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Bowser thefts linked to stolen rego plates

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THE huge surge in "drive-off" fuel theft, triggered by skyrocketing petrol prices, is being linked to the underground trade in stolen registration plates in Sydney, which has risen at the same rate as bowser larcenies.

NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research figures show petrol thefts, or service station fraud, has increased by 33 per cent since mid-2004, from 9163 incidents to more than 12,900.

In the same period, the number of number plate thefts rose by a third.

A bureau study published last September found a "high correlation" between drive-offs and stolen plates.

Every 10-cent increase in the price at the bowser triggered another 120 fuel thefts a month in Sydney, the bureau found.

Some service stations are not bothering to report drive-offs if they suspect the culprits are using stolen plates because they believe little can be done to track them down.

The number of motorists that are driving off without paying for fuel had resulted in service station owners asking customers to pay before they fill up. Two dozen stations in south-west Sydney have joined a "pre-pay" scheme being promoted by Liverpool police to help reduce drive-offs.

Another 20 operators signed up to a similar initiative in Bankstown several months ago and police plan to take the idea to the Hunter Valley.

Liverpool police chief Mick Plotecki said the pre-paid system had reduced petrol theft in his area command by more than 90 per cent in the past year.

A linked project that uses security camera footage to match the identity of thieves with their vehicles, regardless of the plates they display, has resulted in the arrests of several serial offenders.

At the height of last year's petrol price rises, when motorists were paying more than \$1.40 a litre, one south Sydney retailer complained to police that he was losing \$2000 a week from motorists stealing petrol.

Garage operators in the eastern suburbs recently said they were being cheated up to three times a night.

Petrol station owners in Liverpool had been reporting a total of more than 70 thefts a month, Superintendent Plotecki said.

With 24 local stations now asking customers to pay beforehand, the number of drive-offs had fallen to 24 in January, 23 in February, 20 in March and just seven last month.

"We can directly attribute that to the pay-before-you-pump scheme," Superintendent Plotecki said. "It's a nice solid strategy. I don't think it's the entire solution because it does still

happen, but if we can combine it with plate-linking programs and introduce initiatives that would make it harder to remove and steal number plates, we'll slow it down.

"The only problem we're now finding is that thieves tend to target stations that are not part of the program."

Service Station Association president Ron Bowden said there were no plans to push for a more widespread pre-paid system.

"If you have a drive-off during a shift, that's your profit for the shift," he said. "If you have two drive-offs in a day, then there's not much point in opening the bowsers.

"The industry is set up now so that people can buy petrol the way that they want to buy it.

"What we don't want is a small number of people stealing petrol who are threatening to upset the majority. The package has got also to include better policing."

Superintendent Plotecki said that he had an officer devoted solely to the problem.

"We've had some pretty good results too," he said. "We had this van being used in drive-offs with a particular piece of damage on the side.

"The bloke involved had been using stolen plates on some occasions, but he was also silly enough to come into the same garage with his own numbers on it at one point, so we were able to identify him and lock him up.

Pump action

FOR every thief who drove off with a tank of his petrol, Nicholas Logozzo reckoned he would need at least 30 new customers to make up the loss.

"I knew a long time ago what I had to do instead was try and stop the crooks stealing from me," he said.

Six years ago, Mr Logozzo began asking customers at his Mobil service station at Kemps Creek to pay before filling up.

"Some of them didn't like changing the way they did things, but there really weren't too many of them," he said.

"It's a system whereby you still get exactly what you pay for - no more, no less - and some people trying to budget actually prefer it."

Mr Logozzo said he had not had a single theft since his bowsers went prepaid.

He is so keen on the idea that he will address industry colleagues on its merits at the invitation of police in the Hunter Valley.

"For everything else you have to pay first, so why not petrol?" he said.

Source: The Sun-Herald