



Fuel Theft on Farms: What's the Risk?

A Merced County farm was the target of thieves who cut through a chain-link fence to steal 900 gallons of diesel fuel valued at more than \$2,700.

In San Joaquin County, thieves stole 400 gallons of fuel – and the tank wagon in which it was stored.

A tank trailer loaded with \$6,000 worth of fuel was stolen from a Fresno peach and almond farm.

As fuel prices rise, fuel thefts occur with increasing frequency, especially on farms and other rural properties. Across California, thieves steal hundreds of thousands of gallons of farm fuel each year.

While the thefts cause direct monetary losses of hundreds or thousands of dollars' worth of valuable fuel, they also cause significant disruptions to farm operations. Without fuel, farmers cannot cultivate their crops or care for their animals. In many cases, entire crops have been lost when fuel theft prevented farmers from irrigating fields or bringing produce to market.

Though gasoline and fuel oil are sometimes stolen, the most frequently targeted commodity is diesel fuel, the most common fuel used in agricultural operations. During peak harvest periods, California farmers use more than 1.5 million gallons of diesel fuel each day.

Most farm fuel is "red diesel," which has dye added to mark it for off-road and agricultural use. Because it is subject to less tax than diesel used for road transport, it is attractive to thieves who re-sell it to dishonest buyers. Officials conjecture that most of the stolen fuel is destined for illegal sale to other farmers.

Much of the fuel used on large farms is delivered directly to bulk storage tanks located in farmers' fields to facilitate easy refueling of field equipment during the work day. These remote locations make the tanks vulnerable to theft. Many properties are unfenced and unguarded, and the sparseness of local populations makes it unlikely that a neighbor will see illegal activity.

Farmers can take several steps to make theft difficult and can also install equipment that can capture information to help law enforcement officials apprehend and prosecute criminals.

Choose Safe Locations. Locate fuel tanks where they can be monitored easily. Consider placing tanks near outbuildings where tools and equipment are stored, so that the entire area can be fenced. Fuel tanks should

be concealed from public roadways but easily viewed from within the farm. Underground tanks, which are less visible, are often preferable to above-ground tanks.

Install Fences and Barriers. Install fencing around the fuel tank storage area. Keep gates locked except when access to the tanks is needed. Keep intruders out by installing locking gates across driveways, farm roads, and field openings. Keep gates in good repair.

Post Warning Signs. Post "No Trespassing" signs. In California, proof of properly installed "No Trespassing" signs is essential to prosecution of intruders charged with trespassing on farms. Install *at least three signs per mile* along exterior boundaries and at all points of entry. Replace signs when they are broken, faded, stolen, or damaged.

Use Strong, Effective Locks. Install heavy-duty locks and chains for the fences or buildings that protect the fuel tanks. Ensure that all fuel tanks can be locked, either by use of locking caps or locking shut-off valves.

Install Security Lighting. Provide lighting systems connected to motion detectors around all fuel storage areas, both in remote areas and in centrally locations.

Install Alarms and Cameras. Install the best alarm system you can afford. Consider an alarm that will alert police or a monitoring service. Surveillance cameras, both video and still types, are useful for gathering evidence. These cameras are generally connected to intrusion detector devices (such as motion detectors).

Make Security Part of Your Business Plan. Keep abreast of reports of criminal activity in your area. Inspect the farm property often, but on an irregular schedule. Keep a log of all suspicious activity; take pictures of anything that seems unusual. Enlist employees and neighbors in a crime watch program.

Report Criminal Activity. If you see suspicious people or vehicles, or if you find evidence of trespassing, theft, or other criminal activity, contact police immediately. Do not disturb evidence at the scene. If any part of your security system has been compromised, work quickly to restore functionality.

For a more detailed risk management plan to help reduce farm fuel theft, request Sequoia Risk Management Guide SRMG-013, *Understanding and Preventing Fuel Theft from Farms*.