

Construction equipment theft ring broken; 4 held

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By Ernie Hoffman and Jan Ackerman, Post-Gazette Staff Writers

State authorities yesterday said a broken windshield was the break that led them to recover more than \$1.6 million of stolen goods from an Allegheny County theft ring that targeted heavy construction equipment.

The recovery of 25 stolen items -- ranging from a high-lift valued at \$200,000 to a trailer worth about \$7,000 -- and the arrests of four persons suspected of running the theft operation were announced at a news conference at the Greensburg state police barracks.

Deputy state Attorney General Mark Serge said the thieves were bold: They leased some of the stolen equipment to unsuspecting businesses and even charged sales tax on it, and used some of them personally.

"They openly used the equipment," Serge said, and that was their downfall.

The suspects are John A. Mayer, 43, and his wife, Heather L. Mayer, 31, both of McKeesport; Ronald M. Sanderson, 48, of Elizabeth Township; and Frank T. DeRosa, 61, of Forward.

Charges were recommended by a grand jury sitting in Harrisburg after an investigation by the attorney general's office and state and local police.

"We believe there may be other [stolen] equipment out there," Serge said, adding that more arrests are possible.

Serge said the thieves took things like dump trucks, bulldozers and back hoes, mostly from construction sites and retail outlets. Some of the thefts dated to the mid-1990s.

Authorities became aware of the scheme early last year after a construction-company foreman spotted a front-end loader in Port Vue, Serge said.

The foreman noticed it had a broken windshield, just like one that had been stolen from his firm, so he notified borough police.

Port Vue Chief Gary Cartia said that when his officers confirmed that the front-end loader and an excavator at the same site were stolen, he called state police.

Officials said the stolen equipment was being used by Swede Construction Corp., which is owned by Sanderson.

Sanderson told the grand jury he bought the excavator from John Mayer and borrowed the front-loader from Mayer.

As the investigation widened, police found a bulldozer stolen from Delaware and an excavator stolen from North Versailles on the property of an Indiana Borough police officer, John Scherf, who told authorities that Mayer and DeRosa were doing work for him there.

Scherf, who has not been charged, said he paid for the diesel fuel they used in return for their work.

Investigators also found five pieces of stolen equipment at the Westinghouse Waltz Mills plant in Sewickley Township, Westmoreland County, where work was being done by the Morrison-Knudsen company.

Serge said Mayer, through his wife's company, H.L. Construction, charged Morrison-Knudsen \$32,000 a month to lease the equipment, including 7 percent for sales tax.

But the tax money was never given to the state and H.L. Construction did not have a license to collect it, Serge said.

Other equipment was recovered at sites in Dravosburg, Forward and McKeesport in Allegheny County; Mars, Butler County; and Armstrong Township, Indiana County.

The four suspects were arraigned before North Huntingdon District Justice Douglas Weimer Jr.

John Mayer was charged with receiving stolen property, insurance fraud, false swearing, false reports to law-enforcement authorities, two counts of hindering prosecution, racketeering, conspiracy and violating state tax laws. Bail was set at \$100,000 unsecured.

Heather Mayer was charged with conspiracy and violating state tax laws. Bail was set at \$10,000.

DeRosa was charged with receiving stolen property and hindering prosecution. Bail was set at \$50,000.

Sanderson was charged with receiving stolen property and conspiracy. Bail was set at \$25,000.

Theft of expensive heavy equipment from construction sites is a major problem across the United States, said Paul Becker of Nashville-based Willis of North America, one of the nation's largest construction insurance companies.

"It is the number one issue with contractors equipment insurance companies," said Becker, adding that insurance companies frequently employ specialists who keep data banks on equipment thefts and work with local police if they suspect fraud.

Jeffrey Frank, executive vice president of Willis of Pennsylvania, said his office has seen a large amount of equipment stolen locally over the years, everything from bulldozers and dump trucks, to compressors.

"In the old days, it would be taken into West Virginia and Kentucky and sold on the black market in the coal fields," he said.

He said there's a steady stream of claims for small equipment and an occasional brazen theft of a big piece of equipment.

For years, contractors have worked with the FBI to record serial numbers of any stolen equipment in a national data bank, said Art Prado, executive director of the Pittsburgh-based Constructors Association of Western Pennsylvania.

He said contractors try to keep the equipment in a highly visible area or make it difficult for someone to steal. They might chain a compressor to a local utility pole or hang a compressor from the hook of a crane on a bridge project to try to protect it from thieves.

In some parts of the country, contractors hide an electronic cell in the equipment which sends a message to a tower if the equipment is being moved. Prado said that system is not used in Pittsburgh because the signals don't travel well over the hilly topography.

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