

Published September 27, 2006
[From Lansing State Journal]

Red-Hot Copper

Rip-off artists snag lucrative recyclable

By Kathleen Lavey
Lansing State Journal

When Leon Black had the utilities switched on at a Lansing rental property he owns, he got a big surprise.

"The guy came to turn on the power, and he said, 'You've got water running everywhere,' " Black said.

Thieves stole the home's copper pipes between Sept. 15 and Sept. 18, a crime on the upswing locally and nationwide thanks to high prices for recycled copper.

Plumbing pipe and heavy-duty electrical power lines are items most often offered for recycling.

"For a good five years, we didn't pay over 75 cents to 80 cents a pound for copper," said John Lancour, vice president of marketing and sales at Friedland Industries in Lansing, which recycles iron, steel, copper, brass, aluminum and other metals.

Due to worldwide demand for copper, recyclers now pay \$2.10 to \$2.35 a pound for copper, depending on its type.

A two- to three-foot length of copper pipe weighs roughly a pound.

In June, thieves stole exterior copper pipes at several local businesses, including Bonnie's Place at Saginaw and Cedar streets.

"That was a pain," owner Scott Feltenberger said. "No. 1, it shut down our air conditioning for a couple of days. And without the copper piping, there was no freon, so one of the units burned out."

The price tag for the incident: roughly \$6,000.

That included replacing the stolen pipe and the burned-out unit, as well as installing a cage around the pipes to prevent future theft.

MSU cyclotron hit

Thieves target a variety of sites, Lansing police Capt. Ray Hall said.

"The copper thefts that we've seen have involved red-tagged homes, homes under construction, people taking the copper between homes and air-conditioning units," he said.

Last year, 652 pounds of copper was stolen June 30 from MSU's physical plant, and two heavy copper cylinders were stolen soon afterward at the cyclotron, said MSU police Detective Valerie O'Brien.

A St. Johns man was convicted of the crime.

Hall said it's important to report any amount of stolen copper.

"At some construction sites, some copper is discounted as being misplaced or not worth it to report," he said.

"It's important that the contractors report the crimes."

Blocking the thieves

Nationally, scrap dealers have tightened security and use a network of e-mail alerts to help thwart copper thieves, said Bryan McGannon, spokesman for the Institute of Scrap Recycling Industries.

The organization has more than 1,400 members nationwide.

"One of the biggest problems for scrap dealers is that legitimate scrap and stolen scrap are almost identical," he said.

The group sends e-mail alerts about large local thefts and thefts in neighboring states to participating scrap yards.

It also just created a partnership with the National Crime Prevention Council to work with local builders to deter theft of wire and pipes from construction sites.

For example, it might recommend that builders spray-paint copper pipes a bright color, such as pink. Scrap yards could more easily identify it if it were stolen.

"That gives you a chance to recover the materials, as well as catch the thieves," he said.

Friedland has boosted security at its facility, Lancour said.

It also requires ID from people who bring any amount of copper for recycling.

"This never used to be the case," Lancour said. "It used to be if there was a monetary value over \$150 in scrap."

Black, who lives in DeWitt and has a full-time job in addition to his landlord duties, hasn't repaired the pipes in his rental home yet.

He's having trouble finding somebody to take on the job, and he's short on tools, since his toolbox was stolen, too.

"You know that hurts," he said.

"They probably used my tools to cut the doggone pipe."