



Alaska's Bypass Mail Program

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Table of Contents

Introduction 1

Types of USPS Mail Service in Alaska 1

Bypass Mail History 2

Bypass Mail: How it Works 3

Alaska DOT&PF’s Role 6

Changes to Bypass Mail 6

Conclusion 6

Table of Figures

Figure 1. Bypass mail being loaded by Lynden Air Cargo. 2

Figure 2. Bypass mail being loaded by Northern Air Cargo. 3

Figure 3. Pallets of bypass mail being moved for transport. 4

Figure 4. Bypass mail being loaded by Northern Air Cargo. 7

Appendices

Appendix 1. Bypass Mail Points for Anchorage and Fairbanks (United States Postal Service Handbook PO-508, Appendix A: Alaska Bypass Mail Procedures, Attachment D)



Introduction

Delivering the mail is not easy in remote Alaska, but it is the mission of the United States Postal Service (USPS) to “provide the nation with reliable, affordable, universal mail service.” Federal law requires the USPS to serve all patrons in all communities promptly, reliably, and efficiently (39 USC § 101(a)) and the law explicitly states that the USPS must service rural areas and small towns, even if a post office is not self-sustaining or is operating at a deficit (39 USC § 101(b)). To fulfill this mandate in Alaska’s unique environment, the USPS developed Bypass Mail as a means to ensure efficient delivery of bulk shipments to rural communities.

Due to Alaska’s size, terrain, and limited road system, the USPS must utilize alternative and sometimes creative modes of transportation, such as airplane, helicopter, and even hovercraft, to deliver the mail. The delivery process must also navigate the dispersed nature of Alaskan communities, with many small villages being serviced by a few central hubs. Maintaining the facilities and staff to process mail in each small community is not feasible, so the Bypass Mail program was established “to alleviate congestion of mail in processing centers by creating bypass mail acceptance points” (USPS Handbook PO-508). Practically speaking, bush mail is processed in Anchorage and Fairbanks by the air carriers that will deliver it to its final destination.

The Bypass Mail program has been enshrined in federal code (39 USC 5402) for over fifty years and continues to serve as an essential lifeline to keep remote communities connected through regular, affordable, and equitable mail service. The primary recipients of Bypass Mail include rural Alaska community stores (often just one in each community) and public institutions such as schools, hospitals, health centers, and elder care facilities that operate on extremely limited budgets. These key entities serving rural Alaskans depend on the Bypass Mail program for shipment of essential goods and supplies, including grocery and food items.

Types of USPS Mail Service in Alaska

To understand the Bypass Mail program, it’s helpful to take a step back and provide some context about the different types of mail service available in Alaska. There are two categories of intra-state mail in Alaska: priority rate mail, which includes First-Class, Priority, and Express Mail, and non-priority rate mail, which includes in-house non-priority mail and Bypass Mail. In the Lower 48 states, priority rate mail is typically transported by air, while non-priority rate mail travels by ground transportation. In Alaska, however, most non-priority mail travels by air, since ground transportation is not possible. Despite the higher cost of air transportation, Alaskan non-priority mail is still shipped at ground-based postage rates to ensure that the USPS meets its universal service obligation (USO).¹ The USPS

UNIVERSAL SERVICE OBLIGATION

The USPS’s universal service obligation (USO) is a collection of laws and regulations that outline the minimum level of service the USPS is required to provide. Some requirements are more clearly defined than others, but the USO generally includes considerations for geographic scope, range of products, access, delivery mode and frequency, pricing, and service.

¹ <https://www.uspsoig.gov/focus-areas/focus-on/universal-service-obligation> and <https://about.usps.com/what/strategic-plans/postal-act-2006/universal-postal-service.htm>



defines Bypass Mail as “Parcel Post² mail that is prepared so as not to require handling by Postal Service personnel or in a Postal Service facility.”³ The Bypass Mail system helps prevent bottlenecks and backlogs in Alaska’s postal network by allowing air carriers to handle mail processing and delivery, eliminating the need for USPS to build facilities or staff operations in more than 200 remote communities.

