Report Number 23-025-R23, dated July 13, 2023), Fiscal Year 2024 Peak Season Preparedness (Report Number 23-121-R24, dated November 15, 2023), and Service Performance During the Fiscal Year 2024 Peak Mailing Season (Report Number 24-050-R24, dated August 26, 2024).

USPS Delivering for America Report, https://about.usps.com/what/strategic-plans/delivering-for-america/assets/USPS\_Delivering-For-America.pdf.

<sup>5</sup> USPS Delivering for America Second-Year Progress Report, https://about.usps.com/what/strategic-plans/delivering-for-america/assets/usps-dfa-two-year-report.pdf.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

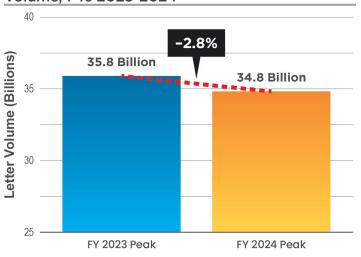
<sup>7</sup> USPS Ground Advantage combines USPS Retail Ground, Parcel Select Ground, and First-Class Package Service.

a change was made regarding the primary air transportation carrier; as of October 2024, a different vendor will become the primary air cargo provider for the Postal Service.

#### Mail Volume

Total letter volume during peak season decreased by more than one billion, or 2.8 percent, from FY 2023 to FY 2024 (see Figure 1).

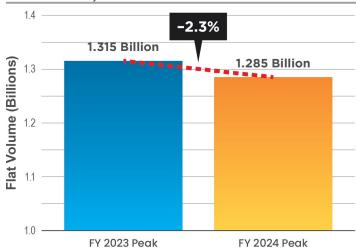
Figure 1. Comparison of Peak Season Letter Volume, FYs 2023-2024



Source: U.S. Postal Service Office of Inspector General (OIG) analysis of Enterprise Data Warehouse (EDW) data.

Total flat volume during peak season decreased by about 31 million, or 2.3 percent, from FY 2023 to FY 2024 (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Comparison of Peak Mailing Season Flat Volume, FYs 2023-2024



Source: OIG analysis of EDW data.

Machinable and NMO combined package volume increased by pieces, or percent, over the FY 2023 peak season (see Figure 3).

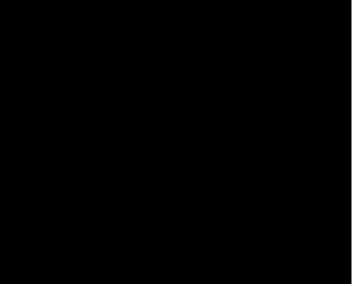
Figure 3. Comparison of Peak Season Package Volume, FYs 2023-2024



Source: OIG analysis of EDW data.

Total volume of machinable package volume during peak season increased by about percent, from FYs 2023 to 2024. However, total NMO volume during peak season increased by about percent (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Peak Season NMO Volume, FYs 2023-2024



Source: OIG analysis of EDW data.

NMOs, which are often handled manually, made up percent of total volume during the FY 2024 peak season, an increase of percent from the prior peak season. The increase in additional large package volume during peak season requires more space, storage capacity, transportation, and manual labor.

This audit evaluates the Postal Service's FY 2025 peak season preparedness initiatives from processing and distribution, logistics, and retail and delivery operations. In addition, we conducted site observations and interviews to assess best practices and lessons learned at the Margaret Sellers P&DC, San Diego, CA; Chula Vista S&DC, Chula Vista, CA; Poway Post Office, Poway, CA; William Taft Station,

"The Postal Service's FY 2025 peak season initiatives span multiple functions, including processing and distribution, logistics, and retail and delivery operations."

San Diego, CA; Brooklyn P&DC, Brooklyn, NY; Brooklyn Alabama S&DC, Brooklyn, NY; New Dorp Station, Staten Island, NY; and Staten Island Main Post Office, Staten Island, NY.

