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Farm Thieves Target Grapes, and Even Bees

By [JESSE MCKINLEY](#)

BAKERSFIELD, Calif. — Sgt. Walt Reed said he could tell right away that the grapes were stolen. They looked like an ordinary bunch. Except, he said, for the way they were dressed.

“Usually grapes are put into plastic bags,” said Sergeant Reed, a 28-year veteran of the Kern County Sheriff’s Office. “But these grapes were just thrown in a Styrofoam box.” Sergeant Reed — who eventually arrested a suspect after staking out a Kern County vineyard — is just one of dozens of deputies on the front lines of agricultural crime in California, home to the nation’s most productive farms and the people who prey on them. While thievery has long been a fact of life in the country, such crimes are on the rise and fighting them has become harder in many parts of California as many grants for rural law enforcement have withered on the vine.

While other states have their own agricultural intrigue —cattle rustlers in Texas, tomato takers in Florida — few areas can claim a wider variety of farm felons than California, where ambushes on everything from almonds to beehives have been reported in recent years. Then there is the hardware: diesel fuel, tools and truck batteries regularly disappear in the Central Valley, the state’s agricultural powerhouse, where high unemployment, foreclosures and methamphetamine abuse have made criminals more desperate, officials say.

“All of our ag crimes are up,” said Sergeant Reed, who oversees a unit of two full-time detectives — down from three a year ago— all patrolling a county about eight times the size of Rhode Island. A wet winter and warm summer, after all, have meant healthy crops, he said, and a healthy market means happy thieves.

“Everything this year is doing well,” Sergeant Reed said. “And if it’s doing well here, there’s somebody looking to steal it.”

Counties up and down the state also are dealing with a surge in copper theft — a perennial problem made all the worse of late by the soaring price for the metal. Such robberies are remarkably simple. Bandits simply snip copper wires running between outdoor wells and their power boxes.

“To repair them is anywhere from \$2,000 to \$5,000 a whack,” said Greg Wegis, a Kern County farmer. “We repaired one, and it immediately got ripped off again.” And copper is not the only tempting metal.

“Two hundred pounds of iron might bring them 75, 100 bucks,” Sergeant Reed said. “That’s money they can use to put gas in their trucks. They can get some food.”

Nor are the crimes limited to poorer areas; in Napa County, where fans of the good life flock for the wine and warm weather, the police set up a tip line in June to combat a raft of thefts, including solar panels at some vineyards.

In other areas, deputies say they have witnessed a kind of Robin Hood effect, where some small, struggling farmers filch materials from their better stocked competitors.

“It’s typical during certain times of the year: you’ll see a surge in theft from bigger farms,” said Deputy Sheriff John H. McCarthy, a rural crime investigator for Santa Barbara County. “Chemicals, fuel and the type of things you need to put in a new crop.” Not even insects are immune. In Madera County, about 130 miles east of San Francisco, officials saw a rash of bee burglaries this year, as a shortage of able-bodied pollinators drove up the price. “They’d just go in there and they smoke the bees, sedate them and take them,” Sheriff John Anderson said. “And they wear protective gear just like the pros.” Brian Long, a beekeeper based in Colorado, was one of those hit, losing more than 400 hives — valued at about \$100,000 — in California in January. And while Mr. Long later recovered the hives, and most of the bees therein, he said the thieves were getting bolder. “This is way more than we’ve ever had to deal with,” he said.

Like many lawmen in vast agricultural areas, Sheriff Anderson said a major challenge was the remoteness of farms and the lack of witnesses. “It’s not like breaking into the neighbor’s house and the dog barking,” he said. “These things are just sitting out here in the middle of nowhere.”

Chris Wadkins, the president of the [California Rural Crime Prevention Task Force](#), a nonprofit coalition of law enforcement and agricultural organizations, echoed that sentiment. Mr. Wadkins, a deputy sheriff in San Bernardino County, said his department had been battling what he called “an organized crime ring of sorts” with a very specific target: avocados.

“You always get your mom and pop who might stop and pick one or two for dinner,” Mr. Wadkins said. “That’s not what we’re talking about here.”

Danielle Rau, the director of rural crime prevention for the [California Farm Bureau](#), said the nonviolent nature of farm theft often made it a low priority when it comes to financing. “Violent crimes have to come first,” Ms. Rau said.

California provides grants to some coastal and Central Valley counties for rural crime prevention. But the California Emergency Management Agency, which administers the grant program, says the amount allocated has shrunk from nearly \$4 million in the 2008-09 fiscal year to a little more than \$2 million in 2010-11.

The cutbacks are not limited to California. Florida officials recently lost or left vacant more than a dozen positions from their agricultural crime units. In Texas, which also has seen an increase in agricultural crime, the authorities rely on groups like the [Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association](#), whose Special Rangers investigate livestock and equipment theft.

With many California counties cutting back, some rural dwellers have taken matters into their own hands. Take Steve Mello, for example, a charmingly crusty corn and alfalfa farmer on the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta who said thieves have taken about \$15,000 worth of his property in the past year. “It’s difficult to lock up 1,400-plus acres,” he said. “The value of the fences would be worth more than I’m worth.”

Still, Mr. Mello was so frustrated that he briefly took to sitting sentinel on his tractor with a shotgun. Not that he ever saw anyone, thankfully.

“Death for thievery is kind of a severe sentence,” he said. “I wouldn’t want that on my conscience.”

Instead, Mr. Mello is now relying on a camera system, something professional lawmen like Sergeant Reed also use. The Kern County Sheriff’s Office also uses hidden tracking devices in seemingly defenseless pumps and other decoy equipment.

Rural theft cost Kern County about \$4 million in the last 12 months, Sergeant Reed said. And despite the cuts, he said that his detectives had made an impact, if only by speaking the farmers’ language.

“If we send a guy who doesn’t know which end the hay goes in and which goes out, that becomes a little — I don’t want to use the word offensive — but it becomes troublesome,” he said. “Now, at least, they’ve got someone they can talk to.”