Bypass Mail History

Bypass Mail was developed by Alaskan postal employees in the 1970s who were overwhelmed by the huge volumes of non-priority mail being shipped to rural Alaska from Anchorage-area post offices. These employees developed a system to transfer large orders directly to air carriers for shipment to the bush (Mondor 2025). This solution helped alleviate massive bottlenecks of individual non-priority shipments that were occurring in Anchorage and other hubs such as Bethel, where providing sufficient storage space for packages was also a challenge. A 2011 report of the USPS Inspector General dates the creation of the Bypass Mail program to 1972 and describes it originally as a “mutually beneficial solution between the USPS and air carriers to remove bottlenecks and improve service.”⁴



Credit: Lynden Air Cargo

Figure 1. Bypass mail being loaded by Lynden Air Cargo.

² The Parcel Post service has evolved into USPS Ground Advantage, but the handbook was written prior to the name change.

³ https://about.usps.com/handbooks/po508/po508_ch8_001.htm

⁴ <https://www.uspsaig.gov/reports/white-papers/alaska-bypass-beyond-its-original-purpose>

Bypass Mail: How it Works

The Bypass Mail program allows bulk shipments that meet certain criteria set by the USPS to 'bypass' official postal facilities for direct delivery by air carriers to rural Alaska recipients. To ship via Bypass Mail, shippers must first apply to the program with a cover letter and application to the USPS. After approval, shippers enter Bypass Mail shipments into an online interface called Surface-Air Management System Alaska (S-AMS Alaska). To meet its USO, the USPS charges shippers ground-based rates for Alaska non-priority mail that travels by air, just as it would for non-priority mail transported by truck in the Lower 48.

The U.S. DOT sets the rates that the USPS must pay to mainline and bush air carriers that transport and deliver Bypass Mail. Mainline carriers⁵ are paid different rates for priority versus non-priority service, while bush carriers are paid one rate regardless of the type of service.⁶ Mainline carriers accept bypass mail at Ted Stevens Anchorage International Airport (ANC) and Fairbanks International Airport (FAI)⁷ and then transfer shipments to bush carriers at a Bypass Mail hub point.⁸ Service is currently provided to 20 regional hubs and 120–130 bush community destinations.



Credit: Northern Air Cargo

Figure 2. Bypass mail being loaded by Northern Air Cargo.

While the mail itself bypasses USPS facilities, the requirements for the Bypass Mail process are set out in USPS Handbook PO-508 – Intra-Alaska Mail Service by Air. To be shipped as Bypass Mail, shipments must be prepared in accordance with the Domestic Mail Manual⁹ and the USPS Handbook PO-508, Chapter 8, Bypass Mail Process.¹⁰ Section 8-3.5 Shipment Preparation provides these guidelines.

Bypass shipments must be palletized and shrink wrapped, of uniform size not larger than 40 in. by 48 in. by 72 in., with weight uniformly distributed and the heaviest items on the bottom. Shipments must be labelled following USPS requirements,¹¹ and each pallet cannot exceed 2,500 pounds in total. Each 'order' sent directly from the shipper to the recipient via the Bypass Mail process must weigh a

⁵ There are four mainline carriers in Alaska: Alaska Airlines, Everts Air Cargo, Lynden Air Cargo, and Northern Air Cargo.

⁶ <https://www.uspsoig.gov/reports/audit-reports/alaska-mail-services>

⁷ https://about.usps.com/handbooks/po508/po508_ch8_005.htm

⁸ Hub points and bush points for the Bypass Mail program are listed in Appendix A of Handbook PO-508.

https://about.usps.com/handbooks/po508/po508_app_a_011.htm#ep1051964

⁹ https://pe.usps.com/text/dmm300/dmm300_landing.htm

¹⁰ https://about.usps.com/handbooks/po508/po508_ch8_001.htm

¹¹ https://about.usps.com/handbooks/po508/po508_ch8_007.htm

minimum of 1,000 pounds and may not exceed 50,000 pounds, meaning that a single order can comprise multiple pallets. HAZMAT items and construction materials cannot be shipped through Bypass Mail. Freeze and chill items may be shipped bypass, but the USPS is clear that this is at the shippers' own risk, and many carriers lack sufficient cold storage for such items.

