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(12) # EUROPEAN PATENT SPECIFICATION

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(54) **Ink supply for a thermal ink jet pen.**

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HEWLETT-PACKARD JOURNAL. no. 4, August 1988, PALO ALTO US pages 41 - 45; Erturket al: "Ink Retention in a Color Thermal Inkjet Pen"

(73) Proprietor: **Hewlett-Packard Company**
Mail Stop 20 B-O,
3000 Hanover Street
Palo Alto,
California 94304 (US)

(72) Inventor: **Cowger, Bruce**
37194 Helm Drive
Corvallis,
Oregon 97330 (US)
Inventor: **Nielsen, Niels J.**
33046 Peoria Road
Corvallis,
Oregon 97333 (US)
Inventor: **Dion, John H.**
3445 S.W. Cascade Avenue
Corvallis,
Oregon 97333 (US)

(74) Representative: **Colgan, Stephen James et al**
CARPMAELS & RANSFORD
43 Bloomsbury Square
London WC1A 2RA (GB)

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Description

Field of the Invention

This invention relates generally to disposable ink jet pens for use with thermal ink jet printers. More particularly, this invention relates to such pens having large diameter feedtubes (or standpipes) for feeding ink from a reservoir to an ink jet printhead.

Background Art

It is known to use feedtubes or standpipes as a preferred means for interconnecting an ink storage compartment of an ink jet pen with a thin film printhead (including orifice plate) which is mounted on one surface of the pen body housing. These feedtubes or standpipes serve to accommodate the necessary capillary draw of ink from the ink reservoir and through the firing chamber of the printhead to the print orifii thereof.

One example of such a feedtube is disclosed in U.S. Patent No. 4,771,295 issued to Baker et al and assigned to the present assignee. Another example of such a feedtube is disclosed in U.S. Patent 4,794,409 issued to Cowger et al and also assigned to the present assignee. Both of these U.S. Patents are incorporated fully herein by reference.

In recent experiments, it has been observed that standpipes which have a maximum diameter of the portion of the standpipe in which air accumulates below a certain minimum value will cause the ink jet pen to be greatly susceptible to depriming. In these so-called small standpipe ink jet pens, air bubbles that form in the standpipe, and particularly those that form and accumulate at the ink entrance or input opening of the standpipe, block the flow of ink to the ink jet printhead mounted at the other end of the standpipe to thus starve the printhead of ink and cause the pen to deprime. The printhead is simply incapable of generating enough pressure to pull ink past the air bubble in the standpipe, and the air bubble at the ink input opening of the small diameter standpipe seals off the flow of ink at this opening and causes the pen to deprime.

Historically, small diameter standpipes have been designed so that during pen priming, when there are relatively high flow rates of ink through the standpipe, high ink flow velocities are obtained through the standpipe and bubbles of air should theoretically be swept away. In practice, however, this rarely happens for the reason given above.

Disclosure of Invention

In accordance with the present invention, we have discovered that this problem of air bubble blockage of ink flow and pen depriming can be solved by making the diameter of the standpipe in the section thereof where air accumulates equal to or greater than a predetermined minimum value as calculated below so as to allow ink to be drawn past the air bubble in the standpipe. It is virtually impossible to sweep air bubbles out of a large bored standpipe, and this fact would seem to make such a design highly undesirable. However, a close examination reveals that when there is an air bubble located in a large bored standpipe and ink is pumped by the printhead at the small diameter end of the standpipe, the air bubble deforms slightly and allows the ink to slide down the standpipe wall. It has been observed in transparent body pens with large standpipes that page after page can be continuously printed over long periods of time without pen depriming, even when there is no visible ink in the standpipe.

Energy is required to deform the air bubble in the standpipe and thus increase its surface area. This energy term is inversely proportional to the standpipe radius. Also, the amount of air bubble deformation cannot be arbitrarily small, since the viscosity of the ink limits its velocity past the air bubble. With the ink flow rate determined by the operation of printhead and being limited by the viscosity of the ink, a sufficient ink flow cross-section must be established at a suitable pressure to satisfy the printhead. The energy required to deform the air bubble is supplied by heightened suction at the printhead.

