

## Press-Enterprise Editorial

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# Metal threat

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The Legislature has done its part to help stop a crime wave plaguing the Inland region and the rest of California. Gov. Schwarzenegger should waste no time in signing two bills cracking down on metal theft.

The price of copper and aluminum has mushroomed in recent years, drawing thieves to electrical wire, school plaques and fire hydrants, among other targets. The market price for pure copper is currently \$3.50 a pound -- up from about \$1.50 in 2004.

The metal-theft trend is taking a serious financial toll on California taxpayers, businesses and homeowners. In Riverside County, the Sheriff's Department says public and private losses in 2007 hit \$2.6 million.

And the thefts have public-safety consequences. A Hesperia fire in April, for example, destroyed a home because the hydrants were not working. Someone stole \$8 copper fittings from all five fireplugs on the street.

That led Assemblyman Anthony Adams, R-Hesperia, to introduce legislation in May enhancing the penalty for theft of fire hydrant parts. His bill, AB 1859, which would impose a fine of \$3,000 for theft of such parts, passed last week. The fine would be in addition to any other penalties assessed.

And AB 844 would remove a thief's instant reward for filching precious metal. The bill, which has a long list of co-sponsors, would impose a three-day waiting period on payment for the sale of scrap metal. And it would require scrap metal dealers to obtain a photograph or video and a thumbprint of the seller.

These measures might seem extreme. But they are vital to help stop an epidemic of disruptive and dangerous thefts. Beyond the Hesperia incident:

Thieves are targeting metal water-conduit connectors found on commercial buildings. The connectors allow firefighters to increase pressure to interior sprinklers. A February survey of Fontana warehouses by San Bernardino County fire officials found 22 connectors missing.

In May, Riverside County Supervisor Jeff Stone announced a \$10,000 reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the people who stripped precious metals from landmarks identifying the Wine Country near Temecula.

According to the California Highway Patrol, some criminals are even posing as Caltrans and construction workers. That way, it seems less suspicious when they rip out guardrails, lighting and road signs.

The two bills mark a good start on curtailing metal-related crimes. Some scrap-metal dealers opposed AB 844 because of its paperwork burdens. But public safety trumps these record-keeping hassles. The dealers should help defeat this growing scourge.