The typical journey for a Bypass Mail shipment is acceptance by a mainline carrier at ANC or FAI, transport by the mainline air carrier to a hub point, transfer at the hub point to a bush carrier, and direct delivery by the bush carrier to the rural Alaska recipient in the bush point community. USPS guidelines emphasize that air carriers must maintain the integrity of each Bypass Mail order from acceptance point to final delivery, meaning that pallets are to be left intact as much as possible, and if broken down into smaller packages due to aircraft size requirements, labelled appropriately. Bypass Mail shipments cannot be sent to P.O. boxes, and the final air carrier has the responsibility of delivering the shipment directly to the recipient's physical address.

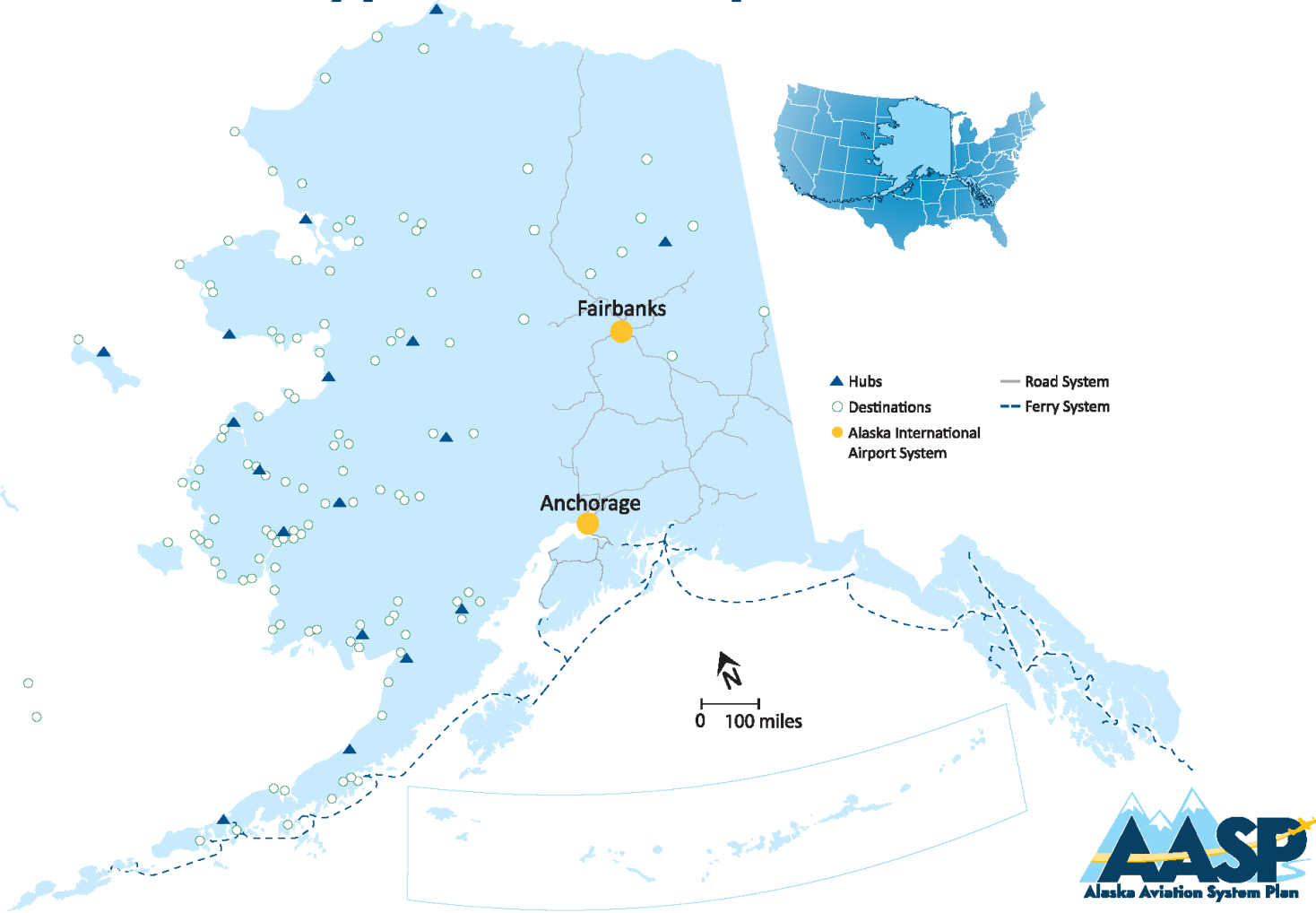


Credit: Lynden Air Cargo

Figure 3. Pallets of bypass mail being moved for transport.



