

THEFT AND VANDALISM OF LOGGING EQUIPMENT

*By Craig Hill, Law Enforcement Chief, Alabama Forestry Commission
Rex Woodson, Corporate Security Manager, Weyerhaeuser Corporation
and Tom Kazee, Woodland Security, Inc.*



Many of you may have had experience with vandals or thieves that target logging equipment, farm equipment, or recreational vehicles. While a large number of these incidents are relatively minor, others can be very expensive. The cost of replacing or repairing equipment is always compounded by down time and lost production. With bad weather, regular maintenance, and mill quotas, you don't need anything else to cause trouble.

A few months back, *the Southern Loggin' Times* website described arrests made by the Alabama Forestry Commission, along with the Butler County (Alabama) Sheriff's Department, for theft of timber equipment.

Over \$200,000 in property was involved. Sadly, there are a lot more crimes than arrests. Theft of equipment seems to be rising to levels unknown in the past, and senseless vandalism appears to be more common also.

Logging contractors often begin to look for solutions *after* there has been an expensive incident. The purpose of this article is to give you a few things to think about *before* you have serious trouble.

One of the problems with protecting your equipment is the balance of cost and risk. It may be that you've never had problem with theft or vandalism, so you can't justify an additional expense. This makes perfect sense, but an expensive incident can occur without warning. The place to start, then, would be a menu of *low-cost, low-tech options* that a crew can utilize all the time, with some likelihood their efforts will mitigate risk.

Obviously, we are not inventing anything new here; many of these things are done every day by you and others in the business. But if you have difficulty in *thinking* like a vandal or thief, we're here to help.

- 1. Be sensitive to your surroundings.** If you are in an area known for criminal activity, you would want to ramp up your preventative measures. Once a *minor* incident occurs, this might be a clue that larger things are in the works.
- 2. Pay attention to people that drive by your worksite.** Encourage your crew to make notes about vehicle descriptions, time of day, and other details. Thieves will often 'recon' their targets during the day, to get the lay of the land.
- 3. Be on good terms with the neighbors.** This includes adjoining landowners (especially a landowner you cross to harvest timber), game wardens, deputies, hunting clubs, road maintenance vendors, and others with legitimate access to the area.
- 4. Discourage the "half-hearted."** Some criminals will not be discouraged no matter what you do, but a high percentage will be scared off if they think you might be watching.
 - a. Signs.** When we approach a deck where a "surveillance underway" sign is displayed, it has an effect on our behavior, even though we have legitimate business there. A quick search of the internet found a wide variety of signs. One favorite is "Dog Contained by Invisible Fence with Full Access to Equipment." Of course, it's not actually necessary to *have* a dog or a camera to display a sign.
 - b. Lights.** There are a wide variety of lights available which are powered by solar cells and activated by motion. You might have something similar to this on your property already. Like roaches, vandals and thieves hate the light.

- c. Alarms.** It is always surprising that expensive new equipment in remote locations is not equipped with simple 'car alarms.'
- d. Barriers.** Although not attorneys, we highly recommend that you never do anything that might hurt a trespasser or recreational user. Cable gates, for example, are notoriously bad. However, a good cheap cattle gate will discourage certain trespassers. Contingent on the terrain, you may be able to safely block road access with a pull of timber or a skidder.



- 5. Guards.** In the Appalachian Mountains, logging equipment is often guarded by a night watchman. This would be the extreme solution because of the cost. There is also liability to consider. The safety of a night watchman could be, at least in part, the responsibility of the people who hired him or her. The actions of a guard are also likely to be the responsibility of the people who hire him or her. So, it makes sense to take this step cautiously.
- 6. Technology.** There are options from low-tech to high-tech, and from low-cost to extravagant. Most folks are familiar with game cameras; we have seen these set up around fuel trailers and other equipment. While they are inexpensive and might work well, they are very difficult to conceal. If you go this route, you must ensure you acquire a camera with no visible flash or red glowing lights. The better cameras have infrared (IR) emitters that are invisible to the naked eye. It is certainly possible to install car alarms on your equipment. This goes back to the concept of discouraging the half-hearted vandal. There are a range of options available at Best Buy and other vendors. A proximity alarm will activate when there is motion near your equipment. If you do an internet search on "RECONYX license plate capture camera," you will locate a unit that does a great job of capturing tag numbers in the dark. This is approximately a \$650 product.



"LTL ACORN" Security Camera - Locks and a protective box might not save the unit from vandals.

(Continued on page 14)

THEFT AND VANDALISM

(Continued from page 13)

There are several kinds of products with sensors that can detect motion and call your cell phone, or send a text or even video image. Of course, these require a cell phone plan (\$15-\$30 per month) and some study to find the right product. Be aware that “false positives” can be a problem. Motion detectors might alarm with wind and raccoons, as well as vandals. You can find a selection of these products at tattletalealarm.com, videofied.com, pixcontroller.com, and ltlacorn.com. The “LTL ACORN” camera has proven itself to be very versatile and more covert than regular game cameras.

7. Marking Equipment. Tires, wheels, hydraulic pumps, and cylinders are all hot items for thieves. We recommend that you brand tires in three places, just above the bead. Many tire dealers will mark tires when they are purchased with your unique brand. Skidders and other heavy equipment should be marked with hidden numbers known only to the owner. A customized kill switch is highly recommended. For common brands of equipment, thieves know where the standard switches are located. PLEASE NOTE: If you purchase used equipment, let common sense be your guide. If the deal is too good to be true, there may be strings attached. Missing PIN (parts identification number) plates should be a huge RED FLAG that things are not normal. While they can be knocked off accidentally, a legitimate owner should have routine paperwork defining ownership. It is a crime in several states to conceal the true identity of a vehicle.

8. Fuel, Lubricants, and Spare Parts. If you don't know how much diesel you left in the woods yesterday, you won't know how much was taken overnight. If you don't know how much you spend on lubricants and spare parts, you won't know what might be missing. Here's a safe bet: when the cost of petroleum products jumps again, there will be a rash of diesel thefts. Lock them up, take them home, and measure consumption. Otherwise, you might be a victim and never know it. Also (and here is a sad fact of life), if you have a problem, you must consider an 'inside job.' We tell forest managers this all the time: you have to protect your business from your own employees.

9. Communicate with Law Enforcement. If you fail to report your equipment as stolen, you have almost no chance of retrieving your property. It may be recovered, but the agency would have no corresponding reports to fall back on. Be sure to communicate with the Alabama Forestry Commission's law enforcement agency if you are victimized. If you have suffered an expensive incident, professional investigators might recommend that you post a reward for information in the local community. Several years ago, a Florida logger had excellent success with this approach. In just a few days, he had three teenage boys identified, and their parents eventually paid for damages.

After experiencing an expensive incident is the *wrong* time to mitigate risk. If you can incorporate low-cost, low-tech solutions in an everyday manner *before* it happens, you might avoid such problems altogether.☹

