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## Copper theft not only illegal it's deadly

Would-be thieves killed; danger to hydro customers

**Matthew Liebenberg, National Post**

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The arrest of a man and teenage boy for copper wire and pipe thefts on Toronto-area construction sites is the latest in what authorities see as a growing theft problem.

The 20-year-old man and 17-year-old boy appeared in court yesterday on charges of break and enter, possessing stolen property and mischief. According to Toronto police, several thousands of dollars in copper wire and pipe were stolen from a number of sites in the city and in neighbouring Peel region.

Toronto police said they are concerned about the popularity of these types of thefts due to safety concerns associated with live hydro power being cut to obtain the wire.

Last Saturday, a 32-year-old Pickering man was discovered dead on top of a power transformer. He had broken into a power substation with bolt cutters and was electrocuted when he came into contact with a 44,000-volt conductor on top of the transformer, police said.

According to Alex Starck, chief operating officer for electricity distributor Veridian, about 800 people in northeast of Pickering were without power for about four hours. Although Veridian's losses from copper theft amount to about \$50,000 a year at the moment, it's not Mr. Starck's main concern.

"It's certainly not the dollars involved as much as it is the threat to electrical continuity of the power system, as well as public safety," he said. "The individuals are not only endangering themselves when they do this but they're leaving potentially hazardous installations to the rest of the public."

There were two fatalities last year during attempted copper thefts when a man in Montreal and another in British Columbia were electrocuted. Across Canada, power utilities have experienced increase theft as a result of the higher market value of copper.

According to Chris Price, director of corporate security at Hydro One, its losses amount to \$2-million per year.

In addition to unsafe conditions at the theft site, Mr. Price said there is also an increased risk of blackouts and power surges. "In 2006, power surges in rural Ontario as a result of stolen copper ground wires caused 12 minor house fires," he said.

Ross Johnson, corporate security manager for Epcor, is especially concerned about attempts by thieves

to hack into energized power lines. During a recent incident in the Edmonton area, a meat cleaver was used to try to cut an electrical wire on a power pole.

In addition to increased security measures, power utilities are using technology to counter the problem.

Epcor, Hydro One, New Brunswick Power and other utilities across the country are implementing microdot technology that make it possible to reference the copper back to the exact location where it was stolen.

"We started off with marking substations that have been repeatedly hit with theft, doing them first," said Mr. Price from Hydro One.

Pat Cowman, the president of DataDot Technology Canada, said the technology provides traceable identification for the police to proceed with criminal charges.

"A wire can be identified to a specific site by law enforcement across the country," he said. "It's the equivalent of DNA for property."

Improved co-operation among the power utilities, law enforcement and the metals recycling industry is also high on the agenda.

Mr. Price said Hydro One is working with the Canadian Electricity Association to develop a lobbying strategy to increase the penalties for people who steal and also purchase this material.