

HVAC Theft Prevention

Preventing Metal Theft

The worldwide demand for nonferrous metals, such as copper and aluminum, has risen dramatically over the past few years, especially in developing nations. Thieves are taking advantage of high scrap metal prices. An Everest policyholder who had several roof-mounted air conditioning compressors stolen for their copper at a cost of nearly \$100,000, is one example. In addition to the damaged equipment, this Florida based client was essentially out of business for several days until the compressors were replaced. In another example, a cold storage warehouse lost nearly \$1,000,000 in contents when fruit spoiled over a weekend as a result of stolen HVAC equipment.

In another case, thieves broke into an apartment building over a weekend and destroyed six heating units by removing copper water pipes. There have been similar incidents in churches (copper sheathing, gutters and downspouts), schools (copper wiring), as well as construction sites and electric utility firms. Stealing metal for scrap is nothing new, but with higher prices and more demand for these metals around the world, thieves seem to be getting bolder and are breaking into more commercial and industrial buildings looking for larger gains.

One Jacksonville, FL church's sign read "To Whoever Stole My Air-Conditioners – You're Going to Need Them – God". Lesser jurisdictions throughout the United States have reported significant increases in the number of thefts. In some areas, the increase has been over 150%. The value of the stolen copper has risen also. In South Carolina, the governor has signed into law a measure aimed at reducing copper theft from air conditioning and farm irrigation systems. Tougher state laws have been adopted in other states as well. In most states metal recycler must collect and record certain required identification from anyone selling scrap metal.



Stolen HVAC units are generally from along the exterior areas of buildings – ground mounted such as these.

These easily accessible HVAC compressor units are mounted on a portable slab on the exterior of a hotel. These units can be disassembled and their copper coils removed in less than 10 minutes.

HVAC units are an easy target for theft or destruction for the copper coils. A connection to an alarm or CCTV monitors would help prevent theft.

What Do Thieves Look For?

- Copper coils in HVAC systems and refrigerators
- Copper flashing, gutters and roofs and other metal components, whether installed or not
- Wiring of all types whether in occupied, vacant or buildings under construction
- Piping in heating and electrical systems both indoors and out
- New wiring and piping
- Electrical wiring installed in unoccupied building sections

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In addition to thefts of ground-mounted units, there also have had cases of thefts from roof mounted units, including large capacity evaporative cooling equipment. Not all that is lost is the copper or the HVAC unit. In one case over a dozen HVAC units were destroyed when the perpetrators damaged the units while taking the copper from roof mounted condenser units. The value of each unit was approximately \$6,000, or nearly \$75,000. The copper taken in total had an estimated value of \$1200. In stealing the copper, the HVAC units were destroyed; the roof was severely damaged at a cost of nearly \$50,000 and many businesses had to close for several days while the roofs were repaired and the HVAC units were replaced.

What can you do? For rooftop units: secure wall-mounted exterior ladders to prevent unauthorized access to the roof. Remove, lock and secure any other access points to the roof area. But be sure to maintain the integrity of any life safety and fire egress. That helps but further security is also needed. A pair of cell phones, a truck and a ladder are all that are needed for an efficient team to be able to complete their evenings work.

For ground mounted units: Install security cage units that are resistant to cutting by bolt cutters and "saws-alls" over all HVAC units. Masonry enclosures can be more visually attractive and provide enhanced security. Eliminate shrubs or other hiding places. Install alarm connections from the HVAC equipment and connect the alarm system to a central station monitored alarm service.



For all units: Provide additional theft prevention protection such as: improved lighting as recommended by your local utility service or other qualified organization to increase visibility; install video surveillance cameras connected to a digital recording device with prominent signs warning the area is video monitored. The monitors should cover the areas of concern with the specific intent to record vehicle license plates and physical features of intruders. Hire security professionals – patrols should be documented and occur every hour, preferably, or every two hours as a minimum. Secure the grounds with fencing and "No Trespassing" signs

Be sure to work with the local police force and ask for their advice for any other precautions that you can implement. If you have a loss, report it immediately to your agent and the police.

Remember Everest Loss Control offers services to help you in your loss prevention efforts. If you would like more information about these services, visit our web site at www.everestgroup.com.

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