

Supreme Court sides with Alabama company in patent dispute

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In this Feb. 14, 2019, file photo, Mitch Hungerpiller of Birmingham, Ala., who invented a computerized system to automate the processing of returned mail, poses for a photo outside of the Supreme Court in Washington. The Supreme Court is siding with an Alabama company over the U.S. Postal Service in a patent dispute. The justices said Monday, June 10, that the government can't use a 2011 law to challenge a patent held by Birmingham-based Return Mail. The dispute involves a patent Return Mail got for a system that processes mail that gets returned as undeliverable. (AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite, File)

The Supreme Court sided Monday with an Alabama technology company over the U.S. Postal Service in a patent dispute.

The dispute before the [justices](#) had to do with U.S. Patent No. 6,826,548. That's the patent Birmingham-based Return Mail has for a system that uses barcodes, scanning equipment and computer databases to process returned mail almost entirely automatically. The Postal Service initially expressed interest in Return Mail's invention but ultimately developed its own, similar system. That led to a dispute over the company's patent.

On Monday, the court sided 6-3 with Return Mail. Of the Postal Service's arguments, Justice Sonia Sotomayor deadpanned in an opinion : "None delivers."

The dispute began when the Postal Service tried and failed to get Return Mail's patent invalidated. Return Mail sued, arguing that the government should pay for using its invention without permission.

Just as Return Mail thought it might be gaining the upper hand, the Postal Service switched tactics, using a 2011 law to challenge Return Mail's patent. The Leahy-Smith America Invents Act says that a "person who is not the owner of a patent," can file a [patent](#) challenge using the law. The Postal Service argued it counted as a "person" under the law, but the Supreme Court disagreed.

The case is Return Mail v. USPS, 17-1594.

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