

September 24, 2008

Solar Panels Are Vanishing, Only to Reappear on the Internet

By KATE GALBRAITH

DESERT HOT SPRINGS, Calif. — Solar power, with its promise of emissions-free renewable energy, boasts a growing number of fans. Some of them, it turns out, are thieves.

Just ask Glenda Hoffman, whose fury has not abated since 16 solar panels vanished from her roof in this sun-baked town in three separate burglaries in May, sometimes as she slept. She is ready if the criminals turn up again.

“I have a shotgun right next to the bed and a .22 under my pillow,” Ms. Hoffman said.

Police departments in California — the biggest market for [solar power](#), with more than 33,000 installations — are seeing a rash of such burglaries, though nobody compiles overall statistics.

Investigators do not believe the thieves are acting out of concern for their carbon footprints. Rather, authorities assume that many panels make their way to unwitting homeowners, sometimes via the Internet.

Last November, someone tried to sell solar panels stolen from a toll road in Newport Beach for \$100 each on [eBay](#). Detectives from the local police department entered the bidding and won the panels, which were worth nearly \$1,500 apiece, according to Sgt. Evan Sailor, a Newport Beach police spokesman.

When Nathan Tyrone Mitchell, a resident of Santa Monica, showed up to hand over the panels, the police greeted him with handcuffs.

Mr. Mitchell, who was charged with possession of stolen property, has pleaded not guilty. His lawyer, Charles Stoddard, said that his client had bought the panels from someone on [Craigslist](#) and then tried to resell them on eBay for a profit. “Our contention is that Mr. Mitchell is just an innocent purchaser who kind of got caught up in this thing,” Mr. Stoddard said.

In Contra Costa County, detectives accustomed to handling thefts of copper began to notice solar panels going missing in the last six months, according to Jimmy Lee, a spokesman for the county sheriff’s office.

This summer, an officer on patrol became suspicious when he spotted a man trying to sell solar

panels to a home builder who had advertised on Craigslist that he was seeking panels. The officer confiscated the panels and, after detectives found that they matched panels stolen from a school, a California man was charged. Mr. Lee says that law enforcement agencies are investigating about a half-dozen other solar-panel thefts in his area.

“We were surprised and kind of caught off guard” by the solar thefts, said Mr. Lee, who recommends people engrave their driver’s license numbers onto their panels for better identification.

For Tom McCalmont, president of Regrid Power, a solar installation business near San Jose, the problem hit home in late June. His own headquarters was struck by thieves, who took more than \$30,000 worth of panels from the roof.

The panels were disassembled expertly, he said, leading him to suspect that someone in the solar industry had done it. He urges clients to install video cameras and alarms for their solar arrays, and likens his own revamped security system to Fort Knox.

“This is the crime of the future,” Mr. McCalmont said.

After suffering a solar theft, some victims find unusual ways to protect their property. Ms. Hoffman, of Desert Hot Springs, could not sleep for several weeks during the string of thefts from her roof.

One night, she waited beside a nearby building and watched her house in an attempt to catch the thieves, causing a suspicious neighbor to call the police. She vows that if she ever catches the culprits, “they’re not going to leave walking” — especially if she feels threatened.

So far, with the losses still modest, homeowners’ insurance is processing the claims with little resistance. Ms. Hoffman’s insurer, State Farm, is paying \$95,000 to replace her entire system. She plans to install an alarm, and possibly a video camera.

Not far from Ms. Hoffman, in the town of [Palm](#) Desert, Jim and Shayna Powell were devastated after thieves took 19 of their solar panels in June, causing their electricity bill to shoot from \$3 to \$300 just when they needed air-conditioning the most. “Of all the times of year to steal the panels,” Mr. Powell said in frustration.

Beyond California, solar-power markets are comparatively small, so thefts are still rare — but they are spreading. In the last 18 months, Oregon’s highway department has lost a few panels used to power portable traffic message boards.

