



April 17, 2008

Bill would hold scrap metal buyers accountable

Recyclers, Realtors and others in favor of tough legislation.

Chad Livengood
News-Leader

Jefferson City -- Scrap metal thieves aren't the only ones facing stiff fines and possible jail time for ripping off precious metals.

Lawmakers are now taking aim at the scrap metal buyers with new legislation requiring scrappers to keep better records of whom they purchase metal from and imposing fines for buying beer kegs and manhole covers.

Under a proposed revision to existing laws, scrap metal dealers could go to jail for up to six months for purchasing cast iron manhole covers. Buying kegs for scrap from persons other than beer brewers would become a misdemeanor, according to Senate Bill 1034.

The Senate's judiciary committee heard testimony Wednesday in favor of tougher laws from recyclers, Realtors and electric companies.

"These thefts have monetary affects on our customers and the rates they pay for services," said Pat Strader, a lobbyist for Empire District Electric Co. in Joplin.

In the past year, Anheuser-Busch and other beer companies began requiring deposits of \$40 or more from people purchasing kegs to prevent them from scrapping the containers. Party stores use to require as little as a \$10 deposit for aluminum kegs.

The Senate bill also would prohibit scrap metal dealers for paying with cash for transactions of \$100 or more for copper or aluminum. Exceptions would be made for dealers buying scrap metal from an "established business" or for purchasing aluminum beverage cans.

Across the state, the high price of scrap metal has made it a lucrative money-maker for thieves and drug addicts in need of some quick cash to buy drugs.

In addition to manhole covers and beer kegs, parks officials across the state are reporting that thieves are ripping off the aluminum bleachers seats from athletic field complexes, said David Ostlund, executive director of the Missouri Park & Recreation Association.

"They've started replacing the aluminum slats in the bleaches with wood because it's such a problem," Ostlund said.

The damage to public facilities such as parks from metal thieves, Ostlund said, is "a complete waste of hundreds of thousands of dollars of taxpayer money each year."

At Fantastic Caverns north of Springfield, telephone lines were cut more than three weeks ago, knocking out phone service to the cave tour attraction and numerous homes for a week. The

thieves cut the lines to steal the copper.

When people tried to call and inquire about vehicle-guided cave tours, "folks didn't think it was open," resulting in financial losses for the attraction, said general manager Steve Thompson.

More than three weeks later, the phone companies are still working to fully restore services, Thompson said.

"It's still not all up and running like it should," he said.

But more importantly, scrap metal theft is now a public safety problem when people are disconnected from emergency services, Thompson said.

"Somebody could have died," Thompson said.

Rep. Shane Schoeller, R-Willard, used the Fantastic Caverns phone line incident as a reason to give law enforcement authorities more power to prosecute illegal metal dealers.

"I look forward to getting this passed as quickly as possible," Schoeller told Sen. Rob Mayer, a Stoddard County Republican who is sponsoring the bill.