

HB 7107 – Theft of Waste Vegetable Oil In Connecticut

Terrence Plakias
Western Mass. Rendering Co.

Introduction

My name is Terrence Plakias, co-owner of Western Mass. Rendering Co. based in Southwick, MA. We are New England's largest, independent, family-owned recycler of used cooking oil, fats, bones, and meat-trimmings. We have serviced the central and southern New England market since 1937. Our company services thousands of customers throughout Connecticut and the region.

Used Cooking Oil

Used Cooking Oil (UCO), also referred to simply as "grease", is an economically valuable waste-product produced from restaurants and food-service businesses. This oil is typically vegetable based (e.g. soy, canola, peanut oil, etc.) and is used by restaurants for deep-frying French fries, fish fillets and other fried foods. Restaurants can filter and reuse their oil for a time, however, eventually, it must be replaced. Restaurants—especially fast food chains—generate large quantities of used oil, and for many environmental reasons this oil cannot be simply disposed of in trash containers or down the drain. Renderers collect UCO to process it into a product called Yellow Grease. Yellow Grease has numerous industrial uses to include the production of soap, shampoo, cattle-feed, and biodiesel.

Used Cooking Oil Theft

UCO theft is a very common crime in Connecticut and throughout the United States. Some estimates have put the annual losses due to UCO theft at \$75 million nationwide.

For 2018, our company alone recorded nearly 2000 known/suspected theft incidents in the state of Connecticut. These incidents resulted in the estimated loss of over 1 million pounds of UCO. The loss of potential revenue from these incidents is even more significant.

The driving force behind UCO theft in Connecticut is the increase in demand for UCO as a feedstock for regional biodiesel production facilities.

UCO is typically stored in special containers behind restaurants, usually co-located near the other waste containers. UCO thieves typically use converted vans or trucks equipped with pumps and hoses to drain the containers then move on to the next target.

UCO thieves transfer their stolen oil to a third-party, often in New York state. The third-party middleman then transfers and sells the stolen UCO in bulk to a regional biodiesel plant. The biodiesel plant often pays cash for the UCO.

Impact of Used Cooking Oil Theft

UCO has a number of negative impacts on local communities that should be of concern to law-enforcement. Directly, UCO theft results in decreased revenues for both local restaurant owners and the UCO collection firms that service them. There is also the risk of physical harm, violence, or intimidation of witnesses by UCO thieves caught in the act. Most recently, UCO thieves nearly struck pedestrians at the Danbury Fair Mall in Danbury, CT while trying to avoid capture by Mall Security.

Other types of crimes are committed in the course of stealing UCO. For instance, grease thieves often commit vandalism by cutting locks, fences, and damaging containers while stealing the UCO.

UCO theft can result in grease spills on public and private property that can cost thousands of dollars to clean-up. Spills on major roadways can lead to unsafe driving conditions and vehicle accidents. UCO that drains into sewers can turn into solid material during cold weather, blocking water drainage. UCO is a contaminant, just one liter of UCO can contaminate 1 million liters of drinking water, or year's supply of water for 50 people.

Challenges for Law-Enforcement in Combatting UCO Theft

Law-enforcement faces numerous challenges in combatting UCO Theft. By its nature, UCO theft is a clandestine activity primarily occurring late at night or early in the morning, behind buildings and away from direct observation. On occasions when police do discover the activity it isn't always clear that a crime is being

committed to the responding officers since UCO is a waste product. The primary problem from our point of view, is that under current Connecticut law, UCO theft is a petty crime. The majority of individuals arrested for UCO theft are charged with Larceny 6, often resulting in probation in no jail time. This does not act as a deterrent to re-offending. It also limits the leverage law-enforcement has over suspects in developing the case further to go after the “big fish”.

Potential Legislative Remedy

We are asking the state legislature to increase the penalties for the theft of UCO to act as a stronger deterrent. There are many ways this could be accomplished. We suggest some or all of the following concerning any legislation on this issue:

- Designate UCO theft as a specific crime under Connecticut statutes with enhanced penalties over and above that of petty larceny.
- Clarification to law-enforcement that UCO theft is, in fact, a crime they are empowered to act against.
- Mandate the inclusion of UCO theft topic as part of annual police training to increase awareness.
- Increase penalties for individuals convicted of stealing UCO to include potentially longer jail/prison sentences, seizure of vehicles & equipment used in commission of the crime, and substantial fines.
- Establish and/or increase penalties for businesses engaging, coordinating, or facilitating UCO theft to include substantial fines.

Conclusion

Used Cooking Oil theft is an obscure but real threat to the economic vitality of our state and its communities. Legislative action to enhance the penalties and increase the risk of engaging in this criminal activity will act as a significant deterrent. Thank you for your time and consideration on this issue.