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News Release

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COPPER THIEVES ENDANGER THEMSELVES, OTHERS FOR PENNIES IN MATERIAL

ATHENS, Tenn. – With scrap companies paying up to \$2 per pound for copper, local thieves apparently are working overtime to cash in.

Officials at Athens Utilities Board (AUB) report that theft of copper wire is on the rise across the AUB system.

“The most troubling aspect of this trend is that we know sooner or later someone is going to die trying to get a buck’s worth of copper. Or some thief is going to cause an AUB worker to be hurt or worse,” said AUB spokesman Wayne Scarbrough.

Scarbrough said that thieves are snipping and stealing copper grounding wires from homes and recently even broke into two AUB substations to steal grounding wires there.

“Apparently these thieves think that there is no danger in cutting grounding wires. They are dead wrong and may, in fact, die finding out,” Scarbrough said. “Moreover, they are removing the safety net that grounding wires provide to the system. They are putting our employees who work on the power system at risk.”

Nick Fortson, AUB’s superintendent of power, explained how a person could be electrocuted cutting an apparently benign grounding wire.

“If on a three-phase feeder the amperage across the phases is not balanced, a circulating current is created. As the system tries to regain balance across the phases, power goes to the earth via the grounding wire. If you are messing with a grounding wire then you become the ground, the power flows through you, and you could be killed,” Fortson said.

He explained further that if a fault occurred on the power system at the time a person is tampering with a grounding wire, the person could be killed as the fault goes to ground.

“Or there could be a difference in voltage on the ground wire and at the ground itself,” Fortson explained. “When you cut a grounding wire and break that connection, you are going to realize the difference in voltage across your body. Again, you could be killed trying to steal a few cents worth of copper wire.”

Scarborough said that the health and safety of the public and AUB workers is paramount and urges thieves to stop risking their lives and endangering others.

“Make no mistake about it. This is serious business offering serious consequences. First, you may die or kill someone else indirectly. Second, AUB will prosecute to the fullest extent possible anyone found tampering with ground wiring,” Scarborough said.

Scarborough urges individuals to be on the lookout and to report any suspicious activity around AUB substations or relative to outside-wiring thefts at homes.

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