# Finding: Fiscal Year 2025 Peak Season Preparedness

The Postal Service developed its FY 2025 peak season preparedness initiatives to build upon the successes it experienced during prior peak seasons. The Postal Service's FY 2025 peak season initiatives span multiple functions, including processing and distribution, logistics, and retail and delivery operations. Marketing and sales complete outreach to mailers in the spring about peak season plans, and also does an annual marketing campaign for Postal Service products and shipping services for customers ahead of peak season.

### **Processing and Distribution Operations**

To prepare for and operate effectively during peak season, processing and distribution management began planning for peak season staffing, space, network modernization, and equipment.

Processing and distribution management plans to expand to a daily 20-hour processing window<sup>8</sup> on equipment, where necessary, to process the increase in package volume. In addition, management plans to flex overtime usage up to 25 percent, from the Postal Service's current, historically low levels of 4 percent, and limit peak season overall hiring to precareer allocations, further reducing the number of seasonal hires needed.

In total, management plans to hire 4,033 seasonal employees to support operations in processing

facilities, with start dates as early as October 2024 (see Table 1). The 2025 hiring plan is 40.6 percent lower than the FY 2024 peak season hiring target.

During peak season, the Postal Service also plans to continue its year-round deployment and repositioning of processing equipment. During FY 2024, the Postal Service deployed machines to 37 new sites, and seven machines were relocated in preparation for peak season. In addition, processing and distribution management will continue to leverage the space vacated by Flats Sequencing System (FSS) machine removals and reduce reliance on peak processing annexes.9 Each FSS machine occupied about 25,000 square feet. Similar to last peak season, the Postal Service will continue to use this vacated space for overflow package volume staging and processing equipment that will handle larger packages. In addition, the Postal Service plans to lease four temporary peak processing annexes, down from the seven annexes leased for FY 2024.

During our site visit at Margaret Sellers P&DC, management stated it removed two FSS machines, eliminating the need for an annex, and now uses one Single Induction Package Sorter (SIPS) machine where the FSS machines were (see Figure 5). The SIPS machine handles larger package sizes, decreasing manual processing of NMOs.

Table 1. FY 2025 and FY 2024 Peak Season Employee Hiring Comparison

Employee Type	FY 2025 Peak Hiring Target	FY 2024 Peak Hiring Target	Difference	Percentage Difference
Clerk	1,238	1,818	-580	-31.9%
Mail Handler	2,795	4,971	-2,176	-43.8%
Total	4,033	6,789	-2,756	-40.6%

Source: OIG analysis of Postal Service data.

<sup>8</sup> Run time on mail processing machines will be adjusted to align with the increase in volume, up to 20 hours per day.

<sup>9</sup> From April 2021 through August 2023, the Postal Service removed all 100 FSS machines

Figure 5. Single Induction Package Sorter





Source: SIPS machine in use at the Margaret Sellers P&DC. Photo taken by OIG August 27, 2024.

Finally, processing and distribution management plans to continue modernizing its network. The Postal Service plans to leverage its new RPDCs and LPCs to conduct strategic transfers of mail to alternate facilities for processing and continue insourcing operations at Surface Transfer Centers. Management anticipates the RPDCs and the expansion of their Go East-Go West initiative should further reduce reliance on the Surface Transfer Center network.

"Management anticipates the RPDCs and the expansion of its Go East-Go West initiative should further reduce reliance on the Surface Transfer Center network."

With an increase in volume, fewer annexes, and less hiring during peak season, the Postal Service may encounter having too few resources to process the incoming volume of packages. Specifically, it may incur unanticipated additional NMO volume during peak due to automation issues and encounter difficulty in accommodating an increase in package volume with fewer annexes. In addition, with the increase to the 20-hour operating window, there could be a reduction in time available to conduct regular maintenance on machines. Finally, employee interest in a prolonged increase in overtime may not be as high as anticipated.

