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## Edmonton builders impose tracking program to catch thieves

### Operation Hands Off aims to help find property stolen from construction sites

BY MARIAM IBRAHIM, EDMONTONJOURNAL.COM MAY 11, 2010 6:42 PM COMMENTS (2)

STORY

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The Canadian Home Builders Association showcased new building materials that can be tracked using MicroDotDNA technology, at a news conference in Edmonton on May 11, 2010. The intent is to reduce theft from construction sites and create an avenue for victims of theft to be able to prove ownership of stolen materials.

Photograph by: Candace Elliott, edmontonjournal.com

EDMONTON — Would-be thieves will have to think twice before stealing materials and building supplies from construction sites because of a new tracking program that's being used by homebuilders in the Edmonton area.

That's the message being sent by the Edmonton Canadian Home Builders Association and Operation Hands Off, a national program partnered with Canadian Crime Stoppers and set up by MicroDotDNA Technology Canada, the company that developed the process used to track stolen materials.

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Under the new program, unveiled Tuesday at a south Edmonton construction site, everything from building materials to appliances to tools can be imprinted with MicroDotDNA technology, which can be used to recover stolen property from building sites.

The technology is in use in the Edmonton area and builders have already seen a reduction in theft, builders association president Sandra Young said.

“Tracking is important because the biggest thing is we actually have the opportunity to get things back.”

Operation Hands off representatives demonstrated how the technology works. Everything from nails and screws, to stoves and dishwashers can be imprinted. To the naked eye, each of the materials and appliances looks the same, but through the use of a special laser, the imprinted items can be quickly identified.

The program also collects serial and tracking numbers in an online database that can be accessed by homebuilders and law enforcement officials to determine if recovered materials are stolen, and if so, who their rightful owners are.

“There’s nothing more rewarding than being able to return property to the complainant,” said Const. Steve Sharpe of the Edmonton police department.

“It’s essential for the court process, to lay charges for possession of stolen property and theft, to be able to link that back to a complainant.”

The builders association hopes the program deters would-be thieves because there is no way to tell which of the materials are imprinted with tracking technology.

“The beauty of a system like this is you’ve got deterrents on-site on virtually every piece of equipment and material,” said Tim Howard, the association’s executive officer. “If it’s not stolen in the first place, that’s the best of both worlds.”

Part of the new program includes baiting sites with materials that have been outfitted with the MicroDotDNA technology.

“The message is there’s bait programs everywhere,” said Pat Cowman, president of MicroDotDNA Technology Canada. “You steal it, you’re going to jail.”

“Some of the tracking devices are very small so you’re not going to see them if we don’t want you to.”

Cowman said there is often an element of organized crime at work when materials and appliances are stolen from construction sites. Often, he said, thieves will steal material, only to sell it back to homebuilders and construction companies.

“It’s not just the general person who is stealing a few things here and there,” he said. “This is an issue where they will target sites all over the province.”

Theft is an ongoing problem in the construction industry, with everything

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from kitchen appliances, to building supplies, and even items as large as furnaces being stolen from homes.

Overall, theft from their 300 construction sites in the city can add up to as much as \$60,000 a year, the homebuilders association said.

"It's an ongoing problem," Young said. "It's actually become a cost of business."

Young said the cost to roll out the tracking program is about \$50 for each site.

Similar programs are being used across the country in various industries, but this is the first time it has been used by construction companies and homebuilders in Canada. MicroDotDNA is hoping to expand the program to homebuilders across the country, using Edmonton as a template.

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