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## Copper capers

**As metal prices head skyward, thieves are ripping off supplies at electric utilities, construction sites and homes. Toronto even has a 'copper' cop**

April 11, 2008

**TYLER HAMILTON**  
ENERGY REPORTER

Provincial utility Hydro One Inc. has been hit with a record-breaking 58 incidents of copper theft so far this year, a sign that sky-high prices for base metals are thwarting efforts to crack down on the crime.



SUPPLIED PHOTO

Copper wire has become a magnet for thieves as the metal's price has increased five-fold since 2001.

Copper wiring and other metals are crucial to the operation of distribution and transmission networks, making electric utilities such as Hydro One magnets to thieves.

The lure became ever greater this week after copper prices hit a record \$4 (U.S.) a pound on the New York Commodities Exchange – a five-fold increase over 2001 prices. In London, copper eased to \$8,630 a tonne yesterday after closing at \$8,755 on Wednesday.

"We're starting to call this an epidemic," said Laura Cooke, a spokesperson for Hydro One.

The situation has become so bad that Toronto Police Service has a dedicated copper cop assigned from its 41 Division. Detective Constable Andria Cowan works with utilities and makes rounds with scrap dealers in hopes of deterring would-be thieves.

"A lot more goes unreported than reported," said Cowan, whose first case two years ago was a series of commercial buildings in Scarborough that had copper coils stolen from their air conditioning systems. "It's just crazy what they steal."

Homes, construction sites and retailers are also being targeted.

And it's not just copper. One of Cowan's cases involved the theft of 165 bronze flowerpots in a cemetery.

Zinc and aluminum are also on the hit list, along with other metal commodities.

Used batteries, once sold for \$1 so the lead can be recycled, are now worth \$8. "As metals trade higher and higher, the greater the amount of crime we see," Cowan said.

Gregory Taylor, the head of copper theft prevention at Hydro One, said the culprits include homeless junkies who need money for drugs, as well as criminal gangs. "One of them arrested one night told me he and his partner make \$500 a day doing it in Toronto."

Often, it's more organized. A handful of men will show up in a stolen truck and will load two-tonne copper reels into the back, sometimes even using forklifts, Taylor said.

A two-day conference, ending today in Toronto, is being held to educate police and utilities about the problem and come up with strategies for cracking down.

The big wake-up call came at the end of 2006, when Hydro One noticed a 1,150 per cent increase in copper theft compared to 2005. This prompted the company last May to join forces with Crime Stoppers to raise awareness of the dangers of stealing copper wiring from utilities.

Michael Angemeer, CEO of Veridian Corp., created initially through the merger of utilities in Ajax, Clarington and Pickering, said a death two months ago in Durham makes that point clear. Someone in his service territory had cut the lock to a substation and climbed on a transformer. The thief died from electrocution.

"It's a serious problem," Angemeer said, adding that public safety can also be put at risk. "The copper used in many cases is for grounding equipment, and grounding is there partly for safety reasons."

Taylor said grounding is necessary to defend the system from lightning strikes and power surges. "It sends the electricity into the ground so it's safe."

Efforts to crack down over the past year have failed to make a dent. Hydro One said in 2006 it had an average of 16 theft incidents each month. This increased in 2007 to 18 each month. This year the company is on track to record 19 or more incidents a month. Toronto's east end is a hot spot for theft.

The company is beginning to mark metal assets at more than 11,000 small and large transformer stations by using "data dot" technology that's only visible under ultraviolet light. It makes it easier to detect stolen goods at scrap dealers.

Taylor said the value of the stolen copper is only part of the equation. "The bigger figure is related to labour, indirect costs and crews being pulled off other projects to do this work," he said.

"We don't have a choice. We have to replace this stuff for safety reasons."