Alaska Bypass Mail Footprint, 2025



Alaska DOT&PF's Role

The Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (DOT&PF) supports Bypass Mail by maintaining and upgrading airport infrastructure necessary for mail delivery to Alaska's rural communities. This occurs through the project development process and the Airport Capital Improvement Program (ACIP), in coordination with the FAA and airport stakeholders. DOT&PF and other public airport sponsors across Alaska construct and maintain the statewide airport network that serves as the backbone for critical services like Bypass Mail, ensuring rural communities receive consistent access to goods through the program.

For example, in 2009 the DOT&PF assembled a Work Group to better address postal hub considerations in the AASP. This group focused on developing solutions to improve coordination between DOT&PF and the USPS to set infrastructure and funding priorities at Alaskan airports. They engaged Bypass Mail air carriers to better understand their infrastructure needs and limitations. In recent years, DOT&PF has been working to address other issues that impact air carriers' ability to fly Bypass Mail safely and reliably, such as improving the Automated Weather Observing System (AWOS) and Automated Surface Observing Systems (ASOS) to provide more accurate weather reporting to pilots across the state.

Changes to Bypass Mail

Throughout its history, the Bypass Mail program has faced scrutiny from Lower 48 lawmakers and USPS leadership, with repeated calls for restructuring or defunding due to its high operating cost. The 2011 USPS report was extremely critical of the program, calling Bypass Mail "a freight system that includes items seemingly considered nonmailable anywhere else in the United States" (Mondor 2025). The program also faced threats during a congressional hearing in 2014 and in 2020 under Postmaster General Louis DeJoy's cost-cutting measures. However, Alaska's elected officials, air carriers, and the public have always defended the program, citing the USPS's USO and the absolute necessity of the program to rural Alaska communities.

Over the years, lawmakers and policymakers have proposed numerous changes to the Bypass Mail program, ranging from modest cost-saving and efficiency improvements to calls for eliminating the program entirely. Many options for restructuring have been discussed, including increasing the number of bypass mail hub points, improving mail tracking and air carrier payment systems, and utilizing more types of surface transportation for on-road communities. Some creative solutions have been implemented, including utilizing hovercrafts to deliver mail to communities surrounding Bethel and trucking mail from Fairbanks to Deadhorse along the Dalton Highway.

Conclusion

Alaska's Bypass Mail program was created to address severe overloading and backlogs within the state's USPS postal facilities in the 1970s caused by the large amount of non-priority mail being sent to the bush. Bypass Mail's existence means that the USPS can meet its USO without constructing the numerous



warehouse facilities and hiring the staff that would be necessary to deliver mail to Alaska's rural and remote communities in the absence of the program.

Alaska's approved air carriers, under the Bypass Mail program, assume the roles of delivery and infrastructure support—building, staffing, and maintaining storage facilities that the USPS would otherwise be obligated to provide. Any reductions or cuts to Bypass Mail would be immediately felt across Alaska, specifically institutions such as village stores, schools, health centers, elder care facilities, and other providers serving some of the state's most vulnerable residents. These institutions operate on shoe-string budgets and depend on Bypass Mail for access to essential goods like grocery items and dry bulk goods.

Bypass Mail is once again being evaluated for potential funding reductions, though the extent of any cost savings remains uncertain. Discontinuing the program would significantly increase the cost of living in rural Alaska and could create widespread logistical and humanitarian challenges requiring intervention from other federally supported services. Air carriers would face higher operating costs without Bypass Mail payments, driving up prices for passenger travel, medevac flights, medical transport, and freight. The same mail processing backlogs and delivery challenges that led to the program's creation would reemerge, severely straining USPS operations and jeopardizing reliable, affordable mail service for communities across Alaska.