However, the Postal Service has mitigations for these potential risks. For example, the Postal Service has additional equipment with increased capabilities, such as the SIPS machine, which can handle bigger packages than other, older package sorting machines. Deploying these machines will decrease the amount of NMOs requiring manual handling while leveraging the current space the Postal Service has. This, along with the expansion of the 20-hour machine operating window, will decrease the potential need for additional annexes. Also, the Postal Service has plans to schedule maintenance windows when machines are not running. Finally, if employees do not volunteer to work overtime, the Postal Service could make it a requirement.

#### Logistics

Logistics management has developed peak season initiatives related to air and surface transportation.

<sup>10</sup> Surface Transfer Centers are facilities where mail is consolidated and re-distributed with the primary function of achieving increased vehicle cubic capacity and utilization.

<sup>11</sup> The Go East-Go West initiative eliminates making separations for every single plant in the country by collapsing those separations into a single container and sending it to a regional hub that processes it with the originating package volume. Go East-Go West reshapes the Postal Service package processing network and streamlines it to build direct transportation from origin to region.

Similar to prior peak seasons, the logistics group will plan how much space it predicts it will need on trucks and planes to move mail between facilities and delivery units. Logistics management plans to use several data tools to monitor and report on preparedness and performance for peak season. It plans to consistently verify volume expectations as peak season begins, to ensure the Postal Service has surface and air capacity available in the right regions, when needed.

Beginning in October 2024, the Postal Service changed its primary air cargo provider. Logistics management anticipates a 10.2 percent reduction in air transportation because of the increase in Ground Advantage, which will travel via surface transportation. Changes to air logistics operations this year may put the Postal Service at risk. For example, the new air carrier has less air stops than the prior contractor. In addition, unpredictable conditions, such as weather, have impacted the Postal Service's ability to move packages through the air in years prior. This could become a potential issue if there is more air demand than what is forecasted. The Postal Service's main mitigation for this is to have a more agile surface transportation network.

However, there are also risks with increasing reliance on surface transportation. During a site visit at a P&DC, management stated that more packages are moving to ground transportation, and with the heavier flow of packages during peak season, there could be a potential for gridlock with surface transportation.

To mitigate this, logistics plans to utilize pre-planned trucks and Freight Auction<sup>12</sup> to meet unanticipated demand for long haul transportation. Logistics management is also adding additional transportation to dispatch mail to avoid congestion on the dock. To assist with the Go East-Go West initiative, it has an option to do a mass solicitation for additional drivers. It is also planning to hire 233 holiday transportation associates<sup>13</sup> to support Freight Auction and Go East-Go West activity. In addition, logistics plans to work with mail processing, holding regular calls, and expanding the window for cross-docking<sup>14</sup> from one to three hours to account for package volume.

#### **Retail and Delivery Operations**

Retail and delivery management's peak season-specific initiatives are aimed at ensuring adequate vehicles and personnel are available to deliver the increase in volume. This year, the Postal Service is bringing back peak-specific initiatives used in prior years. This includes the "6-9 Play," which is a program to deliver packages from 6 a.m. to 9 a.m. and 6 p.m. to 9 p.m., or before and after carriers' regular route times. In addition, retail and delivery management is generating a list of Plan B sites, which are sites it recognizes may need assistance with additional resources for peak season.

In planning for the FY 2025 peak season, retail and delivery management anticipates it will require less reliance on 6-9 Play and Plan B locations than previous peak seasons; therefore, it reduced the 6-9 Play sites to 120 and Plan B sites to 18 for this peak season (see Table 2).

Table 2. FY 2025 and FY 2024 Peak Season 6-9 Play and Plan B Sites

Retail and Delivery Initiative	FY 2025 Planned Offices	FY 2024 Planned Offices	Difference	Percentage Difference
6-9 Play	120	209	-89	-74%
Plan B Sites	18	31	-13	-72%

Source: OIG analysis of Postal Service data.