Further in accordance with the present invention, we have discovered that substantially all pen depriming will be eliminated if the minimum radius, r, for the standpipe section in which air accumulates satisfies the equation: $r/r_{nozzle} > 100$ where r_{nozzle} is the radius of the orifii in the orifice plate of the thin film printhead of the ink jet pen.

The above features and advantages of this invention will become better understood from the following description of the accompanying drawings.

Brief Description of the Drawings

Fig. 1 is a schematic cross-sectional view of a thermal ink jet pen representing a preferred embodiment of the invention.

Fig. 2 is an enlarged fragmented isometric view of the standpipe and printhead portion of the ink jet pen of Fig. 1.

Detailed Description

Referring now to Fig. 1, the thermal ink jet pen shown in this figure includes a main unitary pen body housing 10 of a suitable plastic material. The housing 10 will typically contain a reticulated polyurethane foam material 12 therein for storing ink in the manner described in the above identified Baker patent 4,771,295. This foam material provides the necessary capillary backpressure at the printhead of the pen to prevent ink from drooling out of the pen. This pen further includes an output or printhead support section 14 including a small output opening 16 adjacent to which is mounted a thin film thermal ink jet printhead 18. The printhead support section 14 has interior walls 20 and 22 which define the contour of the large diameter standpipe to be described, and the air accumulating section 24 is defined by a radius, r, calculated in the manner described below.

As seen in Fig. 1, the air accumulating section of the standpipe is the upper portion thereof just beneath the wire mesh filter 26. Air accumulates here in the section 24 when the pen is operating in the orientation shown in Fig. 1 and as a result of the wire mesh screen 26 trapping bubbles entering the standpipe from the printhead. That is, air bubbles enter the pen by way of the printhead and through the smaller or lower standpipe opening as shown in Fig. 1 and become trapped in the standpipe by the screen 26. This screen 26, whose absolute filtration rating is 25 micrometers, serves as a capillary stop to prevent air in the foam 12 from being drawn down into the standpipe.

The pen body construction shown in Fig. 1 further includes a cap 28 having an air vent tube 30 in the central portion thereof for supplying and replenishing air to the foam storage material 12 as ink is removed therefrom during an ink jet printing operation.

Referring now to Fig. 2, the printhead 18 has its output face or orifice plate approximately flush with the housing surface 32, and the flat end surface 32 intersects with the angled surface 34. These two adjacent surfaces are adapted to receive a flexible or FLEX circuit (not shown) which is used to supply power and drive signals to the printhead 18. This FLEX circuit may be further extended over the side wall 36 of the structure shown in Fig. 2 which corresponds to the right-hand housing wall of the pen body in Fig. 1.

To determine the minimum acceptable size for the air accumulating section 24 of the standpipe, two sets of five pens each were prepared with the dimensions given in Table I below.

TABLE I

	LARGE DIAMETER STANDPIPE	LARGE DIAMETER STANDPIPE
STANDPIPE DIAMETER AT SCREEN FILTER 26	0.316 inches (8.03 mm)	0.098 inches (2.49 mm)
AVERAGE DEPRIMES PER PAGE	0.015	> 0.4

The small diameter standpipe had an obround (slot) shaped cross section whose critical dimension is the diameter given in Table I above. The length of the obround section was 0.18 inches (4.57 mm).

The two sets of pens were otherwise identical, and the following construction details apply: Screens woven of stainless steel wire were heatstaked onto the top of each standpipe. Such screen material was obtained from the Pall Process Filtration Corporation of East Hills, New York, and Pall J-mesh material was used in this experiment. A piece of reticulated, polyurethane foam of 65 pore per inch (per 2.54 cm) porosity was placed into the ink storage reservoir 10 measuring 1.30 inches (3.3 cm) across, 1.60 inches (4.06 cm) high, and 1.00 inch (2.54 cm) deep, or into the paper as shown in Fig. 1. The foam was obtained from the Scotfoam Corporation of Eddystone, PA and was initially cleaned in Freon, although other fluorinated hydrocarbon solvents can also be used. The foam measured 1.65 inches (4.19 cm) across, 2.00 inches (5.08 cm) high, and 1.30 inches (3.3 cm) deep, which was the axis of felting. Prior to insertion into the pen, the foam's weight was doubled by saturating it with the ink described below, and then expelling all ink except an amount equal in weight to the foam's dry weight. This step aids in the eventual filling of ink

into the foam.

