



How *secure* is your *farm?*

By Denny Eilers

Back in Granddad's time, nobody who lived on a farm bothered to lock the doors. And tools were often left in open sight with little threat of theft. Sadly, those days are gone.

Today, the common trust that bound rural America in fellowship is being replaced by warning alarms that go "beep" in the night, video cameras that cover an area 24/7, motion detection sensors and biosecurity systems to prevent disease outbreaks.

These approaches are making their way onto America's farms as theft in rural areas increases and threats of agro-terrorism surface.

The best advice for folks who live in rural areas is also the simplest: "Report suspicious activity to your local sheriff."

To most farmers, food safety and terrorism are still distant threats, but crime often comes home to roost as sheriff's departments report increased cattle rustling and more theft of hand tools, equipment and other property.

Preventing losses with a good farm security plan is the best solution.

Video cameras at work

"There's more crime in our area than ever," says Glen Schweppe, a dairy farmer in Syracuse, Neb. "It's really growing out here, especially

with anhydrous ammonia, cattle and hand tools."

More than 10 years ago Schweppe installed two video cameras, mounting them on poles at the perimeter of his farmstead. The field of view of one camera was directed at his home and buildings. The other was positioned to view the driveway and lane.

The cameras fed into a monitor in his home for easy surveillance and videotaping when the family was gone. A few years ago, he replaced the cameras with new wireless models that increase his monitoring mobility.

"Now, we can take the monitor with us anywhere we want," he says. "The cameras provide excellent viewing, because it can be dark and they'll still pull in images that let us see what's going on."

Livestock theft

"There's a trend toward more cattle rustling, too," says Larry Gray, director of the Texas and Southwest Cattle Raisers in Ft. Worth. "The reason is the high market prices the past three years."

Gray says cattle are one of the few items a thief can sell for full market value.

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"Unlike a burglar, who is lucky to get 25 cents on the dollar for a new flat screen TV he stole from someone's house, a cattle thief can just go to a livestock auction and get the full price."

In 2005, through investigative work, Gray's association recovered \$6.5 million in stolen livestock and ranch-related property.

The organization has been in operation since 1943, but today, uses a computerized tracking system and investigators at livestock markets to check brands, license plates and descriptions of cattle entering sale areas.



Mike Tschirgi, right, an investigative officer in the Clayton County, Iowa, sheriff's department reviews an inventory list of shop tools with Phillip Meyer, who farms near Monona, Iowa.

Gray says the best way to prevent cattle theft is branding. "With all the technology available today, the brand is still the best means of identification. It's permanent, you can see it from a distance, and it's not easily obscured. Chips and ear tags can be removed. That's the first thing a thief will do." For more prevention information go to: www.texas cattleraisers.org.

The Livestock Marketing Association (LMA), based in Kansas City, also actively fights theft through a nationwide report on missing or stolen livestock. County sheriff's departments access it at www.lmaweb.com.

"The information on our report comes from one of three sources," says Cathy Collett, membership and information coordinator for the LMA. "A county sheriff will report it, a producer will call directly after talking with the local livestock market, or the local livestock market (sale barn) will call in."

Collett says the report is sent to LMA members, since that's generally where stolen cattle are sold.

"We also have a list of state agricultural offices where states can sign up their county sheriff's departments," she adds.

Target dairy calves

"Right now dairy calves are a hot item," she continues. "In the last six months we noticed a lot of stolen dairy calves."

Mike Tschirgi, an investigator in the sheriff's department in a rural Iowa county agrees. "Last spring we saw a rash of calf thefts," he reports. "Thieves come in at night and carry off bull calves. They know what they're doing, because when they feed them out and sell them, these bring the most money."

Tschirgi says dairy farmers normally place calf hutches away from the

farm house to keep flies at bay. This also makes it easy for a thief to carry off a small calf.

"We had a farmer move the hutches to within view of the house," Tschirgi adds. "It's more of a deterrent when a thief has to work within plain view of a farm house with good lighting."

When it comes to other property, Tschirgi says it's important to record serial numbers on all equipment — from tractors to trailers to chainsaws.

"Compile a list that includes brand name and model number," he advises. "It's not only valuable when we investigate a theft, you'll need it for the insurance claim."

Some farmers are taking the inventory list a step further — making digital photographs of each item.

To help farmers and others living in rural areas, the FBI, in conjunction with state law enforcement officials, has established a nationwide information system. The goal is early detection of crime and suspicious activity.

"We're reaching out to agricultural partners and other sectors to gather information," says Phil Fordyce, Fusion Center Coordinator, at one of Iowa's six LEIN (Law Enforcement Information Network) regions.

This system was in place before 9/11, but since the attacks, it's been upgraded to tie agencies into a seamless information gathering network.

The best advice for folks who live in rural areas, says Fordyce, is also the simplest: "Report suspicious activity to your local sheriff." ■

Protecting Your Property

- **Make a serial number list of all your machines and shop tools.**
- **Padlock buildings where hand tools and machines are stored.**
- **Lock fuel tanks with chains and padlocks.**
- **Store chemicals in a designated area and keep locked.**
- **Place animal health medicines in a locking cabinet.**
- **Branding cattle is still the best way to protect your herd.**
- **Install the best lighting possible, include motion detection sensors.**

