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Taking aim at copper thieves

Spray will help NSP identify wire

By DEBORAH MENSAH-BONSU

A LAKESIDE power substation hummed in the background as technician Tom Bellefontaine, clad in a yellow hard hat and workboots, bent down to spray an exposed piece of copper wire with hundreds of sand-grain-sized microdots.

Nova Scotia Power demonstrated Monday how it will use the new technology, known as DataDot, to combat copper theft, which has risen dramatically since 2006.

Each DataDot is outfitted with an electronic code identifying the owner of the copper.

There have already been 70 thefts from Nova Scotia Power sites so far this year, compared to a total of 85 thefts for all of 2006, said Garry Theriault, the utility's

manager of transmission maintenance.

"If the copper is found, it's easier to prosecute the thieves," said Mr. Theriault. "It may have been sold already, but we will be able to trace that it came from our substation."

The price of copper rose from \$1.50 per kilogram in 2003 to more than \$7 in 2006-2007. Mr. Theriault said he couldn't confirm where the bulk of the stolen goods end up, but added that it often flows out of province to places such as India and China.

Nova Scotia Power is applying the technology to all of its roughly 300 substations across the province, spraying hundreds of metres of wire inside and outside stations. Mr. Theriault said the process will cost thousands of dollars, but he couldn't give a more specific estimate.

Mr. Bellefontaine said the cost of replacing damaged electrical grounding systems alone at substations, which runs upwards of \$10,000, would likely justify the cost of the technology. But Mr. Theriault said the safety of employees and the public is the main

priority.

"When thieves come into the substations and remove the grounds, (which are) protective devices for our employees, . . . it's no longer a safe place to work in."

Mr. Theriault said Nova Scotia Power's major concern is that thieves are moving their activities closer to the metro region, where a major substation was vandalized last week.

"We're worried about finding a body," said Margaret Murphy, a Nova Scotia Power spokeswoman.

She said people in residential areas walking by or driving on ATVs could be at risk of being electrocuted at an unsafe substation that has been targeted by thieves.

"It's not only a serious act, but a dangerous one," said Wayne Noonan of Crime Stoppers, which will be airing a special feature on copper theft in partnership with Global Maritimes and Nova Scotia Power this summer.

"It is a criminal and safety issue. An innocent bystander could get injured."

There have been two fatalities due to copper theft in Canada, the most recent in May 2007 at a New Brunswick electrical facility.

New Brunswick Power has also signed up for the microdot technology, Hydro One in Ontario is launching a pilot project and B.C. Hydro has been using it for several months.

Mr. Theriault said Nova Scotia Power will use 100 spray cans containing DataDots over the next few months.

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