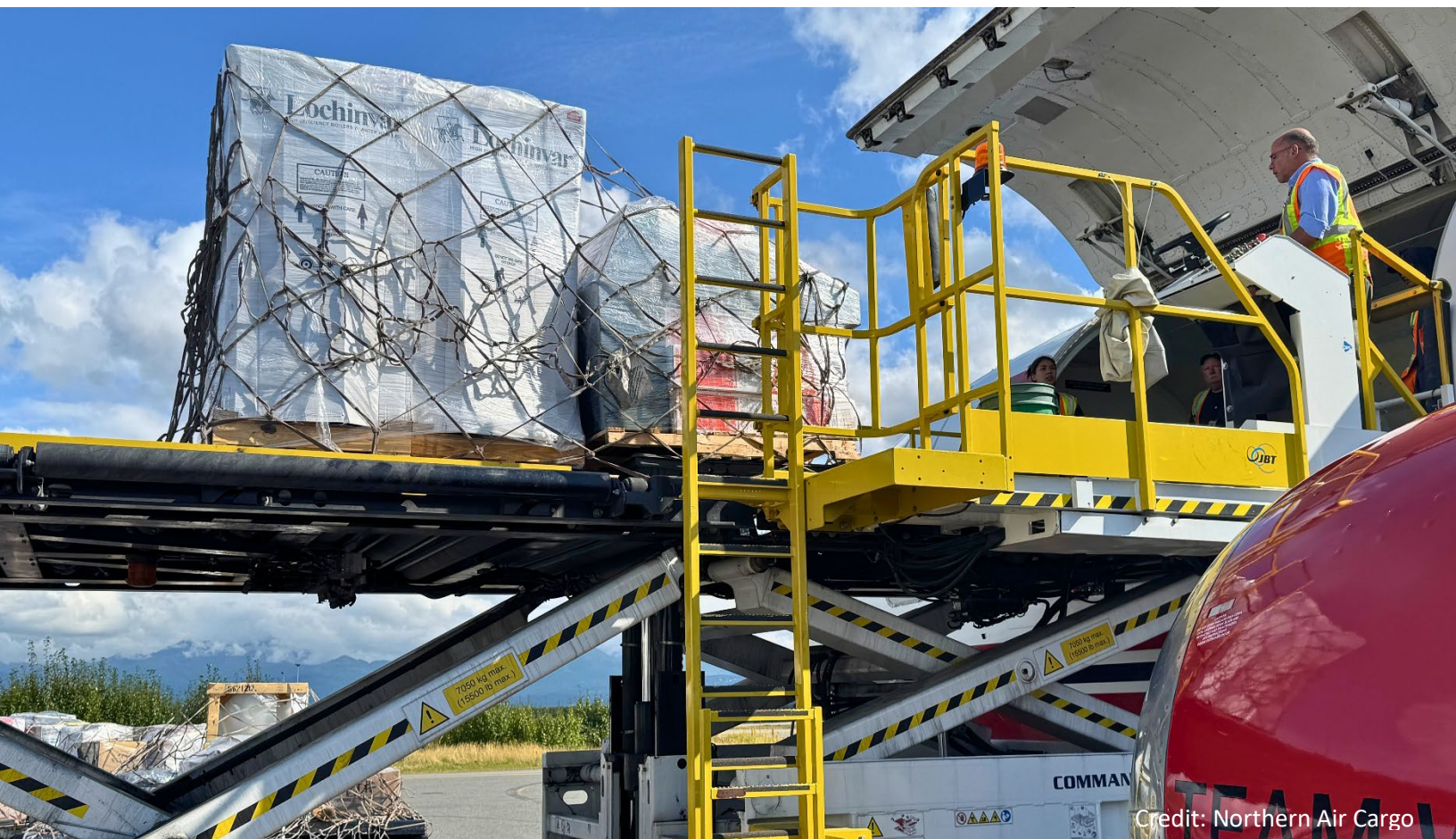


Figure 4. Bypass mail being loaded by Northern Air Cargo.



Appendix 1. Bypass Mail Points for Anchorage and Fairbanks (United States Postal Service Handbook PO-508, Appendix A: Alaska Bypass Mail Procedures, Attachment D)

Note: This handbook has not been updated since 2012, but USPS confirmed this is their most current list.



