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Recycling truck driver Jeff Hurley leaves new sacks for residents who have had their cans stolen.

Crooks catch recycling fever

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SANTA CRUZ — When residents place bags or crates of aluminum cans on sidewalks for the recycling truck, they may as well put out a sign reading, "Come and get it."

Aluminum, bringing in up to 90 cents a pound, is the preferred choice of scavengers who steal cans off sidewalks before recycling trucks arrive. Operators of recycling programs from Scotts Valley to Aptos say the can thieves are robbing communities of thousands of dollars a year.

"It is just bleeding our program," said Ronald Fahl, recycling coordinator for the city of Santa Cruz. "It is just a slow bleeding that never ends."

Profits from sidewalk recycling, operated by the county of Santa Cruz and every city except Watsonville, offset the cost of garbage collection. If the profits don't come in as expected, garbage collection rates will have to go up, said Fahl.

"It affects our company, as well as the taxpayer," said Ken Newman, recycling coordinator for Waste Management of Santa Clara County, which picks up recyclable materials in Scotts Valley and the unincorporated section of mid-county.

"If the volume of cans is down, we would receive less money per month. If it becomes a constant problem, then we would sit down

with the county and talk to them about increasing our subsidy. It could eventually cost the taxpayer," Newman said. How much could it cost? In the city of Santa Cruz, Fahl estimates \$10,000 has been lost this year from thieves taking cans. So far, the city has recycled \$57,000 in cans.

The problem has gotten so bad that:

- he county soon will be prosecuting an Aptos man in the first known case of alleged petty theft of cans from curbside recycling bins.

- The 20-20 Recycling Station on Morrissey Avenue recently was ripped off of \$2,000 in cans, and then hit again the next week.

- Pickup trucks are making their way through neighborhoods in the dead of night, cleaning out all the aluminum cans before the recycling trucks arrive in the morning.

The theft doesn't go unnoticed by residents. Fahl, who oversees the city-run recycling program in Santa Cruz, said he personally receives eight to 10 calls a week. The city's customer service department gets many more calls, he noted.

One of those who called was Dianna Pini of Fernside Street.

A recent morning when Pini was driving her children to school, she noticed a man on a bicycle riding down her street, a large garbage bag slung across his bike. As she

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watched in her rearview mirror, she saw the man collect cans that had been left outside for recycling.

"I saw him go house to house, as calmly as he could, in broad daylight," Pini related. "He emptied out the neighborhood."

Pini called the police. She watched as an officer arrived, questioned the man, and let him go — cans and all.

Later that morning, as she left for another errand, Pini spotted a family working their way up May Avenue, again stealing cans.

Pini no longer puts out aluminum for recycling. She gives cans to her daughter to turn into recycling centers so she can earn money for camp.

Mike Dunbaugh, deputy chief of the Santa Cruz Police Department, said he isn't aware that can theft is a significant problem. He said that each case would be handled according to the circumstances, with the thief given a warning, a citation or jailed.

The stealing of recyclable materials is a nationwide problem. According to an article in *Waste Age* magazine, *Waste Management of North America* says it's a problem in all of the 253 communities in 25 states where the firm operates. The problem is so great in Philadelphia that the city is trying to come up with a new recycling program that allows scavengers to pick up commercial wastes.

Before curbside recycling programs began with earnest here about two years ago, some people on the edge of poverty made their living scavenging for recyclable materials. They went through dumpsters and garbage cans; many became familiar sights, moving through towns with their shopping carts filled with cans.

When curbside recycling started, their livelihood was taken away, and at the same time, made easier. Instead of rifling through garbage, now all they have to do is walk down the street, picking up cans left in sacks or plastic crates.

But the stealing of recyclable material has become big business. It no longer is simply providing a few dollars a day to the needy.

Aluminum in particular has become a hot item since January

when the state Legislature passed a bill increasing the redemption value of aluminum cans. This was done in order to encourage recycling and make recycling financially viable.

The Oakland Recycling Center recently had to shut down because of constant thefts and vandalism. More than \$5,000 worth of recyclable materials were stolen from the center in a three-month period.

But big-time theft isn't limited to big cities. The recycling storage truck behind the Safeway store on Morrissey Boulevard recently was ripped off of \$2,000 worth of cans, according to Charles Himes, manager of the 20-20 Recycling Center at the site.

At the same site about a week later, thieves drove up to the recycling center with a rental truck, broke in and began loading up recyclable materials. But this time, two Safeway employees confronted a suspect in the truck. The suspect ran when the employees said they were going to call police, but he left behind a woman and her two children.

The woman, who told police she was from Phoenix and Los Angeles, was booked on suspicion of grand theft and conspiracy.

Even in the neighborhoods, the theft often isn't on a small scale. Jeff Hurley, a recycling truck driver for the city of Santa Cruz, said Monday is his worst day. That's the day he picks up in the Seabright neighborhood. Of the 150-200 homes where he collects, almost all are emptied of aluminum by the time he arrives.

"They even go to the trouble of separating the aluminum from the tin," he added. "I can go all day without picking up any aluminum. There are people going around with pickup trucks and dumping all the stuff in their backs."

Hurley has noticed over the past six months that the theft is getting worse. "At first, it was obviously just street people doing it. But since then, it has gotten into the full-blown affair. A lot of times, they take the (recycling) bags, too."

Some cities are handling the problem by prosecuting those who are caught stealing. They hope this will dissuade others.

The county of Santa Cruz and the city of Santa Cruz both have laws making it illegal to take recyclable materials from containers.

The prosecution of Robert Dickie of La Selva Beach is probably the first case in Santa Cruz County of someone being charged with stealing aluminum cans from recycling bins.

Dickie, according to the county Sheriff's Department, was arrested Sept. 10 on San Andreas Road in Aptos when Deputy Al Alcantar spotted him squatting in front of three bins.

"I saw Dickie remove three aluminum cans, one at a time, from a bin and place them in a large garbage bag," Alcantar reported. "This garbage bag was bulging."

According to the report, the bed of Dickie's pickup truck was full of glass bottles in boxes and a garbage bag. Dickie had been warned once before by another deputy not to take things from recycling bins, Alcantar stated.

Dickie told deputies he was unemployed and made his living by going through dumpsters for cans and bottles.

"This is a real tough political issue because generally, the people

who are taking the cans are seniors and the homeless," said Newman of Waste Management.

Other areas have tried to solve the problem by having people mix their tin, aluminum, plastic and glass, said Jim Sheppard, recycling coordinator for Capitola Garbage Co. "That makes it a lot harder for someone to stop, retrieve the aluminum and not be conspicuous."

The problem with such a strategy, however, is that it is costly for the garbage company to separate the recyclable materials, Sheppard added.

In Santa Cruz, the new bags for recyclable materials are printed with the words, "Theft of Bags or Contents Prohibited." In San Jose, signs have been posted at recycling centers announcing that stealing cans is illegal, and the city is encouraging centers not to buy cans that appear to be stolen.

But Himes of the 20-20 recycling center said it's very difficult for such centers to distinguish between legitimate sellers of aluminum cans and those who have stolen cans.

"One can looks like another," he said. "What can I do?"

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