

State

Increased thefts in oil boom, 'inside jobs' suspected

DALLAS — Due to the current drilling boom, oilmen often wait six months for delivery of crucial machinery, but if they place an order with a theft ring, they can get the equipment overnight. Increased prices are creating a boom in the oil industry and leading to shortages of more than \$1 billion worth of equipment. Companies are increasingly reporting thefts of field equipment.

In discussing the equipment and manpower shortages, spokesmen point to the industry's phenomenal growth.

For instance, Atlantic Richfield officials say their company now invests more capital in its Dallas division, ARCO, than the entire corporation budgeted a few years ago.

"A lot of these thieves are stealing to order," said Frank Potter, a Hughes Tool Co. spokesman.

"We can tell because when they break into our

warehouses, they are fairly selective about what they steal."

The recent tremendous increase in oil exploration and production make South Texas and Oklahoma prime targets, he says, although thefts are fairly common in every oil field.

Tom Haywood, executive vice president of the North Texas Oil and Gas Association, said the theft problem is most serious in producing fields.

"It's occurring on a daily basis and it is causing not only expense, but down time in presently producing wells," he said. "It's equivalent to stealing oil from the general public, because every barrel you cannot produce is a barrel that has to be imported at premium prices. That costs American manpower, in addition to being a major headache for producers."

The culprits, equipped with blow torches and special winch trucks capable of lifting several tons of machinery, strike these isolated fields at

night. On a good night, an hours' work can net them \$25,000 in equipment.

"Many well sites have no electricity, so they have a gasoline-powered engine (valued at \$3,500 to \$10,000) to run the pumping unit," he said. "These guys can go in there, use a torch to cut through the belts and welds, lift the thing up and load it on a truck in 10 minutes."

"It's a pretty good night's work when someone can go out and steal \$22,500 worth of equipment and sell it the next day for 50 percent of its value. And it's not the sort of thing you'd put down on your income tax."

Like Potter, Haywood points to the booming deregulated oilfields and the resulting shortage of equipment for the increase in theft.

"Right now, used equipment sells for just about as much as new equipment. The reason is availability. Suppose you need a \$5,000 engine. You can wait six months for delivery on a new one

or you can take a rebuilt one and get your well under production right away," Haywood said. Or a producer can place an order with his local theft ring.

Often the thefts are inside jobs.

"We had some well service equipment stolen around here a few months ago where it was apparent from the manner it was stolen, that they used certain safety techniques which would only be known by people familiar with oil well servicing," Haywood said.

"We had a case in which \$22,000 of equipment was stolen just across the Red River in Oklahoma and taken to Gainesville, Texas and sold. When I got the information on that one, I called the FBI and they did a very thorough investigation. In fact, we had a person plead guilty just last week in federal court in Tyler, Texas and we're hoping he gets a stiff penalty," Haywood said.

Haywood said a gang recently drove into a

legitimate storage yard in Jacksboro, Texas during the daytime and proceeded to load up several thousand dollars worth of pipe, departing before anyone even knew of the heist.

"In that particular case, the pipe ended up in a Louisiana well, but since it couldn't be identified, it couldn't be recovered," he said.

The Texas legislature is considering two bills, sponsored by Sen. Bob Glasgow, D-Stephenville, designed to help law enforcement agencies catch and convict more thieves.

One bill makes theft of equipment specifically designed for exploration and production of oil and gas a second-degree felony.

Another would require dealers that buy used equipment to keep the seller's name, address, drivers license and vehicle license plate number, as well as the machinery's serial number already required under existing law.

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State sues neighbor for water

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. — The State of New Mexico has filed a motion before U.S. District Judge Howard Bratton seeking dismissal of a water suit filed by the City of El Paso's Public Service Commission.

Richard Simms, counsel for New Mexico State Engineer Steve Reynolds, said the state contends the federal court lacks jurisdiction in the matter, because under the 11th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, citizens of one state cannot sue citizens of another.

The state also contends that the matter needs additional adjudication before the New Mexico Supreme Court before it is heard in federal court.

Reynolds invoked a state water export ban in late April, and Simms says New Mexico contends the Supreme Court should be allowed to examine Reynolds' ruling for possible certification.

The City of El Paso, citing a potential water shortage, has filed application for more than 300 water well drilling permits in southern New Mexico in Dona Ana and Otero Counties.

Through its Public Service Commission, El Paso is also challenging the New Mexico ground water export ban that Reynolds invoked, contending it amounts to a restraint on interstate commerce, forbidden under federal law.

The State of New Mexico argues, however, that the complaint by El Paso against the export ban is faulty. New Mexico contends the El Paso complaint challenged the constitutionality of the ban, instead of the major articles of the state constitution in which it is included.

Both sides appeared before Bratton May 15, and the judge ordered them to file formal motions by June 1, the basis for Monday's action.

Formal briefs are due by June 15 and answers to those briefs are due in Bratton's court by June 22.

Pete Schenkkan, attorney for the El Paso Public Service Commission, says the tactic of certification is a delaying stratagem on New Mexico's part. He contends it will only lengthen the entire legal process that ultimately will wind up in federal court anyway. "We suggest it is not appropriate," he said Tuesday.

The action taken Monday in Albuquerque involved the State of New Mexico's motion for dismissal or certification, and a motion filed by an intervenor in the case, The Elephant Butte Irrigation District. The irrigation district filed a motion to abstain or dismiss.

"What is standing in the way of appropriation of New Mexico's water is the New Mexico Constitution," he said.

5 indicted for seizure at airport

HOUSTON — A federal grand jury indicted three Houston-area men and the wives of two of them in connection with the May 6 seizure of about 800 high-quality gun silencers at a suburban airport.

Houston machinists Aaron Phillip Knopp, 45, and William Kelly Kimball, 37, and Homer Gene Hawkins, 33, were charged Monday with one count of conspiracy, one count of manufacturing illegal firearms and four counts of possessing illegal firearms.

Carol Kimball and Kay Tucker Hawkins were each named in the conspiracy count.

The three men posted bond after they were arrested and remain free. The women appeared before U.S. Magistrate Walter-mire and were released on personal recognizance bonds.

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