

Published: Friday, January 25, 2008

## Copper theft a growing danger for state drivers

By [Jerry Cornfield](#), Herald Writer

OLYMPIA -- Thefts of copper wire along state highways are a costly annoyance that increasingly threatens to make travel unsafe on some roads and offramps.

Brazen thieves have stolen roughly \$375,000 worth of wire from every corner of the state in the past two years, sometimes knocking out power to highway lighting, traffic signals at interchanges and even message signs at overpasses.

About \$110,000 of those losses occurred in Snohomish and five other counties that make up the Department of Transportation's northwest region. Twice last year lights along a short stretch of U.S. 2 went dark as a result.

"It is a big problem. It's driving us crazy," Washington's Secretary of Transportation Paula Hammond said.

On Wednesday, work crews discovered wire had been stolen from a weigh station in the rural town of Buckley in Pierce County.

Since November, the department documented seven thefts along Highway 16 in that county. One occurred last week, shutting off traffic lights on the offramp from westbound Highway 16 to Highway 161.

"When they're doing it to signals, that becomes a safety concern," said Capt. Jeff DeVere, spokesman for the Washington State Patrol.

Copper thievery is a national problem affecting cities, counties, special districts, states and private contractors. The increase is driven by rising prices for copper. Stolen copper wiring typically is sold at recycling centers.

State transportation officials said thieves like to target copper wire from electrical junction boxes typically buried near the roadway. There are thousands of these concrete boxes, 2 feet by 2 feet in size with an unlocked metal lid that allows workers to easily reach the wiring.

Chris Christopher, the state's maintenance engineer, said the criminals will find two junction boxes, break in, cut the wire, hook one end to the back of a truck and pull it out.

Most thefts occur in remote locations in the middle of the night. Most times thieves risk electrocution by cutting into a line that is energized, Christopher said.

In Snohomish County last year, thieves operated in the day and night in the course of pulling off two thefts totaling 2,800 feet of copper wire, a theft that darkened stretches of U.S. 2.

They picked an area where lights were equipped with sensors so bulbs are off during the day and the lines are not energized, explained Jon Cornelius, superintendent of signals for the Transportation Department's northwest region.

Apparently they went in the day wearing vests and hard hats and clipped the lines then came back at night to pull out the wire.

"They appeared to drivers like they belonged there," Cornelius said.

Some criminals are simply getting more daring.

A would-be thief at a Pierce County project is still getting talked about for the creativity that went into the crime.

This person took one of the plastic orange barrels used to close lanes and cut it in half vertically. After discarding one half, the person crouched down behind the other half to shield themselves from view while breaking into the junction box, Christopher said.

Passing drivers would have seen the barrel and not seen this person. No theft occurred as the person cut into a live line, got a jolt of electricity and fled, Christopher said.

While much is known about how thefts occur, not many answers exist on how to end it.

Transportation and State Patrol officials are discussing ways to improve enforcement and increase public education.

The department is making some changes too. After thefts on I-90 through Snoqualmie Pass last fall, the department decided to weld shut some of the junction box lids -- which means grinding off the welds if a malfunction occurs that requires repair.

That won't happen everywhere. Nor will existing boxes be replaced with ones with locking lids; it's too expensive, Christopher said.

There's talk of trying to enact a law compelling copper recyclers to get more personal information from those selling wire in hopes it deters thieves.

"It's a difficult crime to proactively curb," DeVere said. "Nobody's got the panacea identified yet."

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