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A Greenville developer has been installing fencing around HVAC units, putting them on roofs and adding extra security lighting – something the company never had to do before. Steve Hoover, owner of JoynerHoover Commercial Management, is a victim of copper theft, a rampant problem in the Upstate and the nation and he's hoping these precautions will curb further thefts at his job sites. A rising demand for copper has increased prices and caused a surge in thefts. As of April 14, copper is around \$3.88 per pound, according to www.metalprices.com.

Six months ago, four units were stolen in one night from a property on Pelham Road. They were replaced and then swiped again.

"It's happening at existing buildings with tenants," says Hoover. "They don't care if people are around or not."

Hoover had to do something drastic - place the units on the roofs of the buildings.

Mike Raby, president of Raby Construction, is locking up his HVAC units and bolting them to slabs in the hopes of preventing more thefts.

As recent as a month ago, one of Raby's construction sites on Mulberry Street was vandalized when a heating and cooling unit was stripped of its copper. It will now have to be replaced for the third time.

"It's a normal occurrence," says Raby. "They get \$50 worth of copper and it can cost us up to \$3,500."

And that cost will be passed onto the consumer, says Michael Raymond, interim director of the Greenville Housing Authority.

"The end user is the one that is going to feel the brunt of it," he says. "Costs are going to escalate on the properties. It's not a win, win, it's a lose, lose."

Copper is not only being stripped from HVAC units, but also plumbing.

The metal also is used in pipes and Raby says a thief damaged the plumbing in a crawl space and caused water to run all night.

Copper thefts in Greenville were increasing, but have begun to slow down due to the increasing exposure of the problem, says Jason Rampey, public information officer for the Greenville Police Department.

"We still see reports, but not as many as three to four months ago," Rampey says.

"Officers are aware of the problem now. They are much more educated."

Previously, the police may not have thought twice if they saw someone carrying some junk metal, but now they are apt to be more aware of suspicious activity.

Rampey suggests businesses use fencing and lighting, especially on construction sites.

There has also been an increase in the demand for security systems.

Richard Nichols, owner of Nichols Electronics, has been receiving more inquiries on alarm systems and closed circuit televisions to help prevent copper thefts.

"Companies do feel it's a deterrent and helps to identify and catch people after the fact," he says.

Andy Mosser, with Melloul Blamey Construction, says that the only way to prevent copper thefts is to install security systems.

He now has motion detectors and anti-tampering devices on the company's construction sites – a \$2,000 to \$5,000 expense that's not in the company's budget.

“We can't afford to have 24-hour guards,” he says.

Carolinas Recycling Group, with locations in the Carolinas and Georgia, has ongoing training to help its employees recognize anything that may be suspicious.

“We're trying to react and put tighter controls in place,” says Steve Siegel, vice president.

When the company purchases copper, they scan a driver's license, record a vehicle license plate number and keep it in their system.

Siegel, also the president of the Institution of Scrap Recycling Industries, Inc.'s New Southern Chapter, and says there is pending legislation for tougher regulations on copper. The seven states in his district have new legislation in place or are in the process of implementing that legislation.

“We're trying to help get state law, so there are tougher penalties and record keeping,” he says. “With the new law, companies large or small will have similar requirements when purchasing copper.”

Sen. Jim Ritchie, representing Spartanburg, Greenville and Union counties, says a bill was introduced in January and a subcommittee hearing will be held in mid-April.

The bill relates to the unlawful purchase of copper and says, “The purchaser of certain metals from a person who is not an authorized retailer or wholesaler must pay by check or money order, and obtain the seller's identification number and license plate, and maintain the record for five years.”

Ritchie says, “We're attacking it by putting stronger requirements on people who are purchasing it to get IDs and increase fines and jail time for those convicted of stealing copper and those buying and selling it.

“This is a very serious problem and it's causing tremendous losses for homeowners and commercial businesses,” he says. “We've had broad support throughout the state and we're anxious to get it passed.”

He says he hopes it will be passed later this year.