<sup>12</sup> Freight auction is a digital capability that enables the Postal Service to competitively solicit, review, select, and implement ad hoc transportation needs (extra trips) from existing Highway Contract Routes suppliers, resulting in significant cost savings.

<sup>13</sup> Holiday transportation associates provide supplemental support for peak season applicable to surface transportation.

<sup>14</sup> Cross-docking is a dock transfer that entails transporting mail that has not and will not be processed in the facility. Mail or equipment may be transported directly between two vehicles, between a vehicle and a staging area, or between two staging areas. The staging areas may be on the platform or inside the facility.

In addition, management plans to hire 3,298 retail and delivery seasonal employees, with start dates as early as November (see Table 3). Of these, the Postal Service plans to hire 126 city carrier assistants and 3,172 retail and delivery clerks this peak season. Overall, the retail and delivery peak hiring plan reflected a 25 percent decrease compared to the plan in FY 2024. Retail and delivery management attributes the decrease in plans for FY 2025 seasonal hiring to the reduction in Plan B sites.

Peak season can present risks and challenges to retail and delivery. Potential risks may include a decrease in service performance due to increased volume and insufficient space, challenges with staff scheduling, and the potential to encounter insufficient vehicles for delivery.

To navigate these risks, the Postal Service plans to leverage the newly expanded S&DC network during peak season. These facilities have package processing capabilities and often have additional space. In addition, retail and delivery management will conduct a dry run for 6-9 Play the week prior to Thanksgiving. It will also closely monitor package volume during peak season and extend the 6-9 Play to other sites. Further, retail and delivery management intends to exhaust current space at delivery units and rent tents for additional space if needed.

During one site visit, management noted how sharing employees and vehicles among offices is a way to mitigate resource issues and handle peak season volume. Also, delivery unit management can request rental vehicles when all vehicles are fully maximized during regular route times and 6-9 Play.

The Postal Service has developed plans to handle the upcoming peak season. If the initiatives are implemented as planned and volume forecasts are accurate, the Postal Service should be prepared for peak season; therefore, we are not issuing a recommendation at this time.

#### **Looking Forward**

Every peak season, the Postal Service anticipates increased mail volume and adjusts operations accordingly. Management's ability to plan for peak season has been generally successful through the years. However, the Postal Service could consider a more regional approach to managing peak season. For example, one state we visited generally encounters a much different climate and space restrictions during peak season than the other we visited, creating specific challenges. Additionally, during a site visit, local management was concerned with its ability to offer competitive wages with other industries because of changes in state law regarding its minimum wage.

#### **Postal Service Response**

The Postal Service agreed with this finding. Management acknowledged that there are risks associated with transportation changes, increased volumes, and limited resources, and it is positioned to mitigate risks associated with these challenges.

#### **OIG Evaluation**

The OIG considers management's comments responsive to the finding in the report.

Table 3. FY 2025 and FY 2024 Peak Season Employee Hiring Comparison

Employee Type	FY 2025 Peak Hiring Target	FY 2024 Peak Hiring Target	Difference	Percentage Difference
Holiday City Carrier Assistant	126	214	-88	-24%
Holiday Clerk Assistant	3,172	4,172	-1,000	-41%
Total	3,298	4,386	-1,088	-25%

Source: OIG analysis of Postal Service data.

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# Appendix A: Additional Information

# **Scope and Methodology**

The scope of this audit includes the Postal Service's preparedness for the FY 2025 peak season.

To accomplish our objective, we:

- Evaluated the Postal Service's preparedness plans for FY 2025 peak season.
- Interviewed Postal Service Headquarters officials and regional management to discuss FY 2024 peak season challenges, causes for past performance, lessons learned, and best practices that can be incorporated into the FY 2025 peak season planning.
- Conducted site visits to two mail processing facilities in the Eastern and Western regions, two S&DCs, and two delivery units serviced by each processing facility.