The standpipe may be placed at different locations in the ink storage reservoir of the pen, but it must extend at least 0.10 inches (2.54 mm) into the foam, preferably 0.125 inches (3.18 mm). Also, as measured in the plane of the filter screen 26, the standpipe should be no closer than 0.08 inches (2.03 mm) from any wall of the ink storage reservoir. The standpipe's vertical height was 0.408 inches (10.36 mm) with an 0.070 x 0.170 inch (1.78 x 4.32 mm) obround slot at its lower end from which ink exists.

A thin film printhead 18 was attached to the standpipe's exit opening 16, and the drop ejection orifii of the printhead measured 52 microns in diameter. Electrical interconnections were then made to the printhead using tape automated bond (TAB) bonding connections of the type described in U.S. Patent 4,635,073 issued to Gary E. Hanson January 6, 1987, assigned to the present assignee and incorporated herein by reference. The pens were then filled with 22 grams of water based ink having 15% by weight of diethylene glycol (DEG) and 3% by weight of black dye (Food Black 2).

The pens were then printed until they were out of ink and the pages inspected for single or multiple nozzle deprimes. The results were tabulated and are shown in Table I above. Further experiments were performed with standpipes having a diameter with a dimension between the diameters given in Table I with no significant increase in the rate of deprimes with standpipes as small as 0.20 inches (5.08 mm) in diameter at the input opening 24.

The minimum standpipe radius which does not cause deprimes depends on the available suction of the drop ejection orifii of the printhead. As is well known to those skilled in the art, that suction is predicted by equation $p = 2\sigma\cos\theta/r$ where p is the suction pressure on the ink at the printhead, σ is the surface tension of the air-ink interface, θ is the contact angle between the ink and the walls of the orifii, and r is the radius of the orifii of the printhead. From these relationships it can be determined that the available suction of the printhead before depriming is inversely proportional to the radius of the drop ejection orifice. As the printhead orifii become smaller, so may the minimum acceptable diameter of the standpipe at the input opening 24, since the printhead is able to apply increasing suctions to deform the air bubble and flow ink past the bubble.

Thus, when considering the foregoing parameters and relationships together with the above tests, we have determined that the minimum acceptable radius for the large diameter opening 24 of the standpipe or feedtube must satisfy the following equation: $r/r\ nozzle > r\ min/r\ nozzle$ which is calculated according to the above tests as $r\ min/r\ nozzle$ = minimum diameter/nozzle diameter = 0.20 inches/52 microns (5.08 mm/52 microns) = 0.20 inches/0.002 inches (5.08 mm/0.0508 mm) = 100. Thus $r/r\ nozzle > 100$, and similar relationships may be determined for pens having different orifice diameters or surface tensions.

The requirement for a minimum acceptable standpipe diameter for the opening 24 is not limited to pens which store ink in foam. Rather, this requirement applies equally well to pens containing ink in bladders or other means, such as for example the ink feed structure disclosed in the above U.S. Patent 4,794,409 issued to Cowger et al. Thus, the broad scope of this invention covers the unique sizing of the ink feed standpipe or other equivalent air-accumulating chamber or ink passage member to make the standpipe or chamber air-tolerant.

Claims

1. An ink jet pen comprising an ink jet reservoir, an ink jet thin film printhead and a standpipe interconnecting said reservoir and said printhead and having an air accumulating section at an ink receiving end thereof adjacent said reservoir, which section has a radius, r, characterised in that said printhead is provided with an orifice plate having orifii of radius, r nozzle, and in that the radius, r, of the air accumulating section is such that the equation r/r nozzle > 100 is satisfied whereby air bubbles remain in said standpipe when said printhead is in operation and said air bubbles are deformed by the suction force generated by said printhead and allow ink to pass through said standpipe between said air bubbles and the walls of said standpipe so as to enable said ink jet pen to operate continuously without significant depriming due to bubble blockage.

