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Why Air Conditioner Thefts are Heating Up

Just another reason to curse the hot weather: thieves are mining AC cooling coils to sell on the black market

By VERNA GATES/BIRMINGHAM

It's hard enough staying cool these days, what with heat indexes topping 100 degrees around the country. But it doesn't help that a growing number of petty thieves looking to capitalize on rising copper prices are stripping air conditioners to sell the cooling coils on the black market.

At Earl Dudley Associates in Birmingham, Ala., 10 fans do little to tame the 97 degree heat. Last weekend, four of the surveyor supply company's air conditioning units were mined for their copper coils. Six other businesses on their block languish with open doors, waiting for their air conditioner replacements. "I'd just like five minutes alone with the guys who did it," says sales manager Mike Smith, as he wiped sweat from his brow.

While the copper coils that were stolen were worth about \$1,200 in the scrap market, Smith's company will spend \$29,000 on replacement ACs. The crime took 30 minutes; it will take a full week to fill out insurance forms, rent cranes and replace units.

In Dallas, such thefts have doubled over the last year, according to the Dallas Police Department, up from 113 to 282 so far this year. Five detectives working metal thefts are overwhelmed by the increase, according to police spokesperson Donna Hernandez. Dallas' Dalco Air Conditioning & Heating Co. has replaced units at a pizza parlor and a struggling Baptist church. The two crimes total \$30,000 in damage.

It's not just ACs that are the targets of the metal thieves. Plumbing pipes, electrical wires, mail boxes and even copper urns decorating graves are all fair game. Even the Alabama Environmental Council's recycling center in downtown Birmingham was a victim of a recycling crime. The center's lone bathroom was stripped of copper pipe, spewing gallons of water out during drought restrictions on water usage. Fortunately, a homeless man cut off the water. Still, the \$12 worth of copper mined from the sink cost the small non-profit \$800 in repairs.

The most vulnerable seem to be new properties. Thirty half-built homes in a new development bordering the Renaissance Ross Bridge Golf Resort in Birmingham have lost copper plumbing pipes. Thieves are snatching metals in daylight on job sites. "We put it in on Monday and had to replace it by Wednesday," said Matthew Graves, production manager for Mainline Heating & Air Conditioning in Birmingham.

And with copper prices at a nearly two decade high, the criminals plundering anything and everything they can get their hands on are even risking their lives. Larry Dory, 45, of Dallas was killed July 14 while trying to strip live electrical wire off a utility pole. In addition to the 240 to 460 volts in air conditioners, potential dangers include the inhalation of Freon, a refrigerant illegal to release into the atmosphere. "That's a crime in and of itself with the EPA," said J.D. Points, vice president of Dalco.

Prosecuting these acts is not easy. One problem is the inability to track copper parts and tie them to an offense. Hernandez recommends spray painting or etching copper pipes for identity purposes. Meanwhile, companies like American Scrap Metal in Dallas check photo IDs and turn away scrap that looks too new. Birmingham's Standard Heating & Air Conditioning Co. and Dalco are even starting to attach alarms to AC units. That may sound drastic, until you realize that in the South air conditioners are a life or death issue. "Without air conditioning, nobody would live in this hell hole," said Points.

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