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Thieves leave new hazard for campers

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BOISE - If you see piles of what looks like ashy jumbles of burnt rope in the fire ring at your next campsite, beware.

A fire pit on Kuna Butte in the Snake River Birds of Prey National Conservation Area shows evidence of copper wire burning, an activity that releases toxic chemicals. (Courtesy of the U.S. Bureau of Land Management)

State and federal land management and law enforcement agencies have noted a sharp increase in incidents of illegal burning of insulated wire on public lands in the west. The insulation that's burned off is highly toxic and requires hazardous materials cleanup; it's dangerous to both human health and the environment.

"People looking to make a fast buck, characteristically methamphetamine or other drug users, are stealing the electrical wire, usually copper, from anywhere they can and burning the insulation from the wire to bring in more at scrap metal recycling facilities," said Loren Good, special agent in charge for the Idaho office of the U.S. Bureau of Land Management.

The agency advises anyone who comes across one of the hazardous sites to contact authorities.

"There are serious health risks and environmental concerns from dioxins, copper, lead, zinc and other pollutants commonly associated with illegal wire-burn sites," said Steve Moore, acting coordinator of the Idaho BLM's hazardous materials program.

The BLM has found four such sites in the last three months in the Snake River Birds of Prey National Conservation Area just south of Boise.

"Even the smallest cleanups with lab fees will cost taxpayers a minimum of around $500," said Tim Fuller, hazardous materials technical response team lead for the BLM in Idaho. "For sites determined to be hazardous, depending on the amount and type of materials and the environmental concerns, contracted cleanup costs can run into the thousands of dollars."

Several dozen sites on public lands in Idaho have been cleaned up in the last couple of years, Fuller said.

High prices for copper and other metals have helped make thefts of those materials from farms and construction sites a growing problem.

Said Fuller, "The thieves will usually find isolated areas or camping and recreational sites to burn the casing off the wire. It's not uncommon to find the leftover burnt hazardous materials in fire pits, further putting the public at risk."