2. A process for passing ink to an ink jet printhead without depriming the printhead, by means of a standpipe mounted between an ink jet reservoir and said printhead with an air accumulating section at an ink receiving end of the standpipe being arranged adjacent said reservoir and being provided with a radius, r, characterised by providing said printhead with an orifice plate having orifii of radius, $r\ nozzle$, such that the equation $r/r\ nozzle > 100$ is satisfied, passing air bubbles into said standpipe and deforming said air bubbles by the suction force of said printhead by an amount sufficient to allow ink to pass between said deformed bubbles and interior walls of said standpipe.

Patentansprüche

1. Ein Tintenstrahlstift, der ein Tintenstrahlreservoir, einen Tintenstrahl-Dünnfilmdruckkopf und ein Steigrohr umfaßt, das das Reservoir und den Druckkopf verbindet, und das einen Luftansammlungsabschnitt am Tinte empfangenden Ende benachbart zum Reservoir aufweist, wobei der Abschnitt einen Radius r aufweist,
dadurch gekennzeichnet,
daß der Druckkopf mit einer Öffnungsplatte mit Öffnungen mit dem Radius $r_{Düse}$ versehen ist, und
daß der Radius r des Luftansammlungsabschnittes derart ist, daß die Gleichung $r/r_{Düse} > 100$ erfüllt ist,
wodurch Luftblasen in dem Steigrohr zurückbleiben, wenn der Druckkopf in Betrieb ist, und wobei die Luftblasen durch die Ansaugkraft, die durch den Druckkopf erzeugt wird, verformt werden, und es ermöglichen, daß Tinte durch das Steigrohr zwischen den Luftblasen und den Wänden des Steigrohres vorbeiläuft, so daß der Tintenstrahlstift in die Lage versetzt wird, kontinuierlich ohne bedeutende Fehldrucke aufgrund einer Blockierung durch Blasen arbeitet.

2. Ein Verfahren zur Führung von Tinte an einen Tintenstrahldruckkopf ohne Fehldrucke des Druckkopfes, mittels eines Steigrohrs, das zwischen einem Tintenstrahlreservoir und dem Druckkopf befestigt ist, das einen Luftansammlungsabschnitt an dem Tinte-empfangenden Ende des Steigrohres aufweist, das benachbart zu dem Reservoir angeordnet ist und das mit einem Radius r versehen ist,
gekennzeichnet durch folgende Schritte:
Versehen des Druckkopfes mit einer Öffnungsplatte, die Öffnungen mit dem Radius $r_{Düse}$ aufweist, derart, daß die Gleichung $r/r_{Düse} > 100$ erfüllt ist,
Einführen von Luftblasen in das Steigrohr, und
Verformen der Luftblasen durch die Ansaugkraft des Druckkopfes mit einer Größe, die ausreichend ist, um es zu ermöglichen, daß die Tinte zwischen den verformten Blasen und den inneren Wänden des Steigrohres läuft.

Revendications

1. Dispositif d'écriture par jet d'encre comprenant un réservoir pour jet d'encre, une tête d'impression à couche mince pour jet d'encre et un tube ascendant reliant ledit réservoir et ladite tête d'impression et ayant une section d'accumulation d'air à une extrémité de celui-ci recevant l'encre, adjacente audit réservoir, laquelle section a un rayon, r, caractérisé en ce que ladite tête d'impression est équipée d'une plaque à orifices ayant des orifices de rayon, r buse, et en ce que le rayon, r, de la section d'accumulation d'air est tel que l'équation r/r buse > 100 est satisfaite, ce par quoi des bulles d'air restent dans ledit tube ascendant quand ladite tête d'impression est en service et lesdites bulles d'air sont déformées par la force d'aspiration produite par ladite tête d'impression et permettent à l'encre de passer à travers ledit tube ascendant entre lesdites bulles d'air et les parois dudit tube ascendant de façon à permettre audit dispositif d'écriture par jet d'encre de fonctionner de façon continue sans désamorçage important dû au blocage par les bulles.

