

Fresno freeway ramp lights go dark due to copper-wire thieves

<http://www.fresnobee.com/2014/03/11/3816899/fresno-freeway-ramp-lights-go.html>

By Tim Sheehan

The Fresno Bee

March 11, 2014

Freeway ramp-metering lights are the ultimate sign of urbanization. The Fresno-Clovis metro area has 64 of them.

But, in another reflection of big-city life, only 10 of the lights in the region are working. The reason? Copper wire theft.

Over the past year, copper-wire thieves have managed to disable dozens of the metering signals that are supposed to govern rush-hour traffic on highways 41, 99, 168 and 180. Thieves have also stripped wire from highway streetlights and sprinkler-control boxes in some areas, and brass sprinkler heads have also disappeared.

Together, the damaged lights and sprinklers in the Fresno area are adding up to millions of dollars in repair bills for Caltrans.

"This is a continuous problem," said Gloria Rodriguez, a spokeswoman for Caltrans District 6 in Fresno. "Unfortunately, we have been dealing with these thefts for years and strive to keep up with repairs as our manpower and resources allow."

The metering signals are intended to control how many cars can merge onto busy freeways during the peak morning and afternoon drives, typically between 7 and 9 a.m. and from 3 to 6 p.m. Caltrans said the lights -- when they operate -- help reduce congestion and improve overall travel time for drivers. The agency also credits the lights for cutting down on congestion-related collisions and contributing to air quality by reducing slow-and-go traffic on the highways.

Most of the metering lights that are disabled in the Fresno area have been out of order for at least six months, and in some cases for a year or more, Rodriguez said. "And it's a problem statewide," she added. "There are 12 Caltrans districts in California, and each and every one is experiencing the same thing."

California Highway Patrol Officer Axel Reyes said it's difficult to assess whether the disabled metering lights have caused more accidents.

"Ultimately, drivers are responsible for their own actions," Reyes said. "But the metering lights reduce congestion. Without them, traffic gets backed up ... and the chances increase for traffic incidents."

Thieves steal the copper wiring by breaking into the vaults and fixtures. The stolen metal is then sold, most often at recycling yards.

The CHP is responsible for investigating wire theft from state-owned highway light fixtures. But Reyes said wire theft poses particular challenges to officers.

"A lot of times, no one sees who does it," he said. "And when people show up with copper wire at a recycler, there's no marking on the wire, so we can't prove where it came from. ... It comes down to a lack of evidence, a lack of witnesses and a lack of ability to track the material."

Caltrans is undertaking a \$12 million repair program to get its metering lights in Fresno and Clovis up and running again by the end of this year. The agency will replace the copper wiring with aluminum "due to the cost difference between the two materials," Rodriguez said. "Copper is much more valuable at the recycling yards than aluminum." The repairs also include theft-prevention measures such as locking vault lids or bolts, and boxes that will be encased in concrete (much like what the city of Fresno has resorted to doing) to keep all but Caltrans workers out.

Crews will also replace brass sprinkler heads with plastic -- less expensive, and less tempting to thieves.

Caltrans commissioned a study in May 2013 to look at how other states combat copper-wire theft. It cited a survey and a federal report that showed that copper theft is a bigger problem in some parts of the U.S. than others.

The study suggested that wire theft tends to be more prevalent in areas with higher rates of drug use, moderate climates, proximity to scrap metal dealers willing to buy the wire, greater population density and higher unemployment and poverty rates.

The reporter can be reached at (559) 441-6319, tsheehan@fresnobee.com or @tsheehan on Twitter.