Attachment D

Bypass Mail Points for Anchorage and Fairbanks

Hub points are listed with capital letters, bold, and underlining. Bush points are listed under their hub point. The three-letter code is the alpha airport code.

For each hub point, the bush points are listed in alphabetical order first by city and then by the three-letter airport code. The information in the two lists is the same, but just presented in different order.

Anchorage Originating Bypass Mail Points — Alphabetical By City

ANCHORAGE	ANC	BETHEL (Cont'd)	BET	ILIAMNA	ILI
Sand Point	SDP	Newtok	WWT	Kokhannok Bay	KNK
St. George Island	STG	Nightmute	NME	Nondalton	NNL
St. Paul Island	SNP	Nunapitchuk	NUP	Pedro Bay	PDB
ANIAK	ANI	Platinum	PTU	Port Alsworth	PTA
Anvik	ANV	Quinhagak	KWN	KING SALMON	AKN
Chauthbuluk	CHU	Scammon Bay	SCM	Egegik	EGX
Crooked Creek	CKD	Toksook Bay	OOK	Levelock	KLL
Grayling	KGX	Tuluksak	TLT	Pilot Point	PIP
Holy Cross	HCR	Tuntutuliak	WTL	South Naknek	WSN
Kalskag	KLK	Tununak	TNK	KOTZEBUE	OTZ
Lower Kalskag	KLK	COLD BAY	CDB	Ambler	ABL
Red Devil	RDV	False Pass	KFP	Buckland	BKC
Russian Mission	RSH	King Cove	KVC	Deering	DRG
Shageluk	SHX	Nelson Lagoon	NLG	Kiana	IAN
Sleetmute	SLQ	Port Moller	PML	Kivilina	KVL
Stony River	SRV	DILLINGHAM	DLG	Kobuk	OBU
BETHEL	BET	Aleknagik	WKK	Noatak	WTK
Akiachak	KKI	Clarks Point	CLP	Noorvik	ORV
Akiak	AKI	Ekwok	KEK	Point Hope	PHO
Atmaultluak	ATT	Koliganek	KGK	Selawik	WLK
Chefornak	CYF	Manokotak	KMO	Shungnak	SHG
Chevak	VAK	New Stuyahok	KNW	McGRATH	MCG
Eek	EEK	Togiak	TOG	Nikolai	NIB
Goodnews Bay	GNU	Twin Hills	TWA	Takotna	TCT
Hooper Bay	HPB	EMMONAK	EMK	Tatalina	TLJ
Kasigluk	KUK	Alakanuk	AUK	NOME	OME
Kipnuk	KPN	Kotlik	KOT	Brevig Mission	KTS
Kongiganak	KKH	Sheldon Point/ Nunam Iqua	SXP	Elim	ELI
Kwethluk	KWT	GALENA	GAL	Golovin	GLV
Kwigillingok	KWK	Hughes	HUS	Shishmaref	SHH
Marshall/Fortuna Ledge	MLL	Huslia	HSL	Teller	TLA
Mekoryuk	MYU	Kaltag	KAL	Tin City	TNC
Napakiak	WNA	Koyukuk	KYU	Wales	WAA
Napaskiak	PKA	Nulato	NUL	White Mountain	WMO
		Ruby	RBY		

PORT HEIDEN	PTH	SAVOONGA	SVA
Chignik	KCG	Gambell	GAM
Chignik Lagoon	KCL	UNALAKLEET	UNK
Chignik Lake	KCQ	Koyuk	KKA
Perryville	KPV	Saint Michael	SMK
SAINT MARYS	KSM	Shaktoolik	SKK
Mountain Village	MOU	Stebbins	WBB
Pilot Station	PQS		
Pitkas Point	PQS		

