TIMBER THEFT BY DRUG USERS

Timber Security: theft

June 2002

INTRODUCTION: Old-growth western red cedar trees have been illegally cut in the Olympic National Forest in Washington to support the drug habits of timber thieves. Six men have been charged with first-degree timber theft; five are in custody, and one remains at large. In addition to the timber stolen, investigators found coffee filters and other evidence that supported allegations that at least one of the men was operating a mobile methamphetamine drug lab in the woods.

SECURITY BREACH/DAMAGE: More than 40 trees from a number of sites have been illegally harvested for drug money and sold to make cedar shakes or musical instruments. Nineteen of the trees could have been described as “old growth,” and some of the trees exceeded seven feet in diameter. While most of the trees were from national forest land, the Capitol State Forest west of Olympia and private timberlands in the Olympic Peninsula were also subject to similar thefts. A USFS law enforcement officer investigating the theft commented that a pickup truck load of cedar blocks, called bolts, can fetch as much as $400. “Music wood” or “fiddle back” wood is the highest quality cedar used for stringed instruments. That wood can fetch up to $3,000 per cord. Authorities report that as much as $500,000 worth of cedar may have been stolen.

The thieves worked deep in the forest, in the dead of night, running a hose from the chainsaw’s muffler into a bucket of water to stifle the noise. They wrapped mallets in rubber hose to blunt the sound and posted a lookout along the road with a walkie-talkie to watch for approaching headlights. In addition to felling of live trees, the thieves “salvaged” the butt logs of windfalls that had been on the ground for years. The wood from these trees was still good and quite valuable.

RECOGNITION: The thefts began to unravel in May 2000 after authorities found two men sleeping in their pickup with cedar bolts in the bed of the truck. According to court papers, officials also found drug paraphernalia, trash linking the suspects to the logged sites, and labeled Polaroid pictures the men took of themselves as they worked. The pictures of the men grouped around the logs made exceptional evidence.

ACTIONS TAKEN: An investigation was initiated in May of 2000. Part of the investigation involved installing tracking devices in the suspects’ vehicles. Boot cleat marks on the logs and logging debris helped identify the men who took part in the theft. Not all sites found could be tied to specific individuals, but to date six men from Grays Harbor County have been charged with first-degree theft. Some of the men have been charged with multiple counts. Other individuals are under investigation but have not been charged. None of the men has been charged with drug crimes.

COMMENTS: This Security Alert draws deeply on a Seattle Times news article by Chris Solomon entitled “Ancient trees falling victim to illegal drugs” dated November 25, 2001 and from an interview with Kris Fairbanks, a USFS Law Enforcement Officer with the Olympic National Forest.

Investigators had hoped to prosecute owners of at least two mills believed to have knowingly bought the stolen cedar using a 1985 state racketeering law. However, last December, a state appeals court
ruled the law had been unconstitutionally renewed, casting doubt over whether prosecutors would be able to secure any convictions.

Timber theft to feed a drug habit is not new. In the early 1990s, people sold cedar to buy black-tar heroin. However, the drug of choice today is “meth,” and the percentage of timber thefts associated with drugs has skyrocketed.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

• Recognize the products you have on your land and know their value.
• Recognize that these products have value to others and that they may wish to take them from you.
• Periodically check on your timber assets to ensure that they are still present and being managed properly.
• If you find evidence of trespass or theft, report it immediately to the sheriff’s office and to other forest resource-based law enforcement authorities in your area. You may hold an important part of a theft puzzle.
• Protect any crime scene until the law enforcement officers release it. Don’t destroy important evidence by walking over footprints, driving over tire tracks, or handling evidence left behind.
• Support legislation that helps authorities track the sale of wood and wood products. Such authority may help trace where your wood went and deter thieves from selling in certain markets.

Walt Adams, Corporate Security Manager
Boise Cascade
P.O. Box 50
Boise, Idaho 83728
208/384-6574
walt_adams@bc.com

Reviewed by:
Western Forest & Fiber Security Alert Review Group
Rick Meilan, Associate Professor, Oregon State University, Forest Science Dept.
Roger Currin, Security Director, Western Division, Potlatch Corporation
Mike Dykzeul, Director - Forest Protection, Oregon Forest Industries Council
Walt Adams, Corporate Security Manager, Boise Cascade Corporation