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Farms turned into fortresses to fend off 'brazen' criminals

Michael Race

mrace@nqo.com

FARMERS across Oxfordshire are having to turn their yards into 'fortresses' despite a fall in the cost of rural crime.

Organised crime groups stealing heavy machinery, tools and vehicles from farms across the county are a growing threat, according to the National Farmer's Union.

It means livestock owners and harvesters are having to use tracking devices on vehicles, install infra-red surveillance in yards and use DNA marking to protect their sheep and other animals.

The annual report on rural crime in the county revealed the cost in insurance payouts had fallen from £840,000 in 2015 to £580,000 in 2016 – a 30 per cent reduction.

But concerns still remain with organised crime gangs stealing tractors to export across the globe as well as reduction in the number of close-knit communities.

Jeff Powell, who owns a farm



FARMER Tim Hook from Cote Lodge Farm in Cote near Bampton

in West Hagbourne, near Didcot, said the county's close proximity to major motorways was a factor in criminals targeting farms in the area. The arable farmer also said fly tipping and hare coursing were increasing problems.

Mr Powell added: "Every farmer has been a victim of rural crime in different ways."

Mr Powell urged machinery manufacturers to improve security on their products. He said: "They need to be made more secure. There are tractor keys that

can open and start other tractors. You couldn't do that with a car."

Tim Price, rural affairs specialist for the NFU, said tractors were being 'cloned' to make it easier for criminals to sell on and harder for police to detect.

He added an increase in focus from Thames Valley Police would have contributed in the reductions of insurance claims to the NFU.

Mr Price said quad bikes were a common items targeted due to them being expensive, but 'relatively easy' to steal.

Despite the reduction in 2016, the NFU warned the costs of thefts had 'risen sharply' in the first half of 2017.

Harvey Merrins, NFU mutual senior agent in Oxford, said countryside criminals were becoming 'more brazen'.

He added; "In some parts of the county, farmers are having to turn their farmyards into fortresses to protect themselves from repeated thieves who are targeting quads, tractors and power tools."

Tim Hook, of Cote Lodge Farm, near Bampton, said he confronted people staking out his farm on a regular basis.

He added farmers hit by the costs of replacing machinery also had to deal with the costs of time spent not working.

The report revealed being 'staked out' is the biggest worry for country people, followed closely by longer police response times in rural areas.

Anthony Stansfeld, Thames Valley police and crime commissioner said he was 'delighted' to see the decrease in costs.