

Postal Service Checked Mail Received by 4400

Washington

The U.S. Postal Service last year recorded for periods of a month or more the origins of all mail received by about 4400 individuals and businesses in the United States at the request of dozens of federal, state and local agencies, Postal Service statistics reported to Congress show.

The statistics were obtained yesterday by The Washington Post. They show the agencies requesting the mail surveillances ranged from the Agriculture Department, Department of Health, Education and Welfare and Interstate Commerce Commission to local police departments and the

Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

The figures, which are to be disclosed today at a hearing of the House Judiciary Committee's subcommittee on administration of justice, are believed by subcommittee sources to be the first time the full extent of mail surveillance within the United States has been publicly disclosed.

Sources in the subcommittee, which is headed by Representative Robert Kastenmeier (Dem-Wis.), said Postal Service officials have maintained to the staff that the surveillances are legal but have admitted they did not know why agencies such as Agriculture would want to look at people's mail.

While it could not be determined last night why agencies such as Agriculture and HEW wanted such surveillances, the sources speculated that Agriculture, for example, may use them to detect fraud in its food stamp program.

But the sources said none of the surveillances were conducted with a court order or subpoena.

In contrast, American Telephone & Telegraph Co. says it will not turn over records of toll calls without a subpoena or summons.

The mail surveillances, known as mail covers, do not entail opening mail.

Instead, postal officials make a record before mail is delivered to homes and businesses of data appearing on the outside of the envelopes.

These data, which include the sender's name and address and the date and place of the postmark, are forwarded by the Postal Service to the agency that requested the cover.

In its own regulations republished this month the Postal Service said mail covers are available only to law enforcement agencies to protect the national security, locate a fugitive or obtain evidence of a crime or attempted crime.

Despite this, the mail cover statistics reported last week to Kastenmeier show that the most of the agencies requesting them are not normally considered law-enforcement agencies.

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