

Postal Service will stop removing mailboxes

The iconic blue boxes are moved frequently depending on mail volumes

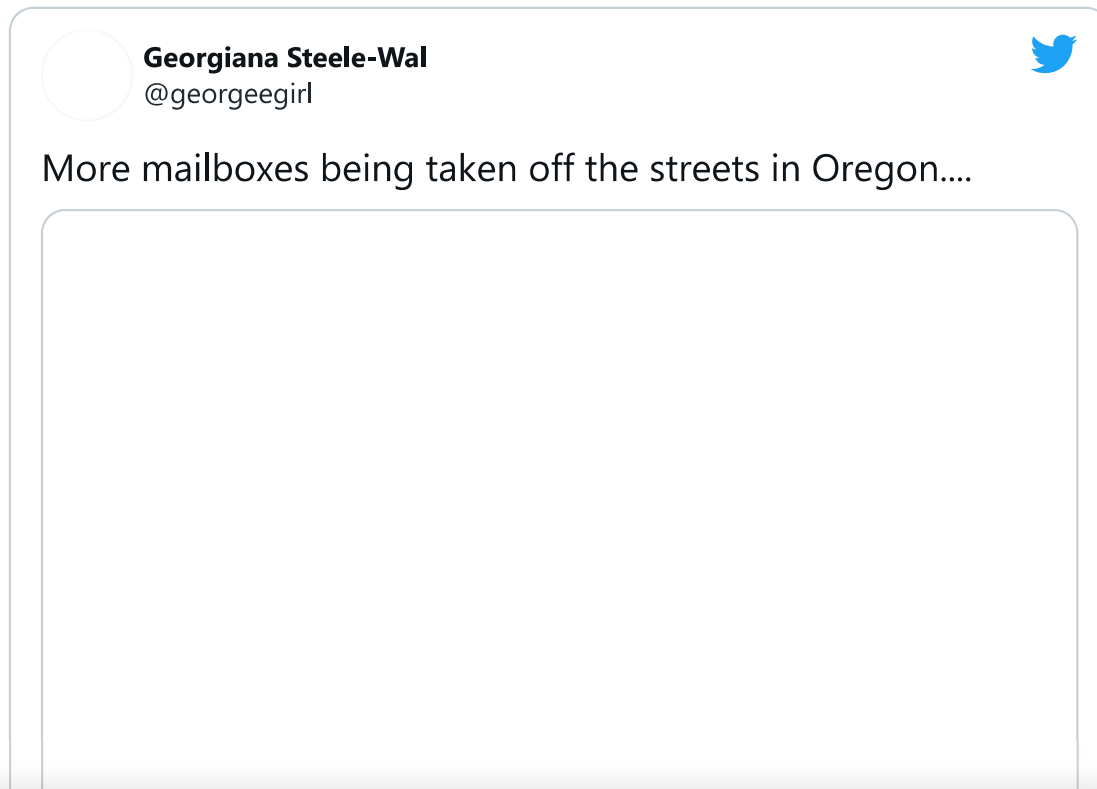
By **Jacob Bogage**

August 14, 2020 at 12:20 p.m. HST

After the removal of dozens of mailboxes in several states set off a social media panic and high-profile blowback this week, the U.S. Postal Service has suspended all such operations nationwide.

“We are not going to be removing any boxes,” USPS spokesman Rod Spurgeon told NBC News on Friday. “After the election, we’re going to take a look at operations and see what we need and don’t need.”

Though the USPS contends the iconic blue boxes are moved frequently depending on mail volume, the public reaction underscores the heightened sensitivities around an agency that has been in President Trump’s crosshairs for months. On Thursday, Trump vowed to withhold USPS funding to restrict Americans’ ability to vote by mail during the pandemic. Hours later, photos began circulating online of postal workers in urban areas loading trucks with the mailboxes.



