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BUSINESS | LOGISTICS

How Amazon Is Bringing Fast Delivery to Rural America

The e-commerce giant is building shipping hubs in the U.S. hinterlands as it looks to reduce reliance on the U.S. Postal Service

By [Sean McLain](#) [Follow](#)

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Amazon driver Matthew Norton taking a photo after dropping off a package. SEAN MCLAIN/WSJ

CONNER, Mont.—A little past noon, [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) AMZN **-1.38%** ▼ driver Matthew Norton pulled his Ford F-250 pickup up alongside the Bitterroot River. He removed a small package and stashed it in a drop-box at the foot of a crude bridge with a sign: Private Bridge, No Trespassing.

Norton and his pickup are part of a [\\$4 billion investment](#) by Amazon to push its signature speedy delivery further into the [rural recesses of the U.S.](#)

In dozens of thinly populated regions across the country, Amazon is building new delivery hubs to deliver packages in around two days. That might not seem especially rapid at a time when the e-commerce giant is introducing [one-hour delivery](#) in some

areas, but residents of some far-flung Montana hamlets were used to waiting up to a week for their orders.

The effort helps Amazon [reduce its reliance](#) on the U.S. Postal Service, a relationship that has become rocky following a dispute over contract terms. Amazon says it aims ultimately to have 200 rural delivery hubs serving around 13,000 ZIP Codes covering around 1.2 million square miles of America—an area the size of Texas, California and Alaska combined.

Delivering packages within Amazon's signature two-day frame means drivers contend with backcountry challenges such as bighorn sheep on the road, dangerously high winds in mountain passes and roads that are impassable during parts of the year.

Norton says many of his customers are regulars. "They order online, because they don't have many stores and their closest grocery store is an hour away."

Amazon currently operates around 560 delivery stations across the country, of which around 160 are in rural areas, said Marc Wulfraat, president of MWPVL International, a supply-chain consultancy that monitors the e-commerce company's logistics network. At its current pace of constructing around 40 to 50 new delivery hubs a year, Wulfraat estimates that Amazon will be able to ship packages to every U.S. ZIP Code in four years.

Wulfraat said Amazon has been burned in the past by partners not delivering on time. In 2013, a sudden [surge in Amazon orders overwhelmed](#) United Parcel Service causing some packages to not make it in time for Christmas. The next year, Amazon started experimenting with its [own "last-mile delivery" service](#).

Holly Sullivan, Amazon's vice president for worldwide economic development, said that over the past decade, Amazon has expanded from major cities to regional urban centers by drawing ever larger circles of coverage. That is now allowing the company to lean on those urban hubs to speed up deliveries in ranch country, Sullivan said.

"We would ideally like to deliver products in two days or less. So how do we make that happen? We have to invest in that," Sullivan said.

There are signs that Amazon customers in remote areas are just as likely to get hooked on speedy delivery as city slickers. Norton, the delivery driver, said he might drop a few packages off at a new customer's house. "Then the following week would be like six to 10 huge boxes and just continually ordering," he said.

“When I first moved here 10 years ago, I couldn’t even buy Christmas ribbon,” said Lisa Mouritsen, a 62-year-old artist from Darby, Mont. “I had to go clear to Missoula, which is 45 minutes to an hour away.”

Around 14,000 packages leave the warehouse located on the outskirts of the city of Missoula on an average day, said Cody Cameron, the site manager. “I’m starting to look at how I can expand my operation,” Cameron said.

Getting packages to the wilds of Montana within 48 hours requires careful choreography.

Deliveries to the Missoula warehouse come from a large urban hub in Spokane, Wash., a three-hour drive across two mountain passes. The location means delays are still possible. High winds from a recent winter storm prevented some trucks from making it to Missoula.

Packages that have been sorted into totes before being loaded onto vehicles at Amazon’s warehouse near Missoula. SEAN MCLAIN/WSJ

When the trucks arrive in the evening, they are unloaded and workers sort the packages into racks organized by numbers and letters. While Amazon has been [increasingly using robots](#) to automate this work in its large distribution centers, humans do it all here.

Early in the morning, workers prepare to send parcels out for delivery by sorting them into large square tote bags. Scanners tethered to a smartphone help them find the packages on long rows of shelves. Each picker has a different color light so they

can quickly find the right rack. Starting at around 9 a.m., the vans pull up outside, the shutters on the loading docks go up and drivers wheel the carts to their truck.

The Missoula warehouse is one of the first delivery stations to test an off-road capable delivery vehicle, the Ford truck driven by Norton. Dubbed Project Ibex, after the long-horned mountain goat, the vehicles are an experiment by the tech company to potentially augment the fleet of box trucks and vans.

The Ibex is built on a Ford F-250 Super Duty, the heftier cousin of the popular F-150 pickup. The truck bed has been replaced by a scaled-down version of the cargo box on delivery vans, and the exterior is equipped with flood lights controlled by switches in the passenger cabin.

Norton said he has used the truck to navigate dirt roads covered in 6 inches of snow. "It just powers through it," he said.

There are some communities, particularly in the mountains, where roads aren't passable in the winter even in a four-wheel-drive pickup, Norton said. In those cases, the residents often set up a package drop-off location along the main roads.

Amazon is testing a customized Ford F-250 pickup truck for deliveries in rural areas. SEAN MCLAIN/WSJ

Before Amazon built the 70,000-square-foot warehouse on the Missoula outskirts in 2024, the roughly 200 residents of Conner and the rest of the Bitterroot Valley near the Idaho border waited up to a week for orders.

Today, they can get many items delivered within two days. Unlike many of Amazon's rural hubs, the Missoula facility also keeps hundreds of items in stock for same-day

delivery, such as diapers, dog food and cinnamon roll-flavored protein bread rolls.

Amazon is experimenting with speedier delivery across its network as it competes with longtime rival Walmart and delivery upstarts such as Uber and DoorDash. In urban areas, the company has started offering one-hour and three-hour delivery as premium options. Amazon recently acquired a Swiss startup called Rivr, which is building four-legged robots that could drop packages off on doorsteps. The e-commerce giant is also dipping its toe in the big-box retail business, with plans for a [230,000-square-foot megastore](#) outside Chicago.

In addition to the weather and distances, delivery drivers are on the lookout for more rural road hazards such as deer and bears, said Brandon Ray, who runs part of the delivery-vehicle fleet at the Missoula facility. These may be new challenges for Amazon, but local drivers say they are used to it. “You can pretty reliably click a button and it’ll show up the next day, rain, snow, shine, whatever it may be,” Ray said.

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