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Postal Service to continue opening mail

WASHINGTON (AP) — Despite bitter criticism from lawmakers about illegal mail openings, the Postal Service said Thursday it will continue to allow customs agents to open letters from abroad.

"You have completely abrogated your authority over the mail entrusted to you," an angry Rep. Theodore S. Weiss, D-N.Y., told postal officials at a House Government Operations subcommittee hearing. Other panel members echoed his sentiments.

Postal officials acknowledged that customs agents have violated laws and government procedures that allow them to open mail without a search warrant only when they suspect a letter contains illegal drugs or other contraband.

But they said turning over mail to the Customs Service would continue. "We have to expect the other agency to comply with the regulations," said Assistant General Counsel Charles R. Braun.

Meanwhile, the Customs Service issued a series of proposed new rules spelling out under what circumstances its agents can open mail.

In the last fiscal year, Customs opened about 270,000 envelopes, 48,000 of which contained prohibited or dutiable items, according to figures gathered by the subcommittee.

Customs began opening mail entering the country in 1971. Usually, mail is

opened comes after a dog trained to sniff illegal drugs has reacted to a letter.

But the subcommittee was told about several incidents in which the Customs Service flagrantly violated letter-opening rules.

In one program, now ended according to the Postal Service, customs officials in New York for several years allowed military investigators to open and read letters without the required search warrants.

Postal officials also allowed customs agents to open some domestic mail in Port Isabel, Tex., in 1975, and agents illegally read mail in a year-long customs investigation in Tennessee.

A postal inspector also said "a

number of mail theft cases involving customs employes" have been referred to the Justice Department for prosecution.

"One of the last areas of privacy a citizen has is the privacy of his mail. To open someone's mail is the same thing as burglary," charged Rep. Leo J. Ryan, D-Calif. "I am incensed by the whole policy and the way it is carried out by the Postal Service."

It was the first congressional hearing into illegal mail openings by the government since massive FBI and CIA programs to open mail were exposed several years ago. Those letters also were handed over by the Postal Service.