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Rail industry steps up battle against metal theft

By Mark Odell, Transport Correspondent

The rail industry has stepped up its battle against metal theft as Network Rail joins its continental counterparts to urge Brussels to intervene and regulate scrap dealers.

A lobby group representing most of the largest national rail operators in Europe has written to the European Commission demanding urgent action as continued high prices of metals, such as copper, lead and bronze lead criminals to target rail and energy industries as well as churchyards and artworks.

In a letter seen by the Financial Times, Monika Heiming, executive director of the European Rail Infrastructure Managers, has urged commissioners to "combat this growing menace".

The theft of cabling along rail lines has risen sharply this year and is costing the industry hundreds of millions of euros as well as leading to tens of thousands of hours of delays to services. In the UK, Network Rail has estimated the problem is now costing £17m per year but the wider economic cost to the country is put at more than £700m.

A large bronze sculpture by Barbara Hepworth was recently ripped from its plinth in a park in London where it had stood for more than 40 years. The theft came on the same day that Scotland Yard announced it was forming its own unit dedicated to tackling metal theft.

David Cameron has promised to look at reforms of the scrap metal industry, including banning cash payments by dealers, but some involved fear the changes may be resisted because they run counter to government efforts to cut red tape.

The EIM calls on the commission to regulate the scrap metal trade to ensure only approved yards can dispose of used materials and to look at the introduction of cashless payments.

In Belgium, anyone selling scrap metal has to provide proof of identity to the dealer, who has to keep a record of all sellers. Cable theft on the railways in the country is running at a fifth of the levels, in costs terms, of its Dutch neighbour, despite Belgian Railways operating a network 25 per cent larger.

Police next week launch a six-month trial in north-east England requiring anyone selling scrap metal to dealers to provide photo identity.

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