In Minnesota, the Sauk River Watershed District has lost at least eight small panels, worth \$250 each, in the last few years, according to Melissa Roelike, who coordinates the water quality monitoring program there.

In response, the district has taken steps to protect the panels, including putting them in trees and

atop poles. Thieves promptly stole one such panel.

“Obviously, hoisting them 20 feet in the air on a metal pipe does not work,” Ms. Roelike said.

In Europe, where the solar industry is well-established, thievery is entrenched, and measures to ward it off have become standard, including alarm systems and hard-to-unscrew panels.

But in the United States, installers are just coming to grips with the need for alarms, video cameras and indelible engraving of serial numbers. Some people fancy simpler solutions.

Ken Martin Jr. lost 58 panels, which will cost \$75,000 to replace, this spring from the roof of a half-empty office building in Santa Rosa, Calif., that he owns. He is considering slapping paint on some parts of his remaining panels — bright pink paint.

“At least if someone comes across them and they’re painted, they’ll know that’s my color,” he said.

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Chico, CA: hotbed of solar crime

Posted by [Margaret](#) in Tuesday, March 31st 2009 under: [Solar Power Info](#) Tags: [California Solar](#), [Chico](#), [crime](#), [theft](#)

The educational observatory in Chico, California was the city's first all-solar building. And now, hardly more than a week after the police arrested a suspect in the case of the theft of solar panels off a Chico elementary school, the observatory might have to shut down its solar operations due to the [theft of three of its roof-mounted panels](#). The director of the Chico Community Observatory said the facility will stay open to host a couple of field trips this week, but after that, it will have to close until the solar panels have been replaced. He noted that

burglary for profit may have been the motive in the crime, but said the panels were crudely removed by someone who probably didn't know what they were doing.

To me, that's almost the saddest part: that on top of wantonly wrecking the property of this nonprofit community organization, the thief (or thieves, seems more probable to me, considering the bulk and weight of the panels) knew so little about the technology at hand that the panels themselves were most likely damaged. If so, no one will be able to get good out of them now.

And why? Yeah, I was flippant in my [first blog post](#) on this subject, joking that at least we know solar panels are really popular now—people finally want to steal them! (Or at least a weird dark element of Chico society does.) But there is some truth here: solar is mainstream enough at this stage that mostly everyone knows it's (a) a viable way to reduce your electric bill and get clean energy, and (b) very expensive. Most people don't realize all the pieces that go into a solar PV system—I know because I talk to lots of folks who come to GetSolar to research solar. Maybe the thought is that if you can steal solar panels, you can get “free” electricity, without realizing the need for a master electrician to install the system, an inverter to convert the charge from DC to AC current, and all the myriad other elements of solar.

Another motive, of course, is the pure stupid malice behind so many acts of vandalism. But this particular kind of vandalism involves getting on top of a building, removing heavy pieces of advanced technology from their custom-fitted moldings, and having a plan to smuggle out the evidence. It's a bit advanced for simple malice. And yet, who would buy obviously used (due to damage from the theft and transport) solar panels? Well north of San Francisco, Chico is not the kind of densely populated urban area in which such a product could melt effortlessly into a brisk black market trade. Urban, yes; and could panels be transported easily once stolen, also yes; but why Chico? It seems like too much of a coincidence that this city of just over 100,000 residents could be attracting “solar thieves” from other locations: it's not like the Bay Area has a shortage of installed PV systems. We don't know yet if the suspect the police arrested for the school theft was out on bail at the time of the observatory incident—that would certainly be a neat wrap-up, if it turns out to be the same suspect. But it might turn out that suspect was not responsible for either solar panel theft—and then it's back to square one.

It's sad that such a beautiful technology, being used for the good of a whole community, could get pillaged

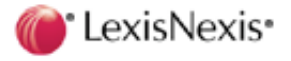
90 solar panels stolen from California water treatment plant

San Rafael officials say damage, losses could top \$135K

The Marin Independent Journal (Novato, Calif.)

