

Now we have our radars up



By Emily Patrick on 09/25/2012

Restaurants: Be on the lookout for grease bandits

They come in the night with tanks, hoses and pumps through back alleys and parking lots: In a matter of minutes, they've sucked the place dry. They take what they came for; their victims don't resist. And sometimes, it's days before anyone discovers what they've done.

Their object is atypical. They deal in grease, used oil from restaurant fryers. Theirs is the province of the busboy, the dishwasher and the garbage man. It's the area at the back of the restaurant amid the discarded remnants of the business.

But what they're taking isn't trash: It's a commodity. The USDA monitors the market for yellow grease (the pure, filtered version of used cooking oil). It's worth 36 cents per pound — about \$2.70 per gallon — as of the Sept. 14 National Weekly Ag Energy Round-Up report.

Locally, thefts are common, and restaurant owners and biodiesel manufacturers get frustrated with the waste and mess that result when a thief breaks into a grease bin. But whoever the bandits are, they're slippery. To date, no one has been apprehended during a grease heist.

An unnoticed crime

Chef Mo Abreu says thieves duped him for months before he realized his oil was going to the wrong place. "Somebody cut a hole, and they insert a hose, and they siphon it," says Abreu, namesake of Chef Mo's Restaurant and Bar. "For me, I was thinking it was going to be [Blue Ridge] Biofuels. It was them doing it, you know."

Abreu contracts with the local biofuel manufacturer and vendor Blue Ridge Biofuels. The company pays him based on the amount and quality of the grease. Earlier this year, he realized the oil was disappearing, but the checks weren't coming. When he called Blue Ridge Biofuels, they said they thought he had hired another company, because his bin was always empty.

Abreu concluded that a third party, a grease thief, must have been involved. But who it was and when they came, he knows not.

"You're kind of thinking, 'Well, you're going to get some money, and you tried to do something good,'" he says. "And then I find out that somebody's coming and taking money from me."

The police report values the stolen oil at \$200, but that's an estimate. Who knows how much was taken.

A prevalent problem

In the past month, Blue Ridge Biofuels has confirmed four grease thefts from its Asheville accounts and about a dozen throughout the entire service area (Boone to Spartanburg). Rezaz, Yao, Marco's Pizza and Metro Chinese have all been recent victims.

For restaurants that get paid for the used oil, stolen grease means lost income, even if it isn't a large amount. But even for those that don't take cash, the thefts are a hassle. Owner Reza Setayesh contracts with Blue Ridge Biofuels because he says they provide a clean and organized service, which the thefts disrupt.

"It upsets me that when a company is taking something and turning it into something reusable, that somebody is coming around and taking advantage of them," Setayesh says. "Now we have our radars up, and we are watching."

A waste of energy

Blue Ridge Biofuels feels the brunt. "They smash the port hole in where we collect the oil, and then they just suck it out and leave it broken, so we have to replace it," says Alisha Goodman, client services coordinator.

Plastic bins cost \$274 and have to be replaced when damaged. The metal bins cost more than \$500, and though they can be repaired, the manpower required to replace them strains the company's staff. "When somebody comes through and busts open a bin, then we have to go out, and that's something we have to take care of," Goodman says. "Metal bins are much heavier than the plastic, so it takes more man power, and with a staff of 10, that can really affect how much of the work ... gets done a week."

Sopping up the mess

Goodman suspects several parties may be involved. First, there are "home brewers" who convert the used oil into fuel on their own.

Then there are industry competitors, regional and national companies that convert the grease into animal feed, soap, makeup and sometimes fuel. Goodman suspects that Blue Ridge Biofuels could have been the target of similar intra-industry shenanigans.

"In Greenville, someone actually stole the entire bin," she says. "We'd just put it out, and they took the entire bin, but the neighboring bin was completely intact. When we put the bin back, the lock was broken, but the neighboring bin, which belonged to another company, was still fine."

The large rendering companies who service Asheville say they have problems with thefts, too. Spokespeople from Darling International and Valley Proteins say their companies

have been plagued by similar acts of larceny throughout Western North Carolina. One company has hired private detectives to monitor some of their accounts.

Still, the outlook is grim for grease victims. Most of the police reports Goodman has filed have been closed. The Chef Mo's case reads "leads exhausted."

Sergeant Mark Lamb of the Asheville Police Department Criminal Investigations Division says that information about the thefts is scarce; grease doesn't have a serial number. Most of the time, volunteers follow up on the police reports since detectives only work on cases with tangible leads.

"If we get any information on where people may be taking the vegetable oil to, or using the vegetable oil for, any investigative leads, anything that we can follow up on, then it will be assigned to a detective," Lamb says.

Goodman says she understands why the police have difficulty tracking the thieves. "I think it's easy [to steal]," she says. "A lot of restaurants don't have cameras on their trash bins."

Emily Patrick can be reached at food@mountainx.com.