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Copper Theft

by Chandler Wright

Agencies across the state of California are feeling the effects of vandalism and copper theft. Copper is a valuable metal that is often collected and stolen because of its high scrap value. California is home to over 150,000 electric vehicle chargers and has the most extensive charging network in the country.

While conveniently placed and readily available for public use, these chargers are just one example of how copper is becoming more accessible to thieves. This document will go over associated best practices for how agencies can better protect this valuable asset and prevent damage to their systems.

Where is copper located? In order for an agency to successfully protect their copper from theft, they must first identify where it can be found. Copper is used frequently in electrical and plumbing systems due to its usefulness as an electrical and thermal conductor, as well as having high durability, malleability, and corrosion resistance.

Agencies should maintain a list of the systems and locations that contain copper, as well as list their level of vulnerability. Exterior uses such as electrical panels, heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) units, lighting, fiber optics, and electric vehicle charging stations will likely be more susceptible to copper theft than the plumbing system located inside the building. The systems that are the most vulnerable should be given priority for protective measures. Vacant buildings should also be given a priority consideration, as they are often the target of vandalism and theft. Individuals looking to obtain the copper found within the aforementioned systems will likely need an abundance of time, making vacant buildings more appealing.

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How to Protect Copper One of the best ways to protect against copper theft is to make it less appealing to steal. The more difficult or risky it is for someone to steal the copper, they less likely they are to be successful. Copper theft can be made more difficult when agencies put the following in place:

- **Lighting** – Lighting around dimly light exterior sources of copper may cause thieves to pause, as they aren't sure who is able to see them.
- **Locks** – While locks can be easily cut, they might deter someone who is acting in the spur of the moment. Strong cut-resistant locks should be used when possible.
- **Signage** – Placing signs that indicate that the area is under surveillance may cause an individual to think twice before acting, even if no cameras are visible.
- **Barriers** – Physical barriers can be added as a deterrent between the individual and the copper, making it less appealing to attempt to steal.

Examples of barriers may include chain-link fence, which can be made more secure by adding razor wire to the top, tamper proof covers, and cages. Agencies should decide what type of barrier will be most effective for their individual locations.

- **Security Cameras** – Individuals looking to steal copper do not want to be seen, and placing cameras in strategic positions will deter them from acting while also providing agencies the possibility of identifying the individual and pressing charges.
 - **Alarms** – Alarm systems can play a role in both notifying an agency that something is amiss, while also scaring away the individual who is trespassing.
 - **Copper Theft Prevention Devices** – Monitoring devices can be attached to HVAC units and automatically activate the building's alarm system when power is turned off to the unit, the copper is cut, or the refrigeration system is compromised.
 - **On-site Security** – While an expensive option, on-site security personnel, especially during the night-time hours, can be a great deterrent to individuals looking to steal copper. They also have the ability of notifying the proper authorities when needed.
 - **Regular Inspections** – While it may not deter thieves entirely, conducting regular inspections and performing routine maintenance will show that these areas are taken care of and that staff are present.
- Paint – Consider painting copper in an effort to either disguise it or make it less appealing. Recycling facilities are often less willing to buy copper with paint on it, as it requires extra work on their part to remove the paint before they can recycle the copper. This also lowers the price on the copper which may deter thieves.

Agencies should take the time to determine where their copper components may be vulnerable to theft and take actions to prevent against it. The amount of copper theft around the state is increasing, and agencies should not wait for an incident to damage critical systems in their buildings before acting. If you have any questions, please reach out to Risk Control at riskcontrol@gsrma.org.