

RANCH AND FARM THEFT ON THE RISE

Property crimes, once considered an urban problem, are being committed in rural areas with increased frequency. Theft and property damage can cause serious financial and personal loss to farmers and ranchers.

Some of the most common items stolen are gasoline and diesel fuel, especially where large quantities are stored. Feeds, produce, tools, fertilizer, livestock and field equipment are also common targets. In some cases, employees may be stealing from their employers, especially if there have been disagreements or misunderstandings.

Unfortunately, the once common, relaxed country attitude must now be replaced with vigilance and alertness when it comes to farm and ranch security. Of necessity, we need to be thinking in new ways.

Law enforcement officials note that a fundamental element of rural crime is opportunity. Criminals are seeking for opportunities to steal without being seen, without taking much time and without making much noise. Farms are ideal targets for theft, due to the relative isolation of each operation. Careful farmers and ranchers should consider simple steps that make theft more trouble than it's worth. Potential thieves will likely look elsewhere for an easier target if they consider the theft to be too risky.

The primary responsibility for crime prevention rests with property owners. They know their operations and should carefully look around for ways to improve safety and prevent theft.

Below are ideas to help avoid the loss and inconvenience associated with crime on farms and ranches.

- * Go around the property and look at it through the eyes of a thief. Be seen around the property often, and vary routines so people can't easily anticipate when someone will be home.
- * Construct sturdy, secure sheds with quality locks. Tools, equipment, chemicals and other valuables should be stored inside. Use strong chains and locks on all gates, access routes and loading ramps. Mark or stamp tools and equipment with a permanent identification number.
- * Form a "rural watch group" to look after each other's farms and to observe and record suspicious behavior. Jot down descriptions of strangers and vehicles including license number, location, date and time. This can be helpful to police if crimes occur in the area. Neighbors working together, being each other's eyes and ears, can significantly reduce crime.

* Install security lighting around sheds, storage facilities and equipment with lights operating on time switches or sensors. Remove hay and straw from fields immediately after bailing, especially small bales.

* Lock fuel storage tanks and make sure they can easily be seen from the house. Have lockable fuel caps on all tractors and vehicles. Park machinery close to home if possible. If necessary, park it where it can be seen from a neighbor's house or completely out of sight behind a hill or a tree line. Remove keys and lock the cab on machinery when not in use. Consider disabling machinery by removing the distributor cap, rotor or battery. Don't leave valuable tools in vehicle trays.

* Use animals as deterrents. A good watch dog around the property with proper signage such as "Beware of Dog" is effective. Geese are also good noise makers when strangers come.

* Keep photographs or video records of property or stock in case of theft. Inventory livestock on a daily basis, but avoid making checks at a regular time. Ensure that all animals are marked or branded for identification and maintain complete livestock records with identification numbers. Photograph valuable animals.

* Keep a good record of past employees, especially if there has been a dispute or a firing. Also, regard people who offer deals too good to refuse with suspicion. Either reject the offer or tentatively accept it, but contact the police immediately. Always notify the police of crime. No theft is too small to report.