Anchorage Originating Bypass Mail Points — Alphabetical By Air Stop Code

AKN	KING SALMON	BET	BETHEL (Cont'd)	DLG	DILLINGHAM (Cont'd)
EGX	Egegik	KPN	Kipnuk	TOG	Togiak
KLL	Levelock	KUK	Kasigluk	TWA	Twin Hills
PIP	Pilot Point	KWK	Kwigillingok	WKK	Aleknagik
WSN	South Naknek	KWN	Quinhagak	EMK	EMMONAK
ANC	ANCHORAGE	KWT	Kwethluk	AUK	Alakanuk
SDP	Sand Point	MLL	Marshall/Fortuna Ledge	KOT	Kotlik
SNP	St. Paul Island	MYU	Mekoryuk	SXP	Sheldon Point/ Nunam Iqua
STG	St. George Island	NME	Nightmute	GAL	GALENA
ANI	ANIAK	NUP	Nunapitchuk	HSL	Huslia
ANV	Anvik	OOK	Toksook Bay	HUS	Hughes
CHU	Chauthbuluk	PKA	Napaskiak	KAL	Kaltag
CKD	Crooked Creek	PTU	Platinum	KYU	Koyukuk
HCR	Holy Cross	SCM	Scammon Bay	NUL	Nulato
KGX	Grayling	TLT	Tuluksak	RBV	Ruby
KLK	Kalskag	TNK	Tununak	ILI	ILIAMNA
KLK	Lower Kalskag	VAK	Chevak	KNK	Kokhannok Bay
RDV	Red Devil	WNA	Napakiak	NNL	Nondalton
RSH	Russian Mission	WTL	Tuntutuliak	PDB	Pedro Bay
SHX	Shageluk	WWT	Newtok	PTA	Port Alsworth
SLQ	Sleetmute	CDB	COLD BAY	KSM	SAINT MARYS
SRV	Stony River	KFP	False Pass	MOU	Mountain Village
BET	BETHEL	KVC	King Cove	PQS	Pilot Station
AKI	Akiak	NLG	Nelson Lagoon	PQS	Pitkas Point
ATT	Atmautluak	PML	Port Moller	MCG	McGRATH
CYF	Chefornak	DLG	DILLINGHAM	NIB	Nikolai
EEK	Eek	CLP	Clarks Point	TCT	Takotna
GNU	Goodnews Bay	KEK	Ekwok	TLJ	Tatalina
HPB	Hooper Bay	KGK	Koliganek		
KKH	Kongiganak	KMO	Manokotak		
KKI	Akiachak	KNW	New Stuyahok		

OME	NOME	OTZ	KOTZEBUE	PTH	PORT HEIDEN
ELI	Elim	ABL	Ambler	KCG	Chignik
GLV	Golovin	BKC	Buckland	KCL	Chignik Lagoon
KTS	Brevig Mission	DRG	Deering	KCQ	Chignik Lake
SHH	Shishmaref	IAN	Kiana	KPV	Perryville
TLA	Teller	KVL	Kivilina	SVA	SAVOONGA
TNC	Tin City	OBU	Kobuk	GAM	Gambell
WAA	Wales	ORV	Noorvik	UNK	UNALAKLEET
WMO	White Mountain	PHO	Point Hope	KKA	Koyuk
		SHG	Shungnak	SKK	Shaktoolik
		WLK	Selawik	SMK	Saint Michael
		WTK	Noatak	WBB	Stebbins

Fairbanks Originating Bypass Mail Points — Alphabetical By City

BARROW	BRW	FORT YUKON	FYU
Atqasuk	ATK	Arctic Village	ARC
Point Lay	PIZ	Chalkyitsik	CIK
Wainwright	AIN	Venetie	VEE
FAIRBANKS	FAI	GALENA	GAL
Anaktuvuk Pass	AKP	Hughes	HUS
Beaver	WBQ	Huslia	HSL
Bettles	BTT	Kaltag	KAL
Eagle	EAA	Koyukuk	KYU
Stevens Village	SVS	Nulato	NUL
Tanana	TAL	Ruby	RBY

Fairbanks Originating Bypass Mail Points — Alphabetical By Air Stop Code

BRW	BARROW	FYU	FORT YUKON
AIN	Wainwright	ARC	Arctic Village
ATK	Atqasuk	CIK	Chalkyitsik
PIZ	Point Lay	VEE	Venetie
FAI	FAIRBANKS	GAL	GALENA
AKP	Anaktuvuk Pass	HSL	Huslia
BTT	Bettles	HUS	Hughes
EAA	Eagle	KAL	Kaltag
SVS	Stevens Village	KYU	Koyukuk
TAL	Tanana	NUL	Nulato
WBQ	Beaver	RBY	Ruby