Fentanyl-Laced Letters Mailed To Election Offices; Five States Hit

Inbound Mail Centers Need To Be On Guard With New Ways To Detect and Contain Fentanyl

WASHINGTON, DC — Authorities were hunting for whoever sent suspicious letters — including some containing fentanyl — to elections offices in at least five states during election week, delaying the counting of ballots in some local races in the latest instance of threats faced by election workers around the country, the Associated Press reports.

The letters were sent to elections offices in Georgia, Nevada, California, Oregon and Washington.

Four of the letters contained fentanyl, the FBI and U.S. Postal Inspection Service reported in a statement to elections officials Thursday.

"Law enforcement is working diligently to intercept any additional letters before they are delivered," the statement said.

Emergency and law enforcement agencies respond to a possible hazmat situation at the King County Elections office in Renton, Wash., Wednesday, Nov. 8, 2023.

Four county elections offices in Washington state were evacuated Wednesday after they received envelopes containing suspicious powders — including two that field-tested positive for fentanyl — while workers were processing ballots from Tuesday's election ... (click to read more)

Detecting, Containing Threats

Fortunately, some of the tainted letters were intercepted by the Postal Service before they arrived, the AP reports.

But what happens when letters make it into the mailroom? What can inbound operations do to minimize threats and detect tainted matter?

To find out, we asked Elric Saaski, CEO, Research International Inc. for his perspective on containing the fentanyl threat.

Research International CEO Elric Saaski measures RPM on a Tritek mail sorting test bed modified to support high-speed aerosol threat detection.

His company specializes in inbound security with advanced systems to identify contaminated mail and packages.

In 1990, Mr. Saaski initiated his third start-up company, Research International. Under his direction an innovative line of counter-terrorism products have been developed that are sold worldwide. Concurrently, Research International has developed and licensed technologies to third parties including a robotic biodetector, several micromachined drug delivery devices, and a cancer therapy.

Mr. Saaski has built an impressive record of conceptualizing and delivering innovative hardware for medical, industrial, and military applications. His engineering career includes developing devices for the Alaska pipeline, for satellites, and medical equipment. He presented at MAILCOM 2023 Atlantic City the session "Advancements in Mail Screening".

MAIL: *Fentanyl is a serious concern in mail and office operations. How is Research addressing fentanyl detection?*

SAASKI: Research International is addressing the fentanyl situation in several ways. We are transitioning our optics-based aerosol threat detection products from operation at 365nm to 280nm. While both excitation wave-

lengths are good for detecting bioaerosol threats, 280nm is a sweet spot for exciting fluorescence from a wide range of illicit drugs that are used to cut fentanyl. While still at the lab stage, we are also investigating spectroscopic methods of rapidly detecting small levels of fentanyl aerosols directly. This is in combination with new approaches for interrogating flats and boxes that more effectively extract and concentrate aerosols.

MAIL: *Are there any systems to detect fentanyl and other lethal drugs?*

SAASKI: Yes, there are primarily three instrument-based approaches that have application to mail operations. An issue with detecting fentanyl is that the vapor pressure is very low and traditional gas-phase methods such as mass spectrometry and ion mobility spectrometry (IMS) need to volatilize samples first using a pre-heater. Systems so equipped are on the market and can detect and identify fentanyl variants. For white powder analysis, several raman spectroscopic instruments can detect and quantify fentanyl variants and mixtures of them with cutting agents.

MAIL: *What vulnerabilities do mail and office operations face with inbound mail/packages.*

SAASKI: Very small aerosol quantities can create ill effects. The lethal dose for fentanyl is in the range of only 2 milligrams and carfentanyl is about 100X more potent. As a reference, the lethal dose for ricin is about 50 milligrams. Significant problems in this context include the fact that standard envelopes and boxes can be quite leaky, mail handling equipment can encourage the discharge of aerosols, and a typical aerosol particle of 2-3 microns diameter can linger in the air for an hour or more.

MAIL: *What is the one piece of advice you would give to mail/office/facility managers when it comes to inbound security?*

SAASKI: If at all possible, minimize the release and dispersal of aerosols during mail handling.

MAIL: *What is your future forecast for inbound security?*

SAASKI: We and our partners in the mail processing business are focusing on methods for doing aerosol containment, monitoring and detection in real-time. With biological and chemical threats it is not acceptable to provide a warning on an hourly or daily basis- action needs to be taken either prior to or at the time of potential aerosol release.

In addition, isolation of mail processing using a negative pressure room will become increasingly important for preventing these lethal airborne agents from migrating and affecting personnel not directly involved in mail handling.

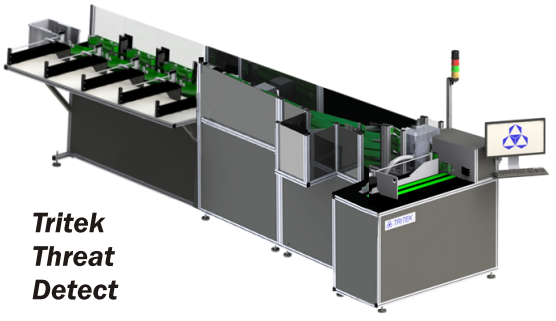
(To reach Elric Saaski, call 1-360-805-4930 or 1-703-625-8381. Or, email info@resrchintl.com. Visit Research International online at resrchintl.com.)

Is Your Mailroom Protected? Yes, With Tritek Threat Detect

WASHINGTON, DC -- In 2002 Tritek began work with the U.S. State Department to securely process incoming mail. Mail had become weaponized with the Anthrax mail attacks after 9/11 and government needed to take precautions.

Fast forward to today and Tritek offers government and corporate mail centers advanced security systems called Tritek Threat Detect. Tritek sorters are equipped with camera systems tied into detection units, so when tainted mail goes through the system the exact piece can be rapidly identified.

Tritek Threat Detect features a Bio-Check Feeder, an advanced system from an earlier design variant tested and certified at U.S. Army Aberdeen Proving Ground's Edgewood Chemical Biological Center. With automatic mailpiece feeding and singulating, the sorter achieves throughput up to 20K pieces per hour.



Tritek Threat Detect

The Bio-Check Feeder features a pinch point that forces air out of mailpiece for collection by bio-check sampling system. The Sampling Chamber processes sampled air to the detection unit and return to HEPA filter. The system detects biological particles with clean air discharge flow through the HEPA filter.

The Reader and Printer Module features image OCR and suspicious criteria detection and high resolution image capture. It also features:

- Mail Piece Dimension Range
- Store images as tiff, jpeg, or pdf formatting as color or grayscale images
- Images presented within range of contaminated mailpiece for investigation
- Screened mail printed with high resolution indicia and time/date stamp

The Sorting and Stacking Module features:

- Media capabilities include postcards, letter mail, and flats
- Single sided left side machine
- For optimized layout (against wall)
- Requires operator on only one side of machine
- Bulk sequential stacking pattern for cross-contamination isolation

Tritek field-proven technology processes all types of mail - postcards, letters, flats, newspapers, magazines and poly wrap items up to 3/4" in thickness including parcels. *Learn more about Tritek's Threat Detect Mail Processing Equipment by calling 302-223-4065 or click www.tritek.com.*