

Copper Theft Still A Rising Problem For States

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Unprecedented copper thefts have spurred a crackdown to stop the damage, as at least 16 states have passed or proposed new laws, and businesses have boosted security and offered bounties for information on the thieves, reports USA Today.

The crackdown comes as losses to businesses hover around \$1 billion, the U.S. Department of Energy reports, and as escalating thefts have disrupted the flow of electricity, slowed construction projects and knocked out irrigation networks crucial to commercial farms.

Seizing on rising worldwide demand and surging value for the popular metal -- up from 80 cents per pound in 2003 to about \$3.50 this year -- thieves sell stolen copper for millions of dollars in cash, state and federal authorities say.

"We're trying to do everything possible to fight this epidemic," says Adam Grant, spokesman at Nevada Power, where copper thefts have more than doubled since last year. "It's crazy," he told USA Today.

The new and proposed laws toughen penalties for the thefts and tighten regulation of the lucrative salvage industry to prevent the resale of stolen materials. Among those tracked by the National Conference on State Legislatures:

*In Arizona, new laws require dealers to maintain photocopies of sellers' driver's licenses and increase penalties for convicted thieves. The laws took effect in May.

*An unusual Washington state proposal would exempt landowners from liability when thieves stealing copper are injured.

*Oklahoma has elevated copper thefts from misdemeanor violations to felony offenses.

Telecommunications giant AT&T has offered up to \$5,000 for information leading to convictions of thieves who have hit various corporate holdings. Spokesman Fletcher Cook says the thefts are a serious threat to the integrity of the communications network.

Several utility companies have recently turned to Intelligent Video Solutions (IVS) to combat this problem.

"Utilities realize they must start treating the metal as an asset to protect," says Steve Birkmeier, vice president of Arteco, a supplier of intelligent video systems. "The demand for copper overseas, especially in China, is driving up the price for scrap, and this security problem has to be dealt with proactively."

"Intelligent video offers a pro-active and cost-effective solution to a problem that is growing at alarming proportions," Birkmeier says. "Utility companies realize that they have personnel already in-place to respond to the problem but until now they haven't had an accurate solution to alert them to the theft taking place in real-time."