

# Ask the Experts



Each issue, we ask members of the *On Tap* Editorial Advisory Board to answer a drinking water-related question. We then print as many responses as space permits. The opinions expressed are not necessarily those of the NDWC.

*How does your utility handle water theft generally and, more specifically, how do you deal with unauthorized use of fire hydrants or contractors who bypass meters when building?*

## Backflow Is a Big Worry

Water theft is a concern for the Auburn water supply, especially the potential introduction of contaminants via backflow. We have very strict regulations in our municipal ordinance relating to the use of hydrants, and these regulations are made very clear to contractors working within the city's water district. Any request to use our hydrants requires that the water be metered and protected from backflow. To accomplish this, we have several meter/backflow setups that attach to the hydrants and are supplied by the city. Where we have hydrants that are somewhat obscured, we have locking caps that can be operated only by our fire department or water maintenance personnel. To accommodate those who require bulk water (such as lawn maintenance services, pool fillers, etc.), we have set up a station at our maintenance garage where they can come in to fill their tanks only under the supervision of one of our staff members. This station is metered and protected from backflow as well. We found out from experience that if we made it easier for those who wanted bulk water supplies, they were less likely to tap the hydrants themselves. It has worked out very well for us.



**Frank J. DeOrio**  
Director of Municipal Utilities  
City of Auburn, New York

## We Can Only Do So Much

The bottom line is: we do as much as we can to thwart water theft from hydrants and enforce our watering restrictions, but it is not practical for us to pursue prosecution, which is the only way that we could seek compensation for the illegal usage.

Along with our city employees, who are always on the lookout for improper

hydrant usage and restriction violations, we rely heavily on John Q. Public to inform us of possible illegal water usage—and they do a pretty darn good job, especially now that we are in a drought situation and the public is being held to restrictions. Realistically, though, we can only do so much. If, for example, a contractor is caught illegally filling his 5,000 gallon water truck at, say, \$2.00 per 1000 gallons, that's only \$10.00. Most of our city employees have hourly wages higher than that, so it is not economically feasible to pursue the matter any further.

We do note people and/or contractors who repeatedly violate restrictions or have been caught more than once stealing water, and we have, on occasion, taken the matter to the next step. The water shop has 30 meters for contractors to check and report their usage, but those are generally for the honest people.

**Nelson Yarlott**  
Resident Operator  
Bellvue Water Treatment Plant,  
Greeley, Colorado



## Fighting Theft Is a Full-Time Job

Peninsula Light Company (PLC) is a mutual cooperative. We adhere to the Washington Utility and Transportation Commission regulations for private, for-profit water systems regarding theft whenever possible but are not bound by them. We have one person in our company who processes theft and long-overdue bills for both our electric and water customers. This position is entirely self-supporting by these lost revenue sources primarily because of the number of electric customers we have.

According to PLC policy, any bypass of the meter or unauthorized connection is considered theft. Theft occurs on both our commercial and residential accounts

and can be discovered by meter readers, anonymous tips, monthly audit reports done by a revenue protection officer, as a result of repair work being performed, or by the customer calling to report unusual consumption patterns or bills. There is a \$250.00 tamper fee, back billing, and possible denial of service for repeat offenders. A complete file history—including photographs—is compiled for each theft. The file is stored for seven years in case the theft makes it to a courtroom.

Water services are immediately disconnected and locked off upon discovery of theft. Customers are notified by mail. The customer of record is most often the one fined. If the customer of record fails to pay the fines, reconnection is denied. The landowner or PLC member may also be held responsible for the fines and back billing.

We have had situations where we have had to proceed with caution and work with the local police authority. One on-going theft was from a property directly adjacent to our well site and also next to a daycare. The residence was a suspected “meth” lab and, therefore, considered potentially dangerous by the local police authority. Originally, they were disconnected at the meter from the previous owner of the system for non-payment.


Our water technician found them hooking up directly to the pump house. We disconnected and moved the spigot inside the building and barricaded the building. Our water technicians had been threatened while working at this location and forewarned to call before we came out. It appears the meth lab then illegally tapped into the water line, and we knew customers on the system were at risk if a cross-connection existed. Needless to say, locating the illegal tap is not something the water technicians are eager to do, but it is something we must do for the protection of the other customers on the system.

Our largest theft of water actually occurs from hydrants on a couple of our water systems. Two of the larger systems we manage do not want anyone using their hydrants other than the local fire districts. At one of these systems, the county has been a repeat offender even though they have the ability to draw water after the meter on their own property and were repeatedly informed not to. They were even provided a large meter by PLC at our own expense so they could use the hydrant in front of their facility, but they chose to leave it in the closet for a year.

We have drafted a hydrant policy for the systems we own. It will involve informing the worst offenders (street cleaners, hydro seeding, contractors,

and the county) that unapproved use of a hydrant is considered theft. This policy will also benefit the systems we manage. The draft policy requires the inspection of trucks for cross-connection protection and a meter to be used or other means for estimating total water used. There will be fees associated with this service. These particular users may choose to get their water from other water systems not owned or managed by PLC rather than pay for this service. This should reduce our unaccounted-for water use and hydrant maintenance cost.

We also need to determine how we can recover the repair cost of over-use of a particular hydrant from the local fire district for training purposes. We have fewer than 30 customers on this system, so our revenue does cover this type of on-going maintenance cost. This particular issue is currently being discussed with the local fire district directly. If the fire district does not pay for repairs, our options include adding a surcharge to the customers’ bills or allowing the hydrant to remain non-functional.

<p><b>Lisa Raysby</b> Water Department Manager Pennisula [Washington] Light Company</p>	
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*Editor's Note: The cover story for the Winter 2004 On Tap explores stealing water—how it's done, how to spot it, and what to do about it—in greater detail.*

## We're all ears!

Do you have a suggestion for improving this magazine or a great idea for an article we should explore? Do you have a question for our “Ask the Experts” column or a Web site that you find particularly helpful? *On Tap* editors are always eager to learn from you. Here's how to get a hold of us:

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