

## Copper Theft At Epidemic Levels March 13, 2007

**Editor's note:** Originally written for [Arizona Agriculture](#), this article highlights the infrastructure struggle agriculture along with a few other industries is having right now. Arizona's situation is spotlighted but is not alone in the copper theft epidemic.

By Julie Murphree

Huge worldwide demand for copper and simply an easy heist is triggering thieves across the state of Arizona to steal copper from construction and well sites, irrigation pumps, electrical lines and even new homes under construction. With the utilities, construction and agriculture industries getting hit the hardest, Arizonans are beginning to put up a coordinated fight.



Copper Wire

During testimony to the Committee On Natural Resources and Public Safety January 31<sup>st</sup>, Maricopa County Farm Bureau President Steven Bales, Jr. said, “Copper theft is not a new issue for agriculture, but I must tell you it has rapidly escalated into an epidemic.”

As a full-time farmer on the west side from Liberty, Arizona, and director of a local bank and Farm Board member, Bales emphasized to the committee he was speaking as a farmer.

Highlighting Arizona's agriculture infrastructure, “Irrigation is our life blood,” he said, “and our pumps and wells are being stripped of copper.”

With no way to capture replacement costs not counting lost opportunity costs, dollar losses are hard to come by. In the agriculture industry alone, 2006 copper theft estimates and replacement costs are running in to the millions of dollars.

Said Bales during testimony; “It is not simply the theft of copper that creates problems for farmers. Other and more extensive property damage is created as a result of the theft. Fences are cut for the thieves to obtain access. Sturdy chain link fences are cut or backed over. Motors must be rewound, panels are stripped, bearings and transformers pulled down and stripped, oil drip lines cut and removed. Debris is scattered.

“Secondly, the stripping causes much ancillary damage. In mid-January a neighbor had \$12,000 damage caused to a single well, motor and pump, while the thieves made off with a couple of hundred dollars worth of copper wire.”

Utilities identify with the same point that while the copper theft itself may only be in the hundreds of dollars, infrastructure replacement costs run into the thousands of dollars. For this industry, the average theft runs \$1,000 to \$2,000 but the average replacement cost runs \$50,000.

George Diaz, Jr. with APS said during testimony at the same hearing as Bales, “The copper thefts go beyond costs to destabilizing our [utilities] systems.” Diaz comments later prompted one committee member to signal concern over the security risks this could place on Arizona.

Bales testimony also addressed the ongoing loss that no one estimates. “The actual damage and costs of replacement are only the beginning of the costs. In agriculture, down wells mean delays in irrigation and crop losses. I appreciate that other sectors also experience costly repairs and delays. Depending upon the industry sector some of these delays can be made up and some not. But in agriculture, crop losses cannot be recovered. So while the actual theft is small, the resulting costs to agriculture are enormous.”

To noticeably understand this point, go no further than DeWayne Justice, a Waddell, Arizona citrus grower and cattle rancher and also Arizona Farm Bureau board member. During the recent winter freeze a few months ago, Justice planned to protect his citrus trees from freezing by irrigating his trees; called “frost” watering to elevate the temperature in the orchard. When he went to turn on the water, thieves had stripped the copper wiring from his pump. Normal evaporation from the water would have kept temperatures higher thereby preventing freeze. As a result, Justice lost two years worth of production from his citrus since the freeze killed this year’s citrus and also killed new growth that produces the citrus in the following year.

Justice’s pump replacements costs will run \$15,000. His crop losses will run in the tens of thousands of dollars. “All of this for maybe a couple \$100 worth of copper taken by the thief,” says Justice.

The stories of copper theft in just the agriculture industry go on and on.

As of one month ago, Roosevelt Irrigation District reported 25 wells down out of 50 west of the Agua Fria. Buckeye Irrigation District has had 131 wells vandalized in the past 12 months – 79 since mid-year. They have 35 wells currently down and have incurred costs of almost \$250,000 in a year’s time. With copper theft occurring around the clock by police estimates, these numbers don’t take into account copper thefts occurring as this publication goes to press.

To help combat the copper thefts, Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio has made catching copper thieves a priority, setting up a hotline (602.876.1000) in January and creating a reward fund for information leading to arrests and convictions. (When [Arizona Agriculture](#) checked this number, it appears to be the main switchboard number and the weekend operator kept asking to “please repeat your request.”)

