METAL THEFT FROM FOREST PRODUCTS MILL

Timber Security: theft

INTRODUCTION: A substantial amount of aluminum, copper, and stainless steel metal was recently stolen from a forest products mill over a period of several weeks.

SECURITY BREACH/DAMAGE: One male was apprehended after he was observed stealing a truck load of aluminum rails, copper wire, and stainless steel posts. The arrest was made at night by off-duty police officers hired by the forest product company to conduct a surveillance of the site. Officers observed two males drive slowly into an area with their lights off and park adjacent to the fence line at the mill. They observed the individuals load the metal contents into their truck and pull away from the site. The officers used their portable radio and called for another officer in a marked police cruiser to stop the vehicle on the highway. When the police unit activated their emergency lights, the two suspects speed away with officers in pursuit. The chase ended a short time later after gunfire was exchanged. Luckily, neither suspects nor officers were injured, and one suspect (passenger) managed to escape capture. The driver was arrested and charged with theft and assault with a deadly weapon on the officers. He pled guilty and was sentenced to 20 years in prison.

RECOGNITION: The initial theft of materials wasn’t discovered for several weeks, because the suspects were only taking a few limited items each time, so it wasn’t initially noticeable. Mill personnel eventually found that a hole had been cut in the chain link fence and observed some metal material on the ground next to the fence.

ACTIONS TAKEN: Security personnel initially set up a “bait pile” of copper and stainless steel material and installed unmanned surveillance cameras watching the site. However, it was quickly learned that the low light conditions made it difficult to get identifiable photographs of the suspects. It was also discovered that one of the suspects was wearing a mask to avoid identification. It became necessary to employ manned surveillance using armed off-duty law enforcement officers to apprehend the suspects. The manned surveillance was successful on the second night of work.
COMMENTS: The price for scrap aluminum, copper, and stainless steel is currently high, and thieves will take risks to get it. It is not uncommon to read or hear stories about copper wiring theft from electric company sub-stations, construction sites, and closed industrial facilities. Forest product facilities are also good targets for these thieves, particularly if the facilities are closed or unmanned for short periods of time.

The arrested suspect in this case had a lengthy criminal history of drug and theft violations, and used the proceeds to support his drug habit. This is very common in metal theft cases, and you should always be careful when dealing with suspects (as noted in this case). Unfortunately, it is also common to see employees or on-site contractors involved in the theft of these materials. The suspect in this case identified one employee, along with five other individuals who also participated in the theft of metal materials from the mill.

Some states have enacted new and stronger legislation requiring scrap metal dealers to obtain a form of identification from the seller and document each sale. While this is helpful to law enforcement officials, it is still difficult to identify stolen materials positively, and not every state has enacted new legislation.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1) If possible, secure your metal materials in an area or location where they can be under constant surveillance. If that is not possible, put it in a secured, well-lit location that is under lock and key. Keeping some items “out of sight” is sometimes helpful as well.

2) Don’t let scrap metal lie around for long periods of time. Arrange for a vendor to pick it up regularly, and eliminate the opportunity for theft.

3) Since most of these materials tend to be heavy and/or cumbersome, make it difficult to drive up next to them to load. Use barriers to prevent easy access.

4) Use cameras and/or alarm equipment to alert you to breaches of the area. Some theft of existing wiring has occurred by cutting the power off at the supply box, so make sure you alarm the power supply box.

5) Work with your local law enforcement agencies. Ask them to conduct some drive-by patrols and/or hire them to conduct surveillance when you have identified a theft problem.

6) If you begin having theft issues, get to know your local scrap metal dealers. You can oftentimes call them up and ask if they have recently received certain types of material.

7) Where practical, mark your materials to help identify stolen property. Using spray paint and taking photographs of these items can be extremely helpful to law enforcement.

8) If your state is one that needs to have stronger requirements placed on the scrap metal industry, lobby for legislation that will be helpful. There are many other groups to join in this effort.

9) If you plan on conducting manned surveillance to catch suspects, utilize law enforcement officers. Do not try surveillance on your own without trained and properly equipped officers to support your efforts.

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