

# Drain on the system

**W**hen Russia invaded Ukraine earlier this year, it sent fuel prices rocketing to levels not seen before (see also p35). One knock-on effect of this has been an increase in fuel thefts, from trucks and bulk storage units.

Police forces around the country have since issued warnings to drivers and operators to be on their guard as reports of thefts increased.

One of the larger thefts - that is on the record - came in Newcastle in March when about 15,000 litres of diesel, then worth about £24,000, was stolen from a storage tank on the premises of haulage firm Murray Hogg. In this case, a pump had been used to fill tanks on a white truck over the course of several hours in one night before the thieves made their escape.

But fuel theft takes many forms; from organised theft such as this, to people taking a few litres here and there from a pump, and everything in between.

## **MOST STOLEN COMMODITY**

Fuel is the most stolen commodity in freight and cargo crime, according to NaVCIS, a company that records thefts of diesel when notified by a local police force or haulier, and bulk diesel thefts from a distribution centre or haulage yard. In 2020, 1,060 offences accounted for more than £2 million of fuel stolen from freight vehicles - which equated to 24% of stolen commodities overall, NaVCIS reported. In 2021, this was slightly higher at 1,067 offences with an estimated loss value of £2.2 million.



**As fuel costs have rocketed this year, so have diesel thefts from trucks and bulk containers alike, but what can drivers and operators do to try to prevent this from happening, asks Dan Parton**

However, as NaVCIS concedes, these figures do not consider the additional, hidden losses such as damage to fuel tanks and fuel senders. It also doesn't include losses relating to attacks on refrigerated trailers containing chilled goods; any tampering with these trailers can result in the products becoming contaminated and unfit for consumption, meaning the goods must be destroyed.

These figures are likely to be the tip of an iceberg, according to Chris Day from Fuel Theft Solutions. He estimates that fuel theft has increased by 80% this

year, spurred on by fuel prices hitting record levels. But the true scale of fuel theft could be much bigger, as some operators don't report fuel thefts when they happen, because of the potential for reputational damage - especially if they are larger businesses - and the risk of insurance premiums rising, according to Day. He adds that some smaller operators just prefer to 'get on with it' after a theft to minimise any downtime.

Day admits that the mystery of where the stolen fuel is being sold on has yet to be cracked. "There is obviously a complex underground network of where this fuel is going to," he says. "Or there must be companies running around with no fuel costs."

## **SAFE AND SECURE PARKING**

One problem that operators and drivers commonly cite to Day is the lack of secure parking. "There is a lack of security. At services, before you turned the key off, there used to be a bloke in



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Denise Beedell

a fluorescent jacket asking if you are staying for the night. Nothing got past him. They’ve removed all these and replaced them with ANPR cameras and now about 19% of cargo crime, including fuel theft, is from services.”

Denise Beedell from Logistics UK agrees that more secure parking is needed. “Logistics UK were disappointed when the Select Committee came out criticising the industry for not having sorted out the issue of secure truckstops, and giving the industry two years or there was going to be a levy,” she says. “We would argue this is a government issue and plans need to be put in place, including overcoming planning hurdles. Truckstops in the main are just not good enough.”

Paul Allera, technical director at the Road Haulage Association, adds that drivers complain about the lack of lighting and security on sites. “Even if the driver hears somebody trying to do something, we advise drivers not to try and stop them as you don’t know what is going to happen... But if you rang the police, how quickly would they get there? By the time they [arrive], the thieves are over the fields and far away.”

This is part of the problem with fuel theft - it can be difficult to stop. “All any operator can do is try to take precautions and make it more difficult for people to steal the fuel,” he says. “Any thief wants to be as quick as they can, so if you put obstacles in their way, it deters them.”

Allera suggests installing nearside cameras on the back of the cab that stay live even if the ignition is off. “So if anyone is trying to steal your fuel, you will have a recording of it and a chance you might get a face, and the police might know that face.”

Anti-siphon devices, which fit into the neck of the fuel tank and stop fuel from being siphoned out, are a common method of deterring thieves. However,



as Matthew Rose, director of TISS, points out, basic anti-siphon devices have a chamber that doesn’t always sit within the top level of fuel, so that fuel is exposed to skimming - the practice of taking out a relatively small amount of fuel (pictured, p32).

Fuel monitoring systems, if fitted, can only indicate the loss of fuel after it has happened, which is too late, he argues. “Secondly, thieves are clever: for example, there are always in-built parameters to take account of fuel expansion and natural variation of fuel during journeys. They will be wise to that and know that if you take 10 litres, it gets flagged up by the system, but if they take five it doesn’t, so they’ll just take five on a more regular basis.”

Rose advocates premium anti-siphon products that stop all fuel theft. “TankSafe has a patented float valve on the bottom so when the tank fills, the float valve rises with it and locks off the whole tank, so no fuel can be got out,” he says. “It also prevents diesel spills and overfilling.”

**INTELLIGENCE**

Another way of minimising the chance that a truck will fall victim to fuel theft is using intelligence, such as the SafePark app, operated by Fuel Theft Solutions. It provides drivers and operators with access to a comprehensive database of information on recent commercial

vehicle crime across the UK and Europe (for example, sample fuel theft map is pictured, left).

“This gives intelligence to the driver,” says Day. “Basically, where is hot and where is not, in terms of recent thefts, and where they can park safely.

“SafePark updates daily from NaVCIS reports and TAPA [Transported Asset Protection Association]. Drivers need this knowledge as people are, unbeknown to them, parking in crime hotspots. Intelligence is key - it is all about mitigating risks.”

**BULK RISK**

Mitigating risk is crucial to combat the threat of bulk fuel theft from storage bunkers in operators’ yards. These are often targeted by more organised criminals, due to the large amounts that can be stolen, says Martin Devine, managing director of Fueltek.

“The more professional outfits come fully armed with tankers so they can drop a fuel line into the tank and suck the contents out into them,” he says. “They normally extract many thousands of litres at a time.”

To try to stop this, Devine advocates a mix of common-sense precautions and using fuel management systems. “Don’t position the tank against an outside wall next to a secluded area; move it further into the yard and install lighting and CCTV around it,” he says. “We have Tankwatch, which is a system that sends an alarm by text or email if there are any sudden drops in the contents of the tank. It also sets off a klaxon and lights, and hopefully it will scare the thief off.

“I would always advocate a good fuel management system in place so I knew what my opening and closing stocks were, and having an authorisation procedure with the fuel pumps so only authorised people can take it. It doesn’t stop people taking fuel, but it makes it harder.” **TE**