WOOD THEFT IN WISCONSIN

Timber Security: theft

INTRODUCTION: Approximately 72 truckloads of wood were stolen from multiple tracts of at least three landowners over a 5-year period.

SECURITY BREACH: A logger in Wisconsin was observed stealing wood from a timber sale. The logger was confronted by the sale administrator. Under questioning, the logger revealed that he had been stealing wood since 2004. Because these sales had been purchased as “pay-as-cut,” reimbursement to the landowner had based upon how much was actually cut and brought to market. A ticket system was employed by the landowner for security purposes. It was the responsibility of the logging contractor to deposit a ticket in a lock-box at the harvest site with information about the load, and its destination, before the load of wood was allowed to leave the site.

This system provided the landowner an accounting of the loads leaving the tract. It appears that the contractor did not deposit a ticket for a few loads on each tract of timber harvested from various landowners over the 5-year period.

RECOGNITION: Because only a relatively small percentage of wood was stolen from each site, the theft went largely unnoticed, and any differences between actual and appraised volumes were dismissed as part of the statistical error of the appraisal. However, the sale administrator noticed that the volumes harvested by this particular logger consistently fell short of the appraised volume. Also, it was known that the logger in question had been involved in a previous incident of minor wood theft that had been settled out of court.

ACTIONS TAKEN: Forestry personnel set up motion-detecting video cameras in the trees near the landing area, which quickly recorded a stolen load.

COMMENTS: During the investigation, the logger complained of poor market conditions, which initially had provided the motivation for the timber theft.

It appears that everyone involved with the logging operation knew about the theft. Unless the logger had acted independently, and had hauled the stolen loads himself, the theft would have certainly had to involve the cooperation of the trucker, who ultimately had to make the decision of whether or not to deposit the ticket in the lock-box.

The incident continues to be under investigation, and will likely will prove to involve more individuals.
RECOMMENDATIONS:

1) The sale administrator (normally the same person who performs the appraisal) should conduct frequent checks of the harvest site—check stumps, walk the woods, get a good “feel” of what volume should be there.

2) The sale administrator should avoid predictability. Make sure site checks are not conducted the same time and day of each week. Check frequently and randomly.

3) The sale administrator should get to “know” the logger. Many times, innocent discussions can result in an awareness of potential motive.

4) Be aware of the logger’s reputation.

5) Consider whether the logger is local or is someone new to the area buying a timber sale for the first time.

6) Keep up with the pulp and log markets.

7) Purchase a video camera system for outdoor use. In addition to the motion-sensing feature, you may want to consider a video camera with infrared capability.

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