

# ‘Sting trailers’ offer glimpse into world of cargo thieves

BY DAVE COLLINS, ASSOCIATED PRESS | NOVEMBER 29, 2015

*The Associated Press published the following article featuring Travelers cargo theft experts, Scott Cornell and D.Z. Patterson.*

**Somewhere in America, a tractor-trailer loaded with hidden surveillance equipment is parked at a truck stop or warehouse while authorities wait for thieves to steal it.**

No one is sure when, or even if, crooks will take it. But such “sting trailers” have been successful in busting up crime rings and recovering pilfered merchandise.

“It’s like fishing,” said D.Z. Patterson, an investigator for Travelers insurance. “You’ve got your worm in the water, but there are hundreds of other worms out there. They have to pick yours.”

Cargo theft has become a huge problem that the FBI says causes \$15 billion to \$30 billion in losses each year in the U.S. Law enforcement and the insurance industry are fighting back by tempting thieves with “sting trailers” laden with cameras and GPS tracking devices, hidden within both the trailers and the inventory they contain.

The prevention efforts aren’t new, but the reason for them is particularly acute during the holiday shopping season, when such thefts tend to increase as crooks look to score from retailers loading up on merchandise, according to FreightWatch International, a security company based in Austin, Texas. Over time, the sting trailers have given authorities a glimpse into how this breed of thief operates and helped truck owners improve security.

Thieves prefer nondescript trailers that would be hard to identify after being stolen, so it’s best if a brand name or distinctive markings are emblazoned on the sides.

Hidden cameras have recorded which locks are problematic for crooks, leading anti-fraud specialists to recommend truck owners install the highest-tech locks.

And, officials have learned, it’s better to hide GPS tracking systems as best you can, because the criminals know what they look like and how to disable them.

New York-based Travelers Cos., which has a large office in Hartford, believes it is the only insurance company using a sting trailer, though a handful of others are used by law enforcement agencies and retail and trucking companies. Its trailer was developed in 2008 at the company’s Windsor, Connecticut, lab and is equipped with \$100,000 worth of surveillance gear.



Scott Cornell, 2VP, crime and theft specialist for transportation, left, and D.Z. Patterson, lead investigator for the Travelers Special Investigations Group, right. Travelers is the only insurance company with a specialized investigations group and “sting trailer” dedicated to combating cargo theft, a crime the FBI says costs the U.S. \$15 billion to \$30 billion each year.

Law enforcement agencies nationwide have used it hundreds of times, resulting in dozens of arrests.

“The primary purpose is to assist law enforcement in targeting organized cargo rings,” said Scott Cornell, a theft investigator for Travelers. “Every time the sting trailer breaks up a ring ... every trucking company or anyone in supply chain that moves cargo in that area benefits. It has clearly reduced thefts in areas where there have been arrests.” But the effect is never permanent, he said.

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“If you take out a ring, you may see reduced thefts for six, eight, 10 months, but another group is going to move in,” he said.

Some criminals have countered efforts with technology that can jam a tracking device’s signal, said Steve Covey, a commercial fraud investigator with the National Insurance Crime Bureau. The nonprofit group, based in Des Plaines, Illinois, works with law enforcement agencies and insurance companies to prevent theft.

“They figure out what they have to defeat, so they do their homework and try something new, and maybe that will work for a while,” Covey said. “And maybe the companies will come up with something to fix that problem. It keeps mushrooming.”

Getting even bolder, thieves have been using identity theft and bogus documents to pose as drivers for real companies to pick up trailers of goods at warehouses, according to Covey and Scott Cornell, a Travelers theft investigator.

There were 152 cargo thefts nationwide in July, August and September, a 24 percent drop from the same months last year, FreightWatch reported this month. But the average value per cargo theft, nearly \$200,000, increased 7 percent from April, May and June.

New Mexico state police and the National Insurance Crime Bureau in January used Travelers’ trailer to try to catch thieves looting trucks along Interstate 40 in Arizona, New Mexico and Oklahoma. The trailer, loaded with Bose speakers equipped with tracking devices as an extra precaution, sat there for days before thieves came calling.

They took some of the cargo and put it in their own truck just east of Albuquerque. Authorities later learned the suspects would start in California with an empty truck and load it up with goods stolen from trucks all along I-40.

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Police tracked the stolen speakers to a rental storage center in Lyon Township, Michigan, where a state trooper found two suspects, a tractor-trailer and two rental units filled with stolen electronics and other goods. At the nearby home of one of the suspects, authorities found more than \$1 million worth of merchandise and other items they believe were bought with proceeds from thefts, including a \$500,000 Ferrari, The Detroit News reported.

In 2013, the Travelers trailer was taken by members of a Miami-based group that was stealing cargo in eastern Pennsylvania and taking it to sell in New Jersey, Cornell said. Two people were arrested after driving the trailer into New Jersey.

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