

Curbing Copper Theft in California

Metal theft is on the rise in California and the costs to individuals and the economy are staggering. Across the state, thieves are disabling streetlights to steal copper wiring, breaking into construction sites at night to pilfer metal pipes and panels, and even hijacking bronze sculptures from their public art displays. With copper prices on the rise, theft of valuable metals is rampant across the nation, and aggressive action must be taken to address this crime in California.

Senate Bill 691 is the strongest metal theft measure being considered by the Legislature. It includes important provisions that create disincentives to steal valuable metal, while placing additional requirements on recyclers and increased penalties on those who break the law. The bill requires thumbprints of those selling copper, copper alloys, aluminum and stainless steel. Sellers must show government ID and proof of their current address. Recyclers who break the law face suspension or revocation of their business license, as well as increased fines. These provisions serve to strengthen the current law, which has been in place for 20 years in California.

In order to properly police and track criminals, the metal theft law must be consistent throughout the state. SB 691, a statewide measure, takes a stronger stance than any local ordinance. The Fifth Appellate District in a recent published opinion ruled that cities and counties are preempted from enforcing metal theft ordinances. The court found

that metal theft is a matter of statewide concern “leaving no room for further regulation at the local level.”

Groups affected by metal theft believe SB 691 is strong enough to reduce and prevent theft. It has the support of the California State Sheriffs Association, the California Farm Bureau, utility companies and every other stakeholder impacted by the growing crime.

Metal theft is a serious crime that needs to be addressed. Rural and urban communities, farmers and contractors, school districts and utilities are all being victimized. SB 691 provides law enforcement with the tools necessary to put metal thieves behind bars and crooked recyclers out of business.

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