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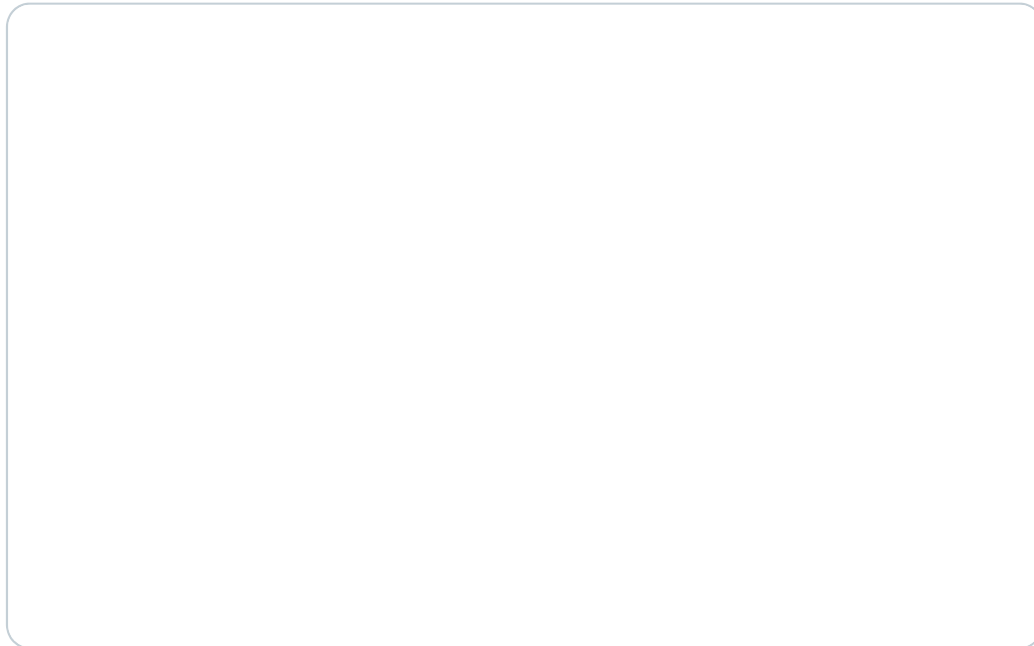


Isaac Hayes III ✓

@IsaacHayes3



They're legit taking the mailboxes off the street. Cheating 101.



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“They’re legit taking the mailboxes off the street,” tweeted record producer Isaac Hayes III. “Cheating 101.”

Presumptive Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden mentioned the mailbox removals Friday from the campaign trail.

“I was joking earlier with a couple on the call. I wonder if you’re outside trying to hold down your mailboxes. They’re going around literally with tractor trailers picking up mailboxes,” he said. “You oughta go online and check out what they’re doing in Oregon. I mean, it’s bizarre!”

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In his nine weeks on the job, Postmaster General Louis DeJoy, a former logistics executive and major Trump ally, has overhauled the Postal Service's corporate structure and reassigned 33 top executives.

He's instituted cost-cutting measures that banned postal workers from making extra trips to ensure on-time mail delivery and cracked down on overtime that local postmasters often rely on to clear mail backlogs. Postal workers say the new policies have caused days-long delays in localities across the country. The Postal Service also is poised to remove 671 mail-sorting machines, roughly 10 percent of its inventory, in the coming month, another move election advocates say could slow down voters' access to ballots and other important election information.

"Given the other things that are going on, it's okay to ask questions," said David Becker, executive director of the nonprofit, nonpartisan Center for Election Innovation & Research. "The high-speed sorters that are getting deactivated, the loss of overtime, the delays in mail we're seeing right now, all of this should cause some concern and warrants questions."

Mailboxes have reportedly been removed in parts of New York, Pennsylvania, Oregon and Montana. Sen. Jon Tester (D-Mont.) wrote to DeJoy on Thursday requesting more information about the Postal Service's plans for its mailboxes.

"These actions set my hair on fire and they have real life implications for folks in rural America and their ability to access critical postal services like paying their bills and voting in upcoming elections," Tester said in a Friday statement. "Postmaster General DeJoy must immediately provide Montanans with an explanation for the actions of the USPS, or he can do it under oath before a Senate committee."

Tester's staffers first noted the removals when a mailbox outside their office in Bozeman, Mont., was taken away on Thursday morning, according to the senator's office. Within hours, Tester received calls from constituents around the state reporting more collection boxes being hauled away.

In a statement later Friday, Tester said the USPS had paused mailbox removals in his state but that DeJoy "still owes Montanans an answer on why mail collection boxes were removed in the first place." He also demanded that the agency replace every mailbox it took away.

The Postal Service has close to 142,000 mailboxes across the country, and removes or relocates them on a case-by-case basis, according to agency spokesperson Kimberly Frum.

"Historically, mailboxes have been removed for lack of use and installed in growth areas," she said in an emailed statement. "When a collection box consistently receives very small amounts of mail for months on end, it costs the Postal Service money in fuel and work hours for letter carriers to drive to the mailbox and collect the mail. Removing the box is simply good business sense in that respect. It is important to note that anyone with a residential or business mailbox can use it as a vehicle to send outgoing mail."

The agency has focused in recent years on placing boxes in high-traffic areas such as shopping centers, business parks and outside grocery stores, she said, and removing them from low-traffic areas. When boxes are removed, "advanced

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concerned about the affect they could have on mail-in ballots. Voters are required to have a mailing address when they register to vote, and absentee voters can only obtain their ballots through the mail. That means the vast majority of voters already have access to a mailbox, Becker said, and don't need a public mailbox.
