

The Sacramento Bee

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EDITORIALS

Growing metal thefts require serious response

In April, firefighters responding to a house fire in San Bernardino County were unable to hook their hoses to a hydrant because the brass couplings had been stolen from every hydrant on the block. The house burned to the ground before a water truck could be brought in.

In May, thieves stole brass valves on a holding tank at a Richmond chemical plant, spilling 3,500 gallons of toxic chemicals into San Pablo Bay. The cleanup cost \$250,000.

Closer to home, school districts are spending tens of thousands of dollars a year to repair heating and air conditioning systems vandalized by thieves in search of copper. The city of Sacramento's utility department is embroiled in an ongoing scandal involv-

ing the alleged theft of recycled water meters sold to scrap dealers in San Francisco.

The worldwide demand for copper, steel, brass, bronze and other metals has soared in recent years, fed by building booms in China and India. Copper, which was selling for 80 cents a pound four years ago, sells for \$2 to \$4 a pound today.

Attracted by the high prices, bold thieves are pulling copper out of air conditioning systems, utility lines, traffic signals, highway barriers, manhole covers, even the catalytic converters in cars.

Farmers are especially vulnerable. Irrigation pumps sitting in remote locations are inviting targets for metal

dealers to take thumbprints from sellers and hold onto those records for at least two years.

The American Civil Liberties Union opposes the thumbprint provision, complaining that it delegates police authority to private businesses. Their objections ignore reality. Thumbprint requirements are neither unpre-
 dented nor unreasonable.

For years, the state's pawnbrokers and secondhand dealers have been required to take thumbprints from the people who sell them recycled goods — and for obvious reasons.

These establishments are places where criminals try to dispose of stolen goods. For the same reason, pawnbrokers in California are also

required to transmit their sales records to local police department every 24 hours.

The new rules proposed in Berryhill's bill will impose a costly record-keeping burden on scrap metal dealers, but it's more than justified. Given the huge and dangerous uptick in metal thefts across the nation, anyone who shows up with truckload of recycled copper or water meters should be viewed with extreme suspicion.

Despite scrap-industry efforts to derail it, Berryhill has kept another controversial provision in his bill. It allows local jurisdictions to impose even tougher regulations on scrap dealers than the state allows. That too is necessary. The metal theft crisis is that serious.