

POSTAL NEWS

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1. U.S. presses Japan on postal reform, beef trade ban

Yoko Nishikawa

TOKYO

Mon Feb 1, 2010 8:16am EST

Related News

* Japan changes auto program after U.S. objects
Tue, Jan 19 2010

TOKYO (Reuters) - The United States on Monday urged Japan to make sure it won't discriminate against U.S. competitors in areas of insurance, banking and express delivery services as Tokyo re-examines the future of its giant postal system.

Barack Obama | Japan

Deputy U.S. Trade Representative Demetrios Marantis also said Washington wanted to normalize beef trade with Tokyo in a way that was "science-based and commercially viable."

Marantis, in Tokyo for the first time in his current capacity, reiterated Washington's stance that Japan must ensure that domestic and foreign companies will be able to compete on equal footing as state-owned Japan Post offers new services.

Japan is freezing sales of shares in Japan Post's financial units, in a retreat by the four-month-old government from a high-profile pro-market reform.

But the full picture of the government's plan to revise the privatization plan, which was pushed by former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, remains unclear.

Japan Post Bank and Japan Post Insurance together hold around 300 trillion yen (\$3,318 billion) in assets.

Marantis said he had constructive talks with his Japanese counterparts on what he called "difficult" issues -- including insurance, beef and automobiles -- in an otherwise "very healthy and robust" bilateral trade relationship.

"I made the point very clear that we are looking to normalize beef trade in a way that is both science-based and commercially viable, and looking forward to working with the Japanese government to accomplish those objectives," Marantis said.

Washington wants Japan to lift its ban on U.S. beef from cattle over the age of 20 months, as the restriction is seen hurting the U.S. beef industry.

Japan bought almost \$1.4 billion of U.S. beef a year before the discovery of the first case of mad cow disease in the United States in December 2003, making it the top U.S. export market.

Tokyo later allowed a limited number of imports from imports from young cattle, but the U.S. beef industry has estimated it is losing about \$1 billion in sales per year because of the restrictions.

Marantis said he was "very pleased" with Japan's decision last month to change its auto replacement incentive program to give U.S. cars more chance to qualify.

A recent string of recalls issued by Toyota Motor Corp covering 8 million vehicles worldwide, was not discussed in his talks with Japanese officials, Marantis added.

(\$1=90.40 Yen)

(Editing by David Fox)

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2. UPDATE: TNT Says Volumes At Express Division Still Improving

FEBRUARY 1, 2010, 5:25 A.M. ET

AMSTERDAM (Dow Jones)--Dutch postal and parcels company TNT NV (TNT.AE) Monday said that the volume of parcels and packages shipped by its express division continued to improve in the fourth quarter of 2009 while a further decline in volumes at its Dutch postal division were in line with expectations.

"The fourth quarter volumes in air, road and domestic at the express division were all above the 2008 level," TNT said, adding that operating margins at the unit had also risen compared with the previous year, driven by cost savings.

TNT said in December last year it ...

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3. Change afoot at USPS

By PETER JOHNSON • Tribune Staff Writer • January 31, 2010

Neither snow, rain, heat nor gloom of night keeps letter carriers from completing their rounds according to the ancient Greek historian Herodotus.

Great Rockies Show

But the reduced volume of mail being sent is definitely changing the way the U.S. Postal Service does its job.

With more people and businesses paying and even receiving bills by e-mail and less personal correspondence, the average household is getting three pieces of mail a day, a drop of two pieces within a few years, said Great Falls Postmaster Dave Chiavaras.

Since the reduced mail volume means less revenue, the Great Falls office, like other postal offices around the country, has expanded the size of its routes and not filled vacancies.

In the last two years, the Great Falls office has lost about 10 percent, or seven of its carriers, to retirement and not replaced them, he said.

"Letter carriers are walking farther on bigger routes, because of the reduction in volume of mail," Chiavaras said, with some routes involving seven to 10 miles of walking. "That can mean longer hours, which is why you sometimes see carriers wearing head lamps in winter when daylight hours are shorter."

Increased automation helped some, with carriers now starting their shifts by sorting larger, flat mail for about 90 minutes and machines sorting most of the letters. A decade ago, sorting took three hours of carrier time.

The Great Falls office has 54 city routes, seven rural routes and three highway routes that are contracted out.

Because it delivers six days a week, but carriers work only five, it has 68 full-time carriers, as well as some part-time and seasonal carriers, plus 35 clerks who help sort mail for about one-quarter of the state.

Letter carrier George Heisler, 39, a carrier for nine years, called it "interesting work."

"Every day is different," with the weather and folks along the route to greet varying, he added.

Carriers learn by trial and error what to wear in cold weather, said Heisler, current state president and past local president of the Association of Letter Carriers union.

He likes to dress in lighter layers, but some prefer large, heavy coats. They can ask supervisor permission for time to warm up in dire weather. In summer heat it's essential to have plenty of water.

The median age for Great Falls carriers is in the late 40s to early 50s, Heisler said.

Starting wages are about \$47,000 a year and peak at about \$56,000, he said, with carriers given the option of working overtime to complete longer routes, especially when volume is heavier around Christmas.

The job is not easy work to learn or do, said Chiavaras, who estimated he has fired about 60 percent of the carriers he's hired over the course of his career during their probationary period.

The work involves a lot of walking, quick and accurate sorting and memorization.

Carriers sort flat mail by address at the office, and then review the names on letters as they walk the route to double-check the automated sorting.

Carriers are timed in sorting and delivering their mail and asked to do it within time frames set by computer program, said Heisler, who said the union objects to such added stress.

"We think the contract's call for fair wages for fair hours worked is sufficient," he said.

Nevertheless, the postal carriers union has compromised with the postal management on a streamlined method of adjusting routes during this period of declining mail volume.

It's saved the postal service time and money.

"We've cooperated so we can keep good, middle-income jobs," Heisler said.

The amount of mail volume stabilized last year in Great Falls and nationally, he said, indicating the economy could be picking up. He said it could be time soon for renewed hiring.

But competition will be tough for the good-paying jobs during a time when unemployment is still high, Heisler said.

Applicants take a postal service test, and veterans are given extra points.

Postal Service officials also have raised the possibility of eliminating delivery on Saturday to cut expenses, a change that would require congressional approval.

Heisler said he's against going to five-day delivery, because it could spur a private company to step in and serve businesses wanting Saturday mail pickup and delivery.

"That could lead the Postal Service, which is required to deliver everywhere, into a death spiral," he said.

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