We conducted this performance audit from August through November 2024 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards and included such tests of internal controls as we considered necessary under the circumstances. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. Management

opted not to have an exit conference, but provided its comments, and we included them, where appropriate.

In planning and conducting the audit, we obtained an understanding of processing and distribution, logistics, and retail and delivery operations internal control structure to help determine the nature, timing, and extent of our audit procedures. We reviewed the management controls for overseeing the program and mitigating associated risks. Additionally, we assessed the internal control components and underlying principles, and we determined that the following three components were significant to our audit objective:

- Control Activities
- Information and Communicating
- Monitoring

We developed audit work to ensure that we assessed these controls. Based on the work performed, we did not identify internal control deficiencies that were significant within the context of our objectives.

We assessed the reliability of EDW data by reviewing existing information, comparing data from other sources regarding the data, and interviewing Postal Service officials knowledgeable about the data. We determined that the data were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of this report.

# **Prior Audit Coverage**

Report Title	Objective	Report Number	Final Report Date	Monetary Impact
Fiscal Year 2024 Peak Mailing Season Preparedness	To evaluate the U.S. Postal Service's preparedness for the fiscal year 2024 peak mailing season.	23-121-R24	November 15, 2023	None
Fiscal Year 2023 Peak Season Preparedness	To evaluate the U.S. Postal Service's preparedness for the fiscal year 2023 peak mailing season.	22-163-R23	November 14, 2022	None
Fiscal Year 2022 Peak Mailing Season Preparedness	To evaluate the U.S. Postal Service's preparedness for the fiscal year 2022 peak mailing season.	21-206-R22	November 19, 2021	None
Service Performance During the Fiscal Year 2024 Peak Mailing Season	To evaluate the Postal Service's performance during the fiscal year 2024 Peak Mailing Season and the implementation of its peak season preparedness plan.	24-050-R24	August 26, 2024	None
Service Performance During the Fiscal Year 2023 Peak Mailing Season	To evaluate the Postal Service's performance during the fiscal year 2023 Peak Mailing Season and the implementation of its peak season preparedness plan.	23-025-R23	July 13, 2023	None
Service Performance During the Fiscal Year 2022 Peak Mailing Season	To evaluate the Postal Service's performance during the fiscal year 2022 Peak Mailing Season and the implementation of its peak season preparedness plan.	22-039-R22	June 23, 2022	None

# Appendix B: Management's Comments



November 12, 2024

JOHN CIHOTA DIRECTOR, AUDIT SERVICES

SUBJECT: Management Response: Fiscal Year 2025 Peak Season Preparedness (Report Number 24-132-DRAFT)

Thank you for providing the Postal Service with an opportunity to review and comment on the finding contained in the draft audit report, 24-132-DRAFT. Management appreciates that the report reflects key components of its comprehensive peak season plan. Our efforts have been designed to ensure the Postal Service is well-prepared to reliably and effectively process and deliver the volume anticipated this year.

Postal Management generally agrees with the finding of the audit. While we acknowledge that there is some risk associated with transportation changes, increased volumes, and limited resources, we are positioned to mitigate any risk associated with these challenges.

Postal Management appreciates the ongoing dialogue and the opportunity to fully describe its robust, organization-wide efforts as it prepares to execute related strategies for peak season. Management remains confident it will be successful.

E-SIGNED by DANE A COLEMAN on 2024-11-12 17:45:59 EST

Dane Coleman Vice President, Processing

e-SIGNED by MICHAEL MELENDREZ on 2024-11-12 16:16:26 EST

Michael Melendrez for Robert Cintron Vice President, Logistics

> E-SIGNED by ELVIN MERCADO on 2024-11-12 16:17:39 EST

Elvin Mercado

Vice President, Delivery Operations

cc: Corporate Audit & Response Management





This is a redacted version of the report.

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1735 North Lynn Street, Arlington, VA 22209-2020 (703) 248-2100

For media inquiries, please email press@uspsoig.gov or call (703) 248-2100