

Heavy Metal

The Allure of Copper Theft and How to Stop It

By Maggie McFadden, Contributing Writer

With thieves being rewarded with high selling prices for the copper they steal, the problem continues to grow.

It seems to be an epidemic, crossing market lines and state lines. It is a problem that the U.S. Department of Energy has estimated is costing more than \$1 billion a year.

The problem is not of a medical nature, but rather the increasing price of metals — and particularly copper. The New York Times reported last year that copper prices hit an all-time high of about \$4 per pound. This is compared with \$0.65 per pound in 2001.

Desperate thieves are finding ways to steal the metal and sell it to scrap yards. Police in many states acknowledge that drug addicts make up a large number of the copper-thieving population.

Farmers are watching their copper and brass irrigation tubes being stolen — costing them anywhere from several thousand to tens of thousands of dollars in ruined crops and loss of equipment.

Power companies and cellular phone companies are facing county- and city-wide outages as thefts of expensive copper plating from the bottoms of towers is costing them time, money and angry customers.

Contractors are repeatedly faced with stolen wiring. Commercial businesses and residences are being left with stripped phone lines and no air conditioning, as the copper plating disappears without notice.

“This is something we have seen growing and building in the last 10 years, and we had no idea early on the levels of crime that would be associated with it,” says Patty Ragan, president of Alarm and Access Control Technologies Inc., Beaverton, Ore.

“It is shocking to talk with electrical contractors that consistently are on their third time wiring a building or a house, because of copper theft,” Ragan says. And potential customers across the country seem to be vulnerable to such a security risk.

Don Smith, group vice president of sales and operations at Alert Alarm Hawaii, Honolulu, says that his company is thinking of ways to reach out to the State Highway Division about how they can address copper theft in his state.

“I’m not sure how [the thieves] are accomplishing it, but they are going to major highways and tapping into the lighting and underground copper and hauling it away onto a truck — putting miles of street lights out on the highway,” Smith recounts. He says that Alert Alarm has thought of proposing an AES transmitter to be relayed to the power. In the event of power failure, police would be dispatched.

While power companies, contractors, law enforcement and others have been trying to find

This outdoor camera system was installed to deter and detect theft of copper from an energy substation.



PHOTO COURTESY OF RSI VIDEO TECHNOLOGIES

ways to address the thefts for the last several years, the market hasn't necessarily been tapped into regularly by security companies.

"A few years ago, customers weren't yet coming to us; we were going to them," Ragan recalls. "Neither of us knew quite what to do."

Today, Alarm and Access Control Technologies helps its customers tackle copper theft by selling Videofied, a product from RSI Alarm of White Bear Lake, Minn. The company markets a portable, wireless "Copper Theft Kit" which includes outdoor cameras, an indoor camera, keypad and control panel.

Right now, Ragan's company is finding utility companies, contractors, and commercial businesses as its main target markets in the copper theft arena.

"Power stations are remote and hard to cover. I have heard the claim that they are losing \$1 billion on a yearly basis just from power loss," Ragan relates. "Yes, [thieves] can damage the wiring but the worst thing for these companies is that their sites are down and this is revenue lost by not providing power to the end user."

Vacant properties and abandoned buildings are also an attractive place for copper thieves. "We have had occasions where every piece of copper in a building has been stripped," Smith says.

Coupled with equipment theft, vandalism, and other metal theft and copper theft, customers are finding that their insurance companies are mandating some type of security, including video surveillance, to help minimize liability.

Smith says that a large insurance company in Hawaii is mandating high-end residential construction companies to have fire protection, video surveillance and a recommended intrusion alarm, in order to be covered. Ragan echoes that observation.

And as metals continue to be sold for stunning profits, security companies can bet that a surveillance solution could be the answer ■

Editor's note: For more information about this problem and possible solutions, visit www.coppertheft.info, a Web site hosted by Videofied, and www.smartersecurity.com/outdoor/stop_copper_theft.html, a site of GE Security.