

Seattle thieves risk death to steal copper from energized transformer, utility reports



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Late last month, vandals cut down a 45-foot utility pole along Des Moines Memorial Way South in Seattle in an effort to steal copper, Seattle City Light said. "The brazen thieves targeted a pole with energized primary wires and a transformer that also held up to 35 gallons of oil," the utility said.

"This is a real safety concern for us," said utility Superintendent Jorge Carrasco. "Even if the vandals knew what they were doing, an innocent passer-by who came into contact with the voltage could have been killed. We take this matter seriously and hope that anyone who observes suspicious behavior – especially the cutting of a utility pole – will get in touch with us immediately."

When the pole fell to the ground, 14,500 volts of electricity fell as well, City Light said. The average household current is 110 or 220 volts of energy. Utility crews found the downed pole, and no customers lost power as a result of the incident. However, the transformer was destroyed when the copper coils inside were removed and oil inside the canister spilled onto the ground. There were no PCBs in the oil and a complete clean-up of the site has been done, the utility said.

This is not the first such incident for City Light. Earlier in April, vandals dismantled a large transformer located on a site where construction demolition was taking place. In that case, oil was released that migrated into Lake Union.

"This is a dangerous proposition," says City Light Energy Delivery Director Bernie Ziemianek. "In all likelihood, the thieves have no idea how tragic the situation could be if someone were to come into contact with live wires carrying that much voltage. Other utilities in the industry are facing similar problems and the results have not turned out so well."

City Light cited the following cases in which people died because of attempts to steal copper from electrified equipment:

- An Indianapolis man was killed in February when he was electrocuted while trying to steal copper from a rooftop transformer.
- In January, a man was killed in Charlotte when he cut an electrical cable in a bid to steal copper and was electrocuted.
- Last October, a man was killed in Los Angeles while he and his wife were trying to steal copper from an electrical vault.

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