

Unusual Culprits Cripple Farms in California

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BUTTONWILLOW, Calif. — The alfalfa here went unwatered for about 10 days, and \$10,000 worth of it withered. About 20 miles to the north, the almond trees were also left thirsty, as were melons, pistachios and tomato crops, for weeks on end.



Monica Almeida/The New York Times

Alan Scroggs near water tanks on the almond farm he oversees.



The New York Times

Half the nation's fruits and vegetables are grown in California.

The culprits were not the typical ones — heat waves, fires or drought — but thieves, who have been stripping the copper wires out of irrigation systems throughout California. The rampant thefts have left farmers without functioning water pumps for days and weeks at a time, creating financial loss and occasional crop devastation in a region still smarting from a spectacular freeze last winter.

Theft of scrap metal, mostly copper, has vexed many areas of American life and industry for the last 18 months, fueled largely by record-level prices for copper resulting from a building boom in Asia. Common in developing counties, metal theft is now committed in nearly every state, largely by methamphetamine users who hock the metal to buy drugs, the authorities say.

Thieves have stripped the wires out of phone lines, pulled plaques off cemetery plots, raided air-conditioning systems in schools and yanked catalytic converters from cars, all to be resold to scrap metal recyclers.

But perhaps no group has been as consistently singled out as California farmers, who provide roughly half of the nation's fruits and vegetables. Irrigation systems, a treasure trove of copper, tend to be in remote places, out of the eyes of farmers and, until recently, law enforcement.

“This is the No. 1 crime affecting farmers and ranchers right now,” said Bill Yoshimoto, an assistant district attorney in the agriculturally rich Tulare County in the Central Valley.

“Virtually every farmer in the Central Valley has been hit,” Mr. Yoshimoto said. “But some have been hit far beyond the value of the metal. For the farmer to replace the pump is anywhere between \$3,000 to \$10,000, and then there is downtime, and loss to crops.”

Some sheriff's departments in agricultural counties have rural crime units that investigate metal crimes almost exclusively these days,

setting up sting operations in recycling shops and tagging copper bait with electronic tracking devices.

Metal theft from California farmers rose 400 percent in 2006 over the previous year, according to the Agricultural Crime Technology Information and Operations Network, a regional law enforcement group headed by Mr. Yoshimoto. The numbers this year are equally high. Through the end of June, there were nearly 1,000 incidents of scrap metal theft on farms, causing more than \$2 billion in losses, the group's figures show.

Here in Kern County, there were 213 incidents of copper theft, the greatest number in the state.

"They go out and take a farm pump in the middle of nowhere," said Sgt. Walt Reed, head of county's rural crime task force. "And they can pull the copper wire strands from the electrical wire box and get 60 feet of wire, remove the insulation and take it to the scrap yard for \$2 to \$3 a pound."

Alan Scroggs, an almond farm manager in Wasco, knows the story only too well. Over the course of three months this spring, his irrigation system was raided five times by copper thieves; his well was hit twice, and the booster system that helps pump the water underground to irrigate the almond trees three times.

Copper thieves cut the wires in the conduit that runs to the power source, tie the wires to the back of a pickup truck and drive away, pulling the wire behind them and generally making off with roughly 75 pounds of scrap metal.

"When the sheriff's department came out here for the third time," Mr. Scroggs said, "they said, 'I can't believe I am here again.'"

Over the last 18 months, copper prices have hovered over \$3.50 a pound, hitting \$4 at one point, the highest price the metal has reached in recent memory, said Patrick Chidley, a mining and metals

analyst at Barnard Jacobs Mellet in Stamford, Conn. By comparison, copper fetched 65 cents a pound in 2001.

“It is really the law of supply and demand,” Mr. Chidley said. “You have a lot of demand in China, where there is a big infrastructure build-out. Every building, every car, every motor, every wind turbine needs copper, and there are not enough mines out there to keep up.”

From Hawaii, where an accused copper thief is about to go on trial for felony theft charges, to Maryland, where a 41-year-old man was electrocuted recently after trying to cut through a high-voltage line in an abandoned discount store, stolen metals have filled a market void. This summer in Oakland, Calif., a memorial to 25 people who were killed nearly 16 years ago in a fire was stripped of stainless steel memorial plaques, and metal scavengers were suspected.

California farmers have faced millions of dollars in losses. A bill sponsored by Assemblyman Tom Berryhill, Republican of Modesto, would have made it harder to steal copper, by making recyclers pay by check — which can be tracked — and photograph the sellers. But that bill failed, so counties are pursuing local ordinances.

Farmers say a statewide law would be more useful, however, as many copper thieves work their way from the north through the Central Valley, often ending their journey in Long Beach, south of Los Angeles, where they sell to recyclers who quickly get the metals to the port.

“We deal with mother nature and farm out in the open,” said Mike Young, who lost the alfalfa crops here. “So it’s not easy. This copper theft is an epidemic.”