2. Procédé pour faire passer de l'encre vers une tête d'impression à jet d'encre sans désamorcer la tête d'impression, au moyen d'un tube ascendant monté entre un réservoir pour jet d'encre et ladite tête d'impression, avec une section d'accumulation d'air à une extrémité du tube ascendant recevant l'encre, agencée adjacente audit réservoir et possèdant un rayon, r, caractérisé par l'équipement de ladite tête d'impression avec une plaque à orifices ayant des orifices de rayon, r buse, de sorte que l'équation r/r buse > 100 est satisfaite, par le passage des bulles d'air dans ledit tube ascendant et par la déformation desdites bulles d'air par la force d'aspiration de ladite tête d'impression d'une valeur suffisante pour permettre à l'encre de passer entre lesdites bulles déformées et les parois intérieures dudit tube ascendant.

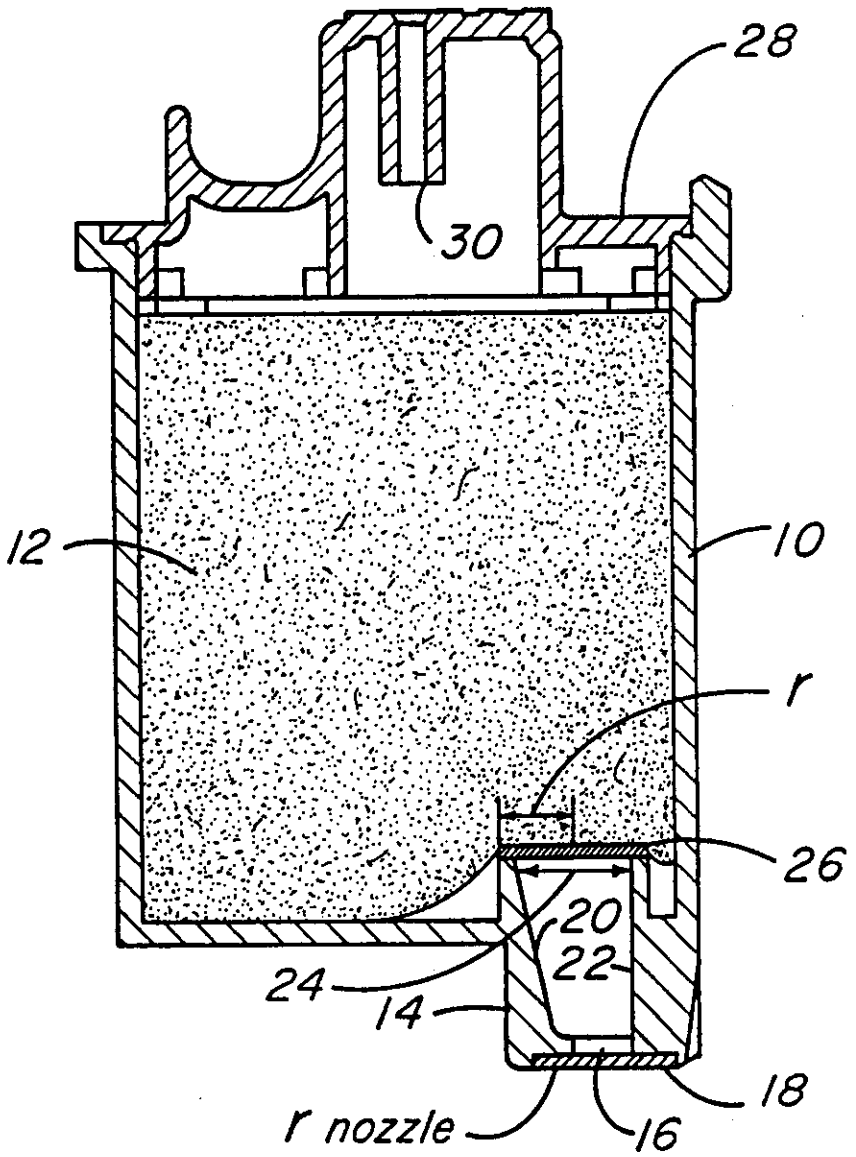


Fig. 1

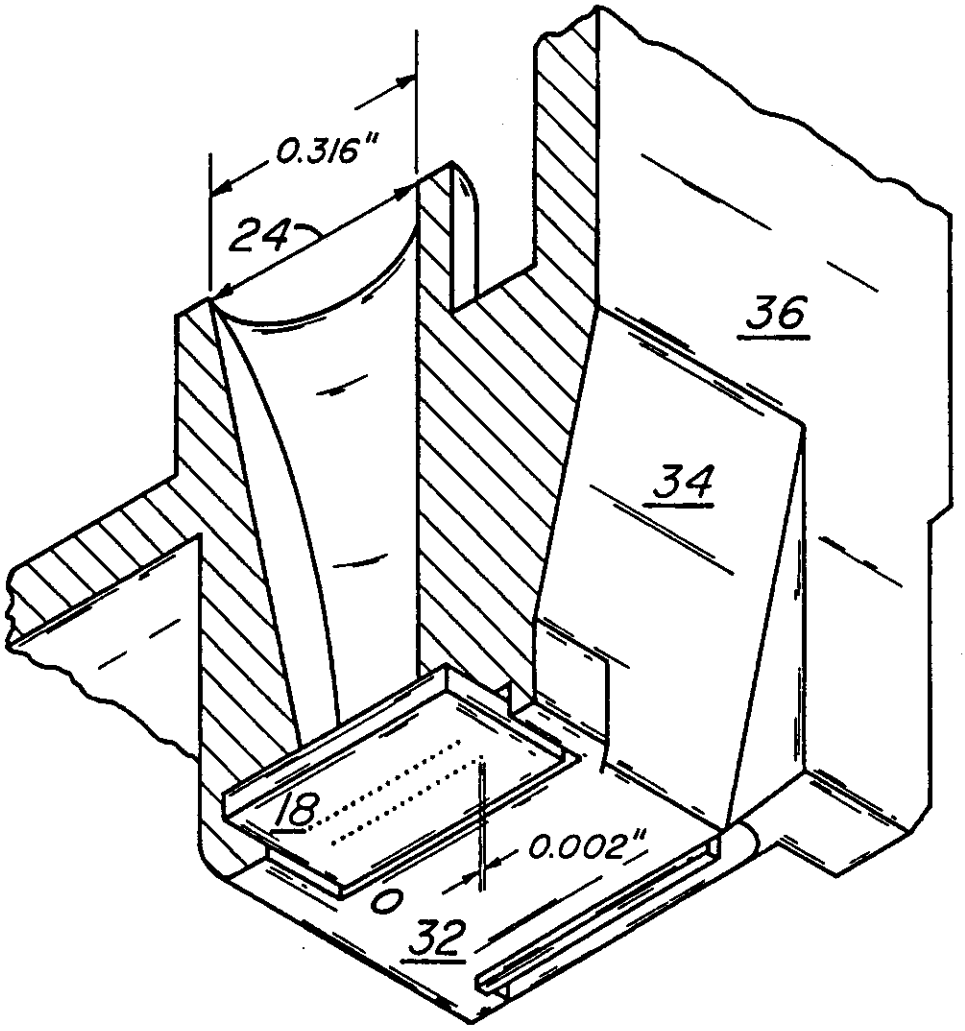


Fig. 2

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Title INK SUPPLY FOR A THERMAL INK JET PEN.

Applicant/Proprietor
HEWLETT-PACKARD COMPANY, 3000 Hanover Street, Palo Alto California 94304, United States of America [ADP No. 50014570002]

Inventors
BRUCE COWGER, 37194 Helm Drive, Corvallis, Oregon 97330, United States of America [ADP No. 57684755001]

NIELS J. NIELSEN, 33046 Peoria Road, Corvallis, Oregon 97333, United States of America [ADP No. 57684763001]

JOHN H. DION, 3445 S.W. Cascade Avenue, Corvallis, Oregon 97333, United States of America [ADP No. 57684771001]

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Address for Service
CARPMAELS & RANSFORD, 43 Bloomsbury Square, LONDON, WC1A 2RA, United Kingdom [ADP No. 00000083001]

EPO Representative
STEPHEN JAMES COLGAN, CARPMAELS & RANSFORD 43 Bloomsbury Square, London WC1A 2RA, United Kingdom [ADP No. 50906551001]

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to
HEWLETT-PACKARD COMPANY, Mail Stop 20 B-O, 3000 Hanover Street, Palo Alto, California 94304, United States of America [ADP No. 50014570001]
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Hewlett-Packard Company, Mail Stop 20 B-O, 3000 Hanover Street,
Palo Alto, California 94304, United States of America

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