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## Copper thief hits Hawaii highway lights

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By [Peter Boylan](#)  
Advertiser Staff Writer

A repair crew with the state Department of Transportation yesterday discovered that someone had stolen 1,350 feet of copper wire worth \$5,450 from the lighting system along the H-1 Freeway in Waikele.

The wiring powered more than two dozen highway lights along the westbound lanes of the freeway from Waikele to the Kunia exit. The area is now dark at night.

Police have opened a second-degree theft investigation in connection with the discovery.

State Department of Transportation crews were sent to repair the area after officials originally thought the lighting failure was caused by a rainstorm. Upon inspecting the connections, workers realized the wire had been cut and pulled from the ground.

"We're going to repair the lights near the interchange for safety reasons," DOT spokesman Scott Ishikawa said.

Police and sheriff's deputies say a loosely affiliated group has been stealing copper from lighting fixtures along the H-1 in Kapolei and the H-2 near Ka Uka Boulevard.

Miles of copper wire have been disappearing from light fixtures along state freeways for more than a year, and large stretches of freeway remain unlit at night.

Copper theft has been on the rise in the Islands, with criminals stealing not only from street and freeway lights, but also churches, schools and Honolulu airport.

Losses in copper-theft cases reported to Honolulu police in 2006 surpassed \$760,000, police have said.

Police say the copper is being recycled for cash.

On freeway thefts alone, the state has spent about \$300,000 to replace wiring stolen from overhead lights, and experts say that figure could top \$1 million once the wiring is replaced.

In response to a rash of copper thefts, the Legislature this year enacted a law that makes it a felony to steal a pound or more of copper.

Another law requires scrap recyclers to check the identity of anyone trying to sell copper. They also must get a signed statement from the seller — usually on the receipt — saying the seller has the right to sell the copper.

Recyclers who violate the statutes face a misdemeanor charge, punishable by up to a year in jail and a \$2,000 fine.

Reach Peter Boylan at [pboylan@honoluluadvertiser.com](mailto:pboylan@honoluluadvertiser.com).

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