“Since the tip hotline was implemented, our telecommunications operators have received several calls that have provided investigative leads and information about copper thefts,” says Arpaio. “However, we need more callers and tips.”

Arpaio believes that the thefts can be pushed back adding, “My sheriff’s deputies are making arrests and bringing some of our cases to successful conclusions.”

The Phoenix police department actually has four metal-theft detectives on staff. They report 12,000 transactions per month of copper and non-ferrous metals being sold in Phoenix alone. Because of current law, there’s no way of telling whether a metals transaction is legitimate or not.

But when looked at statewide, the problem appears insurmountable. Throughout the state you hear about thieves sawing down power poles, rolling over fences, and much more. “We can’t keep up,” says Bales. “It’s beginning to look like we cannot meet irrigation schedules when the season begins in earnest.

Wells are spread out over wide geographical areas and become cost prohibitive for police to monitor especially when their top priorities involve tracking down violent criminals. Even surveillance cameras set up to capture thieves in the act have been stolen.

Additionally, thefts are occurring in daylight hours.

According to county sheriffs offices, the typical thief is a drug addict. Those that have been caught are soon released.

And because of this, Sheriff Arpaio and others suggest that attacking the problem goes beyond law enforcement. “My belief is that effort on everyone’s part is required in order to stem the problem. My deputies will do their part in combating copper thefts, and to help them, I will support legislation that will help resolve the problem of copper thefts,” says Arpaio.

Jim Bechtel, Pinal County farmer and chair of the newly formed Copper Theft

Committee says, “I don’t know any farmer or irrigation district that has wells and pumps that have not been hit.”

Bechtel’s estimate of infrastructure loss in Pinal County is \$10 million. “Pinal County’s agriculture infrastructure has been devastated,” he adds.

### No Easy Answer, No Easy Solution

“We’ll continue to do what we can at the point of the theft,” says Bales, “but I am afraid it’s a losing proposition. Increasing law enforcement resources would certainly help, but again due to the wide geographic spread I have my doubts.”

Bales, Bechtel and other agriculturalists support increased legislation requiring validation of seller identification at scrap metal and recycling facilities where most of the stolen copper is sold. Additionally, they’d like to see legislation that required information as to manifest and seller’s right to have possession of the materials being sold, and payments to sellers by check, which would have to be mailed to actual addresses.

Bales, along with others, even suggests that a time period between delivery and payment of the copper be established to allow appropriate checking and tracking by law enforcement. “This is more effective than trying to chase the thieves after the fact.”

Bechtel’s Copper Theft Committee formed for this very reason to develop strategies that go beyond enforcement to a legitimate tracking system to stop the thieves at the point of sale. “By creating tougher laws regarding the transport and sale of copper we take away the economic incentive to steal this commodity,” says Bechtel.

Many suggest legislation be designed that mimics an already-existing tracking system used by the livestock commission, where an inspection certificate has to be mandated for the sale and trade of any copper or precious metal commodity, beginning at its site

of origin. Such a certificate then follows the item throughout every point of sale, no matter where in the state the sale takes place.

If a tracking-based system was sent through the Arizona legislature, it would prohibit the purchase of copper without a certificate attached, which in turn, helps local law enforcement and courts track and build cases for prosecution more effectively.

Concludes Bales, “Farmers manage many risks and yet we remain optimists, always believing next year to be better. Right now, I know this next year will not be better. The situation is an epidemic, and we need legislative intervention.”

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*Solutions Under Review to Stop Copper Theft in Arizona*

- **Require adequate time between delivery of the copper (and other metals) and payment for law enforcement to examine, at least on a spot check basis, the transaction. Once the copper or metal is gone the chain of evidence is lost.**
- **Require all payments to be made by check to a physical address for tracking purposes.**
- **Create better and more targeted and narrowed photo identification of the seller and the delivery vehicle.**
- **Require a proper manifest to accompany the copper, when delivered so there is a possible trace, with the copper tagged at the yard until sold. Currently, law enforcement is on shaky ground if they stop a pick-up truck with a load of shiny new-stripped wire.**
- **Turn the manifest into a license with a fee attached so additional law enforcement can be funded. This solution is similar to the current cactus or livestock license and fee.**
- **Increase the penalties for these crimes to include damage caused (e.g. \$150 worth of copper stolen created \$15,000 worth of damages, and then subsequent crop loss of an additional \$25,000).**
- **Provide additional resources for law enforcement. We can pass all the laws in the world, but if there is no money for oversight, the problem is not addressed.**