

Protecting Rural Property: An Ag Patrol Perspective

G.B. Crawford: Farmers and ranchers face many challenges in producing food and fiber. Unfortunately, one of the human-made problems they must contend with concerns property crime.

In a recent interview, Sgt. David Estes outlined his perspective on such problems as supervisor of the Agricultural Patrol with the Collier County Sheriff's Office. After having grown up on a farm, he has devoted years of service to protecting agricultural property from theft, vandalism and other destructive acts.

Estes explained that open, sparsely populated rural areas give thieves opportunities to steal fuel, chemicals and other high value materials used on farms. Although the most recent data from the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics show a slight decline in property crime across the nation since 2016, when these episodes occur, the impact upon the individual producer can be substantial.

Estes: The locations are isolated. There's not much vehicle traffic or foot traffic. They have a lot of time there where no one is around, where they can sneak in and have the time to take and be selective with what they are stealing. For example, the chemical thefts that we have had here in the past – they are large dollar amounts for the thefts. It's easy to take a pickup truck and drive in with a set of torches in the back. It's easy to have sixty, seventy, eighty thousand dollars' worth of chemicals taken in one incident.

Crawford: Another headache posed by thieves is the unauthorized harvesting of saw palmetto berries, wild mushrooms and other plant materials. The destruction of fencing and other improvements create liabilities for livestock owners and losses for all proprietors. Last year, the Collier County Sheriff's Office made 118 arrests of individuals involved with berry harvesting. Estes said the beginning of berry harvesting season each August greatly adds to the demand on the Ag Patrol.

Estes: Once that season starts, my unit, with the four of us, we're pretty run ragged for the next couple of months or so with all the ag properties with people going in – whole crews of people being dropped off sometimes at night and they work all night. Sometimes they are dropped off in the morning and they work all day. They sneak in and they're harvesting the palmetto berries and coming back out at night. Often times they are cutting fences and letting cattle out on to the highway – things like that. So the farmers and ranchers here locally – primarily the ranchers and the ranchland owners – they are very frustrated and they fed up with palmetto berry picking season.

Crawford: Like other special agricultural law enforcement units, the Collier County group uses a variety of tools necessary to fulfill its duty. From catching thieves to corralling livestock, the work involves long hours and is performed outdoors in all weather conditions.

Estes: Our primary responsibility and patrol concerns for each day is the agricultural and rural areas of the county – all the farms, ranches and groves and then those places within the county where it is not practical or not possible to get conventional police vehicles in and out. So we drive off-road vehicles, we have ATVs, we have a swamp buggy, we have an airboat, we use horses and then our normal patrol vehicles are four-wheel drive trucks.

Crawford: Good relationships with local law enforcement officials are vital for success, Estes explained. Farm owners and other rural landowners must take action to reduce the risk of theft. Making an investment now in property protection can minimize losses in the future.

Estes: The big thing is to fortify the target. Make sure that you have a gate that if they are going to get in, they are going to have to work at it a little bit. That makes your property a little less attractive. The use of camera systems is very, very important because if we can get some images of a suspect vehicle or of individuals, first of all, it helps with identifying them and making a more successful prosecution if we are able to catch them. And then, secondly, if we do develop suspects and are able to make an arrest on that case, those individuals are in jail now and it prevents them from continuing to victimize another farmer.

This is G.B. Crawford for Florida Farm Bureau's *Newsline*.