

ELECTRICITY THEFT

BC HYDRO AND GOVERNMENT: WORKING TOGETHER ON THE PROBLEM OF ELECTRICITY THEFTS AND MARIJUANA GROW OPS IN RESIDENTIAL NEIGHBOURHOODS

LEGISLATION TO PROTECT YOUR SAFETY

Amendments to the B.C. *Safety Standards Act*, enacted in May 2006, will help local authorities target and shut down marijuana grow operations. This legislation was driven by public safety concerns around grow ops in residential neighbourhoods.

BC Hydro is concerned for public and employee safety, as well as the theft of power—which amounts to millions of dollars a year in lost revenue—and the privacy of customer information.

HOW IS BC HYDRO INVOLVED?

BC Hydro is not a law enforcement agency. However, we do work with such agencies to aggressively pursue theft of electricity, which is considered to be a criminal act. BC Hydro was an active participant in the planning process that led to the design of this legislation. This amendment has created a legal means of providing data on high consumption to address safety concerns in accordance with applicable privacy laws.

Previously, BC Hydro was able to provide consumption information to the police only on a case-by-case basis, in accordance with provisions in the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act*. With the passing of this amendment into law, BC Hydro will—upon the verified request of a municipality wishing to undertake a safety-focused grow-op initiative—provide consumption history for those residential accounts that consume an unusually high level of electricity. Lists of residential locations with unusually high consumption would be provided only to those municipalities that choose to participate in this program.

Consumption information will be provided only for residences that exceed a range of usual consumption (that is, several times the normal consumption). The average consumer would not appear on such a list.

WHAT HAPPENS TO THIS INFORMATION?

Municipalities have the authority to share consumption information with the police. However, this sharing of information is intended to be for the purpose of ensuring the safety of electrical inspectors and avoiding interference with ongoing investigations, not to obtain a search warrant.

Such lists will not be made public and municipalities are also governed by privacy laws.

Any determination of inspection or action to be taken on this information will be in the hands of local electrical inspectors and fire safety inspectors. Each municipality will have the latitude to design and implement its own program.

IF I'M IDENTIFIED AS A HIGH-USE CUSTOMER, IS THERE A WAY FOR ME TO DISPUTE THIS DESIGNATION?

If you have legitimate uses for large quantities of electricity, we would encourage you to contact your local electrical inspector to explain your situation and ensure that appropriate permits are in place and on file and that your electrical service has been appropriately installed and is not overloaded.

In the event that you receive an unusually high electricity bill, we would advise you to verify your meter reading to ensure that an error has not taken place. If you believe that your meter has been incorrectly read, please contact BC Hydro immediately.

HOW DOES BC HYDRO PREVENT ELECTRICITY THEFT?

BC Hydro aggressively pursues theft of electricity. Through a security contract, we deploy former police investigators to look for theft of electricity. Where thefts are found, we forward information to the police to pursue criminal charges and also pursue collections to recover funds for ratepayers. We have also partnered with Crime Stoppers. Through this partnership, BC Hydro receives addresses of suspected grow ops reported to Crime Stoppers. This information helps our investigators confirm energy thefts and recover funds.

WHO CAN I TALK TO ABOUT THIS?

If you are concerned about the inspection process, you should address complaints to your local government and the electrical inspection officer.

BC Hydro will be compelled to provide information in accordance with the recent amendments to the *Safety Standards Act*.

If you have a complaint specifically in relation to BC Hydro's conduct, you are encouraged to call our customer care centre at **604 224 9376** in the Lower Mainland or **1 800 224 9376** elsewhere.

ABOUT MARIJUANA GROW OPS

WHAT IS A GROW OP?

A marijuana growing operation, or grow op, is an illegal enterprise in which marijuana plants are raised to maturity and then sold for a profit. To maintain optimal growing conditions, grow ops are mostly set up indoors, in urban residences and industrial rental properties, although some are on rural properties.

Local criminal elements as well as organized crime are involved in marijuana production. Much of the product is exported from B.C. to other provinces and the U.S.

Grow ops affect everyone from neighbours to landlords to emergency responders and utility workers. They impose a cost burden on all of us. The number of grow ops in B.C. is on the rise, increasing the risks to the community.

WHAT ARE THE DANGERS?

A grow op may use three to 10 times the power of an average home. Bypasses, done to conceal the high electricity usage, are inherently unsafe.

RISKS TO THE COMMUNITY INCLUDE:

- **Fire:** Hazards include exposed live wires, high-intensity light bulbs and overheated electrical ballasts in fluorescent lamps. The additional exhaust fans used can cause the house to go up in flames quickly, endangering surrounding homes.
- **Electrocutions:** Electrical systems that have been rewired illegally pose a life-threatening hazard to those working on it, as well as to residents, emergency responders, Hydro crews, housing inspectors, contractors, the landlord or next legitimate tenants should those involved in the grow op move out and leave the bypass intact.
- **Structural damage to homes:** Rental homes are often used for indoor marijuana growing and are usually altered for the purpose of producing the maximum crop. Structural walls are removed, with the possible consequence of the house collapsing. High levels of humidity lead to condensation build-up, causing the growth of unhealthy mould and fungus, and damage to insulation, walls, ceilings, roofs and floors. Many times, these homes cannot be renovated and may have to be destroyed since they are unsafe to inhabit. As well, leaking water systems cause water damage and fertilizers cause corrosion damage. Tampering with heating and ventilation systems can even endanger future tenants. The cause of all this property damage can void any property insurance, in which case landlords will be faced with the costs of repairs or rebuilding.

- **Violence:** grow ops are increasingly targeted by other criminal elements who “rip off” the highly profitable crop and any money on the premises. The potential for violence is a safety risk to innocent people living in these neighbourhoods with marijuana operations. If you suspect a grow op, do not approach the house but report it to the police.
- **Environmental damage:** Hazardous chemicals like fungicides and pesticides are disposed of down the household drains into our water systems.
- **Power outages:** Overloading the electrical system can cause transformers to explode, resulting in power outages in entire neighbourhoods and costly replacement.
- **Higher utility costs:** Because indoor grow ops require massive amounts of electricity, which can lead to detection, growers often steal the power, which adds to costs for all ratepayers.

WHAT CAN I DO?

If you think there could be a grow operation or theft of hydro in your neighbourhood, you can contact the non-emergency number of your local police department. Refer to the inside front cover of your phone book. If you want to report this, or any other serious crime, and you prefer not to give your name, call Crime Stoppers at **1 800 222 TIPS (8477)**.

The police also suggest keeping a log of the various vehicles that visit the residence, writing down the plate numbers and descriptions of the visitors, without putting your own safety at risk.

Providing information leading to shutting down a hazardous situation could prevent a serious accident.

IF I'M A LANDLORD, ARE THERE STEPS I CAN TAKE TO PROTECT MY RENTAL PROPERTY?

A landlord may conduct monthly inspections of a rental unit when proper notice is given to the tenant. A landlord may also enter any common areas, or the property, at any time without giving the tenant notice.

For more information about landlord and tenant rights under the Residential Tenancy Act, please visit www.rto.gov.bc.ca or contact the provincial Residential Tenancy Branch by calling:

Lower Mainland: 604 660 1020

Victoria: 250 387 1602

Elsewhere in B.C.: 1 800 665 8779

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