

U.S. Special Handling: Fragile

A New Niche for an Old Service

BY ROBERT G. RUFÉ

The text “Special handling” means “fragile,” not speed. At least that has been the case, officially, since June 1, 2015, according to the United States Postal Service. For the flat fee of \$10.35, you can obtain a colorful new label and specify you want your merchandise treated with kid gloves.

The 3-inch-by-1.857-inch label [Figure 1] can be used in place of printing or hand-stamping the required marking of “Special Handling-Fragile” on mailpieces when this service is either requested or required, and the extra service fee is paid.

With the fee and the label or markings, this mail will be segregated in special-handling bins, or “hods,” and move separately through the mailstream. This has always been the case for sensitive parcels such as baby chicks and honeybees, but is apparently extended as an option for any fragile item specified by the postal customer.

U.S. Special Handling was introduced in 1925 as a designated service with its own service-inscribed stamps [Figure 2], to allow live chicks, queen bees and baby alligators to move with the speed of first-class mail. The expedited service provided assurance that baby chicks would survive in the mails, and therefore is widely recognized as the forerunner of Priority Mail parcel service.

Prior to the recent reclassification, the official description for Special Handling only meant speed and efficiency — not gentle care of fragile merchandise, even if the latter seems implied by the nature of the contents, such as live chicks.



Figure 1. A new United States Postal Service label from June 2015 associated with the “Special Handling-Fragile” service.

Special Handling has remained “on the books” continuously since 1925, but after the introduction of Priority Mail in 1968, Special Handling began a downward spiral in sales revenue as costs and publicity changed to favor Priority Mail.

Now, however, Special Handling has new life because its definition and character has been repurposed to cater to mail matter requiring delicate and gentle treatment. Inquiries with Postal Service personnel confirm that such parcels will travel with special care in a separate stream outside the conventional treatment of parcel mail.

One page of a USPS website states: “Special Handling-Fragile. Get preferential handling if you’re sending unusual shipments that are fragile or for other mailable content that needs extra care.”

The service is available for most popular mailing categories — first class letters and parcels, Priority Mail, media mail, standard post, and library mail.

The three-ounce envelope shown [Figure 3], has the new Special Handling-Fragile label applied.

The former weight categories and rates — less than 10 pounds for \$9.90 and more than 10 pounds for \$13 — have been eliminated to streamline the extra service’s offerings. The single flat fee of \$10.35 applies to any eligible weight piece up to 70 pounds. The most significant and visible change in the service is the addition of the term “fragile.” Ironically, the fragile bees and chicks once sent via “Special Handling” today all move via Priority or Express Mail.

Rhetorically, collectors might wonder if they declare something is “fragile,” will they be required to pay the fee for Special Handling? The answer is no, but you may be offered the new service.

Conversely, if you want the “Fragile” service, and the labels are not available in my post office, can you still receive the service? Yes, by just paying the fee



Figure 2. This is the 25-cent service-designated stamp issued in 1925 when Special Handling was first introduced for shipping live chicks and bees.



Figure 3. A three-ounce parcel sent with the new "Special Handling-Fragile" service.

and adding the "Special Handling-Fragile" declaration to the mailpiece.

The new fragile option appears in the post office counter service computer terminals. The words "Special Handling," as such, no longer appear anywhere in the clerk's electronic terminal software.

Figure 4 shows an enlarged portion of the fragile section of a receipt for a first-class letter mailed on June 1.

Additional test shipments were made on the same date utilizing the first-class parcel service. The new service carries no indemnification, but insurance may be purchased separately, of course, and the new insurance forms actually cater to the upgraded Special Handling-Fragile service.

The revised USPS insurance forms (Form 3813-P, April 2015) carry a higher threshold of \$500. The Special Handling

06/01/2015 (7052 1054 03:04:03 PM)

Sales Receipt

Product Description	Sale Qty	Unit Price	Final Price
		Zone-1	\$0.49
First-Class Mail Letter			
0.30 oz.			
Expected Delivery: Wed 06/03/15			
Fragile			\$10.35
Customer Postage			-\$5.75
			=====
Issue Postage:			\$5.09

Figure 4. Part of the U.S. Postal Service counter receipt highlighting the "Fragile" service.

section checkbox is similar for both types of insurance forms.

The section is divided in two parts: "No Fee" for "Perishable" and "Hazardous Material Transportation" items. "With Fee" for "Fragile" (\$10.35 flat fee) and "Live Animal Transportation" (20 cents per pound) items. "Live Animal Transportation" is an addition to the forms, whereas the "Liquid" check box has been removed.

While there is no fee for hazardous materials, perishable shipments, or cremated remains, these categories do require the appropriate unique service codes to identify the contents within the mailstream, and must be declared when presented at the retail counter.

So, what direction will this service change take us? Perhaps a "Fragile" declaration by postal patrons will one day result in a mandatory service fee for such parcels. Will other merchandise categories follow?

The Postal Service has kept the Special Handling service, rewriting and re-characterizing the description so that it provides "delicate treatment" of fragile merchandise. It has nothing to do anymore with expediting parcels. I can almost hear the clerks offering: "... and would you like the fragile parcel service?"

The Author

Robert G. Rufe of Delaware, is an active United States Stamp Society member, and regularly volunteers for the society tables at the New York ASDA and APS StampShow events. He is the son and grandson of postmasters in eastern Pennsylvania. His studies of the U.S. Special Handling issue resulted in the 2007 USSS Hopkinson Literature Award. His exhibit, "U.S. Special Handling 1925-1959: The Stamps and the Service," has garnered 23 gold awards at WSP national shows, and the World Series of Philately grand award at three shows.