Updated: 03-8-2009 7:39 pm

Jan. 9--Thieves this week swiped 90 solar panels that power Las Gallinas Valley Sanitary District's water treatment plant in north San Rafael, causing damage and losses that could top \$135,000, officials said Friday.



The theft at 300 Smith Ranch Road occurred early Thursday between midnight and 6:30 a.m., district manager Mark Williams said.

The bandits bypassed two locked gates by using a Pacific Gas and Electric Co. access key, police spokeswoman Margo Rohrbacher said. A lock to the fenced-in area where the panels were housed was cut.

In addition to the theft, damage was reported to a portion of the panel support structure and the electrical wiring used to convey energy from the panels to the PG&E power grid, district officials said. The treatment plant remained online.

The area, which housed 3,444 Sharp 200-watt solar panels prior to the theft, is accessible by many groups, including the company that provided the solar panels, the utility and others, police said. The 5-by-6-foot panels are valued at about \$1,000 each.

"Solar panels have serial numbers," Rohrbacher said. "We're working with (the solar company) to provide us with that information."

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The heist is the second in recent months that Las Gallinas has been the victim. In October, thieves made off with less than \$50 worth of copper wire. The theft, while small, forced the closure of a recycled water treatment plant for about a week.

Extra security measures were being implemented but were not complete when

Thursday's theft occurred. Officials said they will step up measures, and do not yet know if public access to the district's recreational lands will be affected.

"Certainly we'll be weighing all the options to minimize exposure to theft in the future," Williams said.

"We're very concerned about it. We're trying to do the right thing to protect the environment. It's frustrating -- there's an individual out there willing to steal solar panels."

Solar-panel theft is a growing problem in the Bay Area, with crimes reported in San Rafael, Novato, Bolinas, Napa and several East Bay communities, police said.

In August, the Bolinas organic farm Star Route Farms was hit. Bandits hauled off about \$20,000 in solar panels mounted behind the Bolinas-Stinson Elementary School.

Earlier last summer, Contra Costa County sheriff's deputies arrested a Pittsburg man with solar panels stolen from the Pleasanton School District. In the spring, St. Anselm's Episcopal Church in Lafayette was hit twice. Napa Valley College reported the theft of about \$40,000 in solar panels in June.

About six months ago, five solar panels were reported stolen from San Rafael High School, police said. The 5-by-6-foot panels were similar to equipment installed at commercial businesses and homes.

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Last month, 10 solar panels valued at about \$10,000 were stolen from a law firm on Rush Landing Road in Novato.

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Solar panels stolen

By MARSHA DORGAN
Register Staff Writer

Two separate Rutherford wineries are counting their losses to the tune of about \$70,000.

ZD Wines and Honig Vineyard and Winery are victims of Sanyo solar panel thefts.

ZD Wines discovered its loss between Monday night and Tuesday morning at its vineyards on Rutherford Road, between Highway 29 and Silverado Trail.

“They are not quite sure when they were hit,” Napa County Sheriff’s Capt. John Robertson said.

The thieves made off with 20 3-x-4-foot solar panels worth \$20,380, Robertson said.

“They cut the fencing and used tools to unscrew the panels from the racks,” he said.

Robertson said the panels are bulky and heavy. “It takes them some time to remove and load them into their vehicles.”

Honig was targeted last month. The theft was discovered on Nov. 28.

Once inside the Honig’s vineyards on Rutherford Road, the culprits used the same method to steal the solar panels.

“At Honig, they took 39 Sanyo solar panels, worth \$50,000,” Robertson said.

Robertson said there is some recycling value in the panel racks. “However, they could be selling the panels or using them for their own personal use.”

Vineyard owners are taking precautions to prevent any further thefts.

“They are adding more fencing, installing alarm systems and using different ways to attach the panels to the rack,” he said. “We are also increasing patrols in the area.”