

Meth users revive rustling for cash

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Two guys and a four-door sedan. That's all it took for cattle rustlers to relieve dairy owner Pete Wiersma of three valuable calves.

Once the province of outlaws and the bane of hardscrabble ranchers who grazed their cattle on the open range, cattle rustling has never gone away. Like the livestock industry, it's only gotten more efficient.

In general, cattle rustling tends to increase whenever beef prices are high, said Larry Hayhurst, head of the Idaho State Patrol Division of brands. Because the price of cattle feed has been relatively high this year - making the cattle more expensive to raise and lowering the potential profit - the theft reports should be on a downswing. But in rural dairy regions - where milk cows can nearly always fetch a high price and methamphetamine use is becoming as much a part of the landscape as grain silos and milking barns - the rustling reports seem to stay fairly constant.

The Idaho State Police gets between 300 and 500 reports of lost or missing cattle a year, Hayhurst said. The numbers have been consistent for about a decade.

"Most of the rustlers are stealing for the money, the profit - whether it be to put food on the table or to trade for drugs," said Idaho State Police brand inspector Sean McCarthy. "The dealers tell dairy workers, 'You go out and you steal me five, 10, or 15 head of calves, we'll supply you with meth so you can either deal or use. They'll turn around and sell the calves to Joe Blow dairyman at say, something like last week's top sales yard price of \$2,600 a head. It adds up pretty quick."

Investigators believe many stolen cattle go unreported, sometimes because livestock owners don't discover the thefts right away or because they decide to just chalk the losses up to a tax write-off.

"In the last three months we've had 16 calves reported stolen off of four dairies, but there's probably more than that that have been stolen that the owners aren't aware of," said Sgt. Daron Brown, charged with investigating rural crime in the dairy-laden southern Idaho county of Twin Falls. "What's easier to steal? They don't come with serial numbers."

Most states west of the Mississippi rely on brands - marks seared into the hide of livestock animals - to show ownership of animals. But not all livestock owners brand their animals. Dairy owners, in particular, tend not to brand their cattle for at least the first year or so, said Hayhurst.

"A brand on an animal is the only return address on that animal. Every one of those dairymen is probably missing calves, and they may not even know it," Hayhurst said.

Anywhere between 300 to 500 head of cattle and around 25 horses are reported lost or missing a year in Idaho alone, he said. In California, 1,275 were reported stolen or missing in 2007, at an estimated loss of nearly \$1 million. Other western states have similar numbers.

"Rustling is alive and well everywhere in the West," said Jim Connelley, Director of the Division of Livestock Investigation for Nevada's Department of Agriculture. "The gooseneck trailer and diesel pickup are probably the best piece of equipment to come to a rancher in many years and also the most useful equipment for a rustler."

A gooseneck trailer allows a pickup to haul a heavier load.

The pickings are even easier on many dairies. Investigators are still looking for the thieves who stole three of Wiersma's yearling heifers, valued at around \$700 each, several weeks ago. Twin Falls County Sheriff's Sgt. Daron Brown, who investigates rural crimes, said the calves - which were unbranded - are probably long gone.

"The way that it happens is you drive your little Mazda into the dairy, in the back where the cameras don't pick it up," Brown said. "And you take four small calves out of the calf hutches and you put two in the trunk and two in the back seat and you drive off."

Make two or three trips to dairies a night and a rustler can net thousands of dollars, Brown said. Wiersma's dairy was one of at least four in the region hit by rustlers at about the same time.

The problem has gotten bad enough that Bill Stouder, a veterinarian and dairy producer, now brands even his stillborn calves to keep rustlers from picking them up before the rendering truck arrives and later swapping them for another rancher's live calves.

Motion-activated cameras are becoming more common on dairies and feedlots, as are tall fences and locked gates.

The best defense against rustlers? Branding all animals and quickly reporting any missing cattle, said Greg Lawley, chief for the Bureau of Livestock Identification in California. But many livestock owners still seem reluctant to take such measures.

"For whatever reason, people will not report whether they think it's a bad reflection on them or that a couple of head isn't enough to worry about," Lawley said. "If you wait for six months to make sure they're really missing that's a cold trail for us to follow."

Wiersma reported his missing calves right away and recently purchased a special, smaller branding iron that easily fits on a newborn calf's flank. He still hasn't actually used the smaller iron, however.

"We brand the older ones, when they're about 400 pounds. I just don't have it in my heart to brand day-olds," Wiersma said. "Probably if I get them stole again I'll probably get fed up and do it."

In the meantime, he'll put up a tall fence and hope that does the trick.