

Colley-Urquhart: Time to take drug growers' power theft seriously

BY DIANE COLLEY-URQUHART JANUARY 12, 2012



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Photograph by: From Merlin Archive

Much has changed over the past decade since deregulation of the retail electricity market, as the Herald recently profiled — including the theft of power.

I have one way of curbing utility rates in Alberta; stop organized crime from stealing power. Every month when you and I pay our utility bill, we are subsidizing organized crime operations. Outraged?

You should be. Organized crime steals unbelievable amounts of power to run their marijuana growing farms in houses across our city.

The problem is much bigger than you could ever imagine.

As the magnitude of grow ops has escalated over the past 10 years, it is not uncommon for police to remove well over 1,000 plants in a single home. Over the past five years alone, joint operations of the Calgary Police Service, RCMP and Alberta Law Enforcement Response Teams have seized more than \$372 million worth of marijuana out of Calgary and area — that's 298,000 plants in 590 homes. Over the past eight years that I have been working on this issue, 95 per cent of the grow ops taken down were stealing power. This is a Criminal Code offence that raises the question as to where responsibility lies when utility companies know power is being stolen and either fail to act or disguise it as general line loss.

Gangs could be stealing power right beside you by bypassing the meter and running huge amounts of power through ballast boxes, set to automated timers, and powering their personal grid of 500-watt light bulbs. Organized crime can also monitor their timers remotely, running high-temperature lights reaching 500 F in 12-hour cycles every day of the year and harvesting three crops a year out of one house. An average grow op consumes roughly 10 times the power of a typical home. If they actually paid for this power, the bill would be substantial and utility companies would be able to readily detect the extreme over-consumption of power . . . but they don't.

These large-scale marijuana grow farms, run by gangs and organized crime, are lucrative and provide them with their primary revenue source to move drugs throughout the province and North America. Marijuana is an integral component of the drug trade and the drug problem many of our communities face, and the ecstasy our kids die from. If we stopped the theft of power, we could bring organized crime to its knees.

The problem is that utility companies don't take the theft of power seriously, or worse, they turn a blind eye.

They refuse to admit to the magnitude of the problem. Their ambivalence and failure to admit this theft is happening means we have no idea whether we have 500 grow houses or 5,000.

Whatever the number is, every grow op is stealing power, we are paying for it, and they are putting kids and first responders in harm's way. Remember the Citadel fires in December 2009 from a grow op stealing power? Five homes burned to the ground with two more damaged. Grow ops are 40 per cent more likely to catch fire than a regular house.

Rough estimates from experts such as retired Calgary police staff sergeant Roger Morrison put the theft of power well into the millions in Calgary alone. The magnitude of the problem when viewed provincewide is staggering.

When Morrison was on the southern Alberta marijuana investigation team, he attended and investigated more than 750 marijuana grow operations and almost all were stealing power. He is recognized today as a qualified and sought-after court expert, and I agree with his view that, "in Alberta's deregulated electricity market, there is a disincentive to reduce generation, and a monetary benefit to increase it. The utilities are following the rules set in place, but they have a social responsibility to act."

You are probably wondering how this could be allowed to happen.

Utility companies are able to operate in the generation and distribution side. They sell electricity into the pool from one subsidiary of the corporation and sell you the electricity in another. All power produced gets sold into the grid and doesn't incur theft losses at this stage. Utility companies get paid for all the electricity produced by selling it into the Alberta power pool.

The distribution side charges us for line loss, which is an all-encompassing figure reflective of theft, inefficiencies and statistical losses. So whatever is stolen just gets added automatically to your bill, and the utility incurs no loss. In fact, the more power stolen, the greater the "sales" of the distribution company.

The threat to public safety is significant and municipalities and the provincial government must demand this issue be addressed either through co-operation or regulation. Changes to legislation could require utility companies to be more transparent about line loss, monitor their lines for theft and disclose, or even better, make distribution companies bear financial losses from theft instead of us. The technology and monitoring equipment to detect gangs stealing power is remarkably simple, proven, tested and available.

In two recent community pilot projects, more than a dozen grow ops stealing power were identified in a few minutes. With the recent landmark Supreme Court ruling in favour of using this technology, provincial legislation is timely and necessary to get utility companies to act.

We need to stop marijuana grow ops from ever starting up in the first place, rather than spending millions in surveillance, taking them down and dealing with our city's drug problem.

We need better monitoring and accountability of line loss by utility companies and regulators. We need a smart metering system that readily identifies and analyses line loss. We need utility companies to be socially responsible.

At the end of the day, it is Calgarians who own the transmission wires and we should be able to demand that we don't want our assets being used to fund organized crime.

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