

# US withdrawal from the UPU

by Merry Law, [WorldVu LLC](#)

On October 17, the U.S. presented a letter notifying the Universal Postal Union of intent to withdraw in a year. The UPU is the UN agency overseeing and coordinating international mail rules, regulations and standards. The problem that precipitated the letter is what countries pay each other for delivery of each other's mail. This isn't just a problem for the U.S. Self-declared rates have been discussed at the UPU for many years, along with other potential solutions to make the compensation system fairer. While the UPU is working on resolving this immediate situation, a proposal needs to be crafted that addresses ALL the rates and compensation among the 192 member countries. The major stumbling block is that the method needs to apply to all countries – the U.S., Japan, Canada and Namibia, Vanuatu, and Suriname. Add in the number of different types and classes of mail and the additional services – letters, flats, small packages, first class, express, insurance, registered, etc. – and the complexity becomes obvious.

The most likely way to solve this within the time limit is an intersessional amendment to the UPU Acts, the international agreements that govern the UPU and international mail. That means an amendment between sessions of the UPU Congress that takes place every 4 years. The next Congress is in the Fall of 2020. There are a few ways a proposal can be officially submitted. It's going to be a question of which one is likely to work best. Then, that proposal must then be submitted to all 192 countries for a 45-day comment period. The comment period is followed by a 45-day voting period. At the UPU, each country has one vote. Some countries, those in arrears on their payment obligations, can't vote. So, there are about 20 countries in arrears right now. About 170 countries can vote. 2/3 of the voting countries would need to approve the proposed amendment. The next meetings at the UPU are in January and April and this is very likely to be taken up then. I would be extremely surprised if it's not the major topic. Given the complexity of the issues, the number of countries, and the speed normal to the UPU's work, January is too soon to expect much progress.

Some of those commenting on this have said the U.S. can withdraw from the payment portions of the UPU Acts, but remain in the organization. That is at odds with the letter the U.S. delivered. I have been told by someone knowledgeable that State Department and White House lawyers advise the U.S. can't withdraw from one part – it's all or nothing. It's concerning that we're looking at about \$2.7 billion in revenue for the USPS, about 3% of its total or more depending on what documents one consults. International mail has been and is profitable, no matter what the recent rhetoric has been.

The UPU covers all aspect of international mail, all the forms and standards for sending mail between countries. Withdrawing from the UPU might well mean other countries will not accept mail from USPS or send it to the USPS. That affects everything from customs forms and clearance and Advance Electronic Data (AED) to delivery costs and times to access to P.O. Boxes. Postal customs clearance requirements are simpler than commercial customs clearance. AED is required for all commercial shipments, but not all postal items. (This applies to items from individuals as well as companies; it applies to things sent to APO and FPO military addresses from families.) The STOP Act, recently signed into law, requires AED on more incoming international postal shipments. There isn't a mechanism for this globally outside the UPU.

If the U.S. withdraws, there will need to be bilateral or multilateral agreements on mail with the other 191 member countries. They're not all going to just go along with what we want. It will be disruptive to both outgoing and incoming mail. But there is a solution for corporate and institutional

mailers. There is no monopoly on international mail. Items to be mailed can be shipped to other countries in bulk and mailed there. (I don't know whether government mailers will be able to use this.) International mail consolidators and remailers who already work in this space can provide information. It's not ideal. Rules for size and weight will be in grams and centimeters, rates are higher in many other countries but discounts for bulk mail exist, and, finally, undeliverable mail is returned to the country where postage was paid. You'll get it back but not as quickly.

Watch for what happens in April at the UPU and again in July. If a proposal doesn't happen in April, it will go down to the wire.