AGN. NO.

REVISED: MOTION BY SUPERVISOR KATHRYN BARGER MAY 13, 2025

SUPPORTING ASSEMBLY BILL 476 TO PREVENT COPPER AND NONFERROUS METAL THEFT

The theft of copper and other nonferrous metals—including aluminum and nickel—has become a serious and growing threat to public safety and critical infrastructure in Los Angeles County. While classified as nonviolent crimes, these thefts have serious consequences, including disabling streetlights, cutting off landline access and overall telecommunications, impacting electric vehicle (EV) charging stations, and disrupting water systems. Rural communities are particularly vulnerable, where service interruptions can leave residents without essential utilities and emergency communication, placing lives at risk.

In northern Los Angeles County, rural residents face recurring landline outages due to copper wire theft. In Llano, thieves removed half a mile of telephone wire, cutting off landline service to hundreds of homes, many of which have no reliable cellular coverage. Sometimes, the thieves gain access to the wires by hooking a pick-up truck to a utility pole and pulling it down, requiring lengthy repairs.

In addition to theft, residents have reported that thieves are burning off the plastic insulation from stolen copper wiring in remote areas to prepare it for illegal resale. This illegal practice poses serious health and environmental threats. Burning insulation made of polyvinyl chloride (PVC) or polyethylene releases toxic smoke containing hydrochloric acid, heavy metals like lead and cadmium, and harmful chemicals including dioxins. These toxins are known to cause cancer, respiratory issues, and other health risks while also polluting the air. It is common for thieves to burn the plastic to disguise its origins, but in doing so, they create long-lasting harm.

These crimes, while nonviolent in classification, are creating unsafe conditions for seniors, children, and families, many of whom avoid walking outdoors after dark due to darkened streets and fears around emergency inaccessibility. The impacts of these thefts are not only financial but also deeply personal and felt most in communities that face limited infrastructure and resources.

-MORE-

MOTION

SOLIS _____

MITCHELL _____

HORVATH _____

HAHN _____

BARGER _____

County Departments, including the Internal Services Department, Public Works, and Waterworks, have reported repeated thefts at County water pump stations and equipment yards, which have affected service to thousands of County residents.

Cable thefts have also significantly disrupted the Metro rail system in several ways. Thefts limit the train control system's ability to route trains, interfere with crossing gates, lead to speed restrictions, and take out station lighting and communication systems, which impact cameras, customer phones, and fire/life safety equipment.

The Board has previously supported enforcement efforts on copper theft. In January 2024, the Board authorized a $10,000 reward for investigating the destruction of property in the City of Pasadena after thefts of 4.9 miles of copper wire disabled 280 city lights. In November 2024, the Board authorized a $20,000 reward for investigating copper thefts in Hacienda Heights, where copper theft caused $1 million in damage to utility service posts.

To address this growing problem, Assembly Bill 476 (Gonzalez) offers an approach to address the loopholes enabling the resale of stolen copper. This bill would require junk dealers and recyclers to maintain written transaction records, including: place, date, time, amount paid, employee name, vehicle details, and detailed metal descriptions along with a signed seller statement with identification; mandate proof of ownership for all metal sales through an invoice, contractor's license or demolition permit; prohibit purchases from persons under 18 years of age; require information be kept for one year; authorize law enforcement to conduct inspections during business hours; create a licensure system for the sellers and impose up to $500/year in licensing fees, with enforcement mechanisms to suspend, revoke, or deny licensure if in violation of federal or state law. Closing resale loopholes and establishing clearer pathways for prosecution would help deter theft, assist enforcement, and reduce costly damage to public infrastructure.

I, THEREFORE, MOVE that the Board of Supervisors:

1) Direct the Chief Executive Office's Legislative Affairs and Intergovernmental Relations Branch to support Assembly Bill 476 (Gonzalez);
2) Instruct impacted Departments, including but not limited to the Internal Services Department, Public Works, Sanitation Districts, Flood Control District and Waterworks ~~Division~~ Districts, to continue documenting copper and nonferrous metal thefts and impacts, and share the information with the District Attorney's Office for enforcement coordination; and
3) Urge the District Attorney's Office to prioritize prosecuting copper theft due to its widespread harm to the general population.

# # #

KB:sc/lgo