Copper Theft Prevention & Infrastructure Security Tips

Jeremy C. Wolfe
Loss Control Manager
West Virginia Board of Risk and Insurance Management

The worldwide demand for copper has risen and supply has been unable to keep pace, increasing prices significantly upward. In 2003, the price for a pound of copper was approximately $.70 per pound. The price has since escalated to as high as $4.00 per pound. Tight supplies and the price increase have led to an increase in copper recycling, which has created a market for used copper and made the material a more attractive target for theft.

Some of the major contributing factors for this increase in copper theft include:

- High dollar payouts from scrap dealers;
- The ease of which copper can be stolen;
- Insufficient punishment for perpetrators.

Additionally, copper is readily available for theft. Below are some of the common targeted areas for copper thieves:

- Abandoned buildings, formerly used for business as well as residences;
- Existing buildings and new construction sites;
- Electrical substations;
- Telecommunication products and towers;
- Roof top air conditioning units;
- Utility stockyards and site preparation areas.

These types of thefts create significant undesirable effects, including the obvious economic impact, business interruptions, service disruptions, rise in insurance claims and increase in insurance cost; as well as personal injury or death for persons involved in the theft and in recovery efforts following the theft. Reducing and eliminating copper theft can be accomplished; however, for it to occur, an organization needs to assess its vulnerability to such theft to determine what countermeasures to implement to control such business risk. The following list of countermeasures should be considered by an organization that is faced with this risk or is concerned about suffering the undesirable effects listed above.

COUNTERMEASURES:

- **Consideration of cut-resistant perimeter fencing to control unauthorized entry, especially in abandoned structures;**

- **Adequate lighting at points of entry should be maintained to deter and hinder unauthorized entrance;**

- **If structure is unoccupied, all valuable contents should be removed from the building;**

- **Points of entry, such as windows, doors, and other openings should be properly secured and locked;**

- **A foliage assessment should be conducted to remove the opportunity for coverage or shielding of unauthorized individuals attempting to gain access into a structure;**

- **Use of security/burglary alarm systems should be utilized to help prevent unauthorized entrance into a structure;**

- **Coordination with local law enforcement to gain heightened patrols of areas of risk;**

- **Search for new style locking hardware to replace old chain locks utilized in many structures;**

- **Installation of intrusion detection and alarm equipment to detect, record, and alert intruders with camera and infrared lighting (for night imaging);**

- **Replace copper with copperweld, copper-covered steel, or PVC piping. This material is much less expensive with little value to thieves;**

- **Stamping and marking copper with entity logos or other identifying labels to identify owned entity owned copper and alert recycling dealers of potential stolen materials;**

- **Post "No Trespassing" signs;**

- **Consider working through Neighborhood Watch Programs and establishing toll-free hotlines to report and alert law enforcement to suspicious behaviors around areas of risk;**

- **If perpetrators are caught by law enforcement, resist plea bargains which might allow alleged criminals to strike again;**

Copper theft prevention is an issue of service/business delivery, reliability and safety. Businesses should take steps to protect and prevent against this risk. Please do your part to protect your assets and the needs of your clients against copper theft.

Reference:

United States Deptartment of Energy. An Assessment of Copper Wire Thefts From Electric Utilities   April 2007: 1-20.