

You'd Be Surprised

By Darrel Lockard, OAWU Circuit Rider

Recently I opened the ON TAP magazine and found this article written by Jamie Knotts. At first I started to laugh, but as I read on it wasn't quite so funny. I started to think of some of my experiences as well, over the time I spent as a utility worker and water treatment plant operator. This entire article was either written or inspired by Jamie Knotts and I will elaborate here and there but this is how it starts.

What do you get when you take an unlocked meter box, a length of pipe, and the ingenuity of one mechanically savvy customer? **Free water, baby.** And maybe even a misdemeanor criminal charge, but that's only if you get caught stealing the water and the system feels inclined to press charges.

With rates on the rise in many communities, some drinking water customers use their knowledge of how to bypass a water meter to get a free supply. While it might be a benefit for the customer to avoid a water bill, it's certainly not good for the utility trying to provide services on a tight budget. A non-paying customer is a customer that hurts in the long run.

Some utility workers know it is going on. Others suspect it, but know they need proof before accusing someone. Stealing water is a touchy subject, and it's not a good idea to accuse a customer of water theft unless you've caught them red handed.

If the Mayor Can Do It, So Can You

Larry Rader has worked for more than 25 years in the water industry (including several as a circuit rider) and knows what customers are capable of doing. In his very first job, Rader caught the town mayor pilfering water.

Back then, with the type of meter we were using, you could remove the dial just by loosening one screw. The dial would come off and water would continue to flow through the meter, but of course it wasn't registering." Rader says that he had earlier approached the mayor about the ease by which customers could bypass the meter with simple tools like a screwdriver- or a hammer.

The mayor's response? "Well, we'll make a decision about that sometime." Rader says that in the following month, he read the mayor's meter a little bit earlier than he normally did. What he found wasn't surprising. "The mayor had taken the dial off," the water system later went with a meter that couldn't be tampered with."

Just how do you steal water?

Steve Wyatt, a utility operations consultant with Tennessee's Municipal Technical Advisory Service, provides cities and towns across the state with help finding practical solutions to their problems. He's seen four different ways that people can filch water from a utility. Most of the people he's caught swiping water have done it within the meter setter itself. "In 99% of the cases, they will turn the water off, take the meter out and put in a length of pipe the same length of the meter and turn the water back on. It's called a meter jumper. You can buy them if you were testing water meters and you want to take a meter out and test it. "People also cobble up their own jumpers," he says. "They usually leak, and they are not very good, but it allows them to get water for free. If they know what time the people read the meter each month, then they can allow a few days after the meter is read, turn the meter off, put the jumper in place of the meter, run it for a few weeks, and replace the meter before it is read again."

Another way to steal water is that a kind hearted neighbor will let a shut off customer run a jumper garden hose from house to house because they feel sorry for them, not knowing this to be illegal as well and then getting the neighbor cited also.

Another way for customers to steal water is they will break the meter dial with a hammer or other blunt object. It is always difficult to prove, and when you confront them they will say they have no idea how the dial was broken or smashed. If they [the customer] break the dial so that it doesn't work, the water continues to flow. When you approach them, they say "I have no idea how that happened." And, although you know they are lying, there's no way to prove it."

Detection and Deterrence Is Simple

The utility's billing department water use tracking is often the best way to spot a thief. "If you have a customer going along using 5,000 gallons a month

and suddenly usage drops to 1,000 or 1,500 gallons for a month or two, then maybe you should test the meter to see if it's running slow," Rader says. "If the meter tests okay, then you have a pretty good indication that the customer has been in the meter housing doing something." He suggests using lock on the meter setter to keep the water from being turned off, making it more difficult to bypass the meter.

What legal options do systems have?

In many states, it is legal to tamper with a public utility. "Everyone resents paying for drinking water because they think it's free and they shouldn't have to pay for it. They think that their rates are too high. Because the wastewater fees are attached to the drinking water usage, that water meter becomes a point of contention with many homeowners." Many drinking water systems develop a policy clearly stating the penalties for stealing water.

Under the section "Charges resulting From Customer Tampering, Damaging and/or Stealing Water" the utility outlines fees for:

- Removal of irregular connection to prevent illegal usage where a water meter has been removed;
- Removal of water meter to prevent illegal usage and reinstallation of water meter;
- Illegal turn on by customer;
- Lock off meter with locking device; and Investigative fee where theft of service has been confirmed

Rader says that for practical reasons, he would suggest incremental fines.

Unmetered systems, Forgotten lines, and Good Friends

For systems that do not have meters they likely face fewer cases of water theft. Making a tap into a pressurized line deters most would-be thieves, and is extremely difficult because you're fighting the water pressure and the mess that can be seen by the systems officials.

It's Not Just the Poor Who Pilfer

Some might think that the poorest customers are the ones more likely to install an illegal tap and get free water, but that's often not the case.

There are always a certain number of people who will try to find a way around paying their bill. And it's not necessarily the folks in town who don't have money. The argument is always made that people on fixed incomes are the ones stealing water but I've never had a person on a fixed income that was late in paying their bills.

In a smaller community in New York, where the median household income is double the national average, nearly 200 residents were caught stealing water from the struggling drinking water system.

Drought brings out water thieves

Mention the words "stealing water" to an owner of water rights in the western states and you've got a testy situation on your hands. Those who own water rights zealously guard their privilege to use water in the face of growing agricultural, population, and environmental demands. Farmers, people, and wildlife all need water. But who gets that water can be contentious in the west.

Western water rights are based on prior appropriation, which generally operates on the first in time, first in right's principle. The first or prior user's rights are superior to later arising users regardless of scarcity or social benefits. Users typically acquire rights from the state to withdraw and consume water, and even in times of drought may continue to do so at the expense of subsequent users.

With seasonal droughts hitting record levels throughout the west locals are seeing incidents of illegal water use on the rise. In some cases it's a simple matter of a landowner not realizing that someone else's right to use the water supercedes his or her rights.

In Medford, Oregon, a youth pastor pleaded guilty to using unauthorized water without a permit, according to a story published by U.S. Water News Online. The pastor faced six criminal misdemeanor charges but entered a guilty plea on two charges in return for having the others dropped. Authorities accused him of diverting water into three ponds. A lot of people have the misconception that they have the right to use water even on their property. County code enforcement officers discovered that the pastor didn't have permits for ponds. The pastor refused to

allow Oregon State Police or the county water master on his property to inspect the ponds, so he was issued the citations after being served a search warrant.

Learn from the Experience

It becomes terribly important that meters always be read and that they are read monthly. Some systems read quarterly, and they're really asking for problems. The more that your in the meter housing and the more that operators become familiar with the meter settings, the better chances you'll have of spotting illegal water use.

Not only is it important to know about your meters it is also important to know your system. It seems every year when the construction season is in full swing that operators get call about dirty water in a certain part of town. If you know where your hydrants and blow offs are you are sure to find a spot where a contractor has filled up water tanks to keep the dust down at a development sites, there is water around the hydrant or blow off. The contractors think they can fill anywhere and water is free. Besides the water not being free they have just cause several hours of flushing of the distribution system because they open and close the valves to fast. If you're lucky you just have dirty water and not a water main break from water hammer.

Customers will do anything to get free water. "The mayor did it. The pastor will do it, and a lot of contractors will to. It just doesn't make a difference. People don't think that stealing water is really stealing."