

NewsWatch

Tractor theft causes headache

By BILL SPIEGEL

THE January day began like any other for Greg Dirks. He drove from his home in Scott City, Kan., to an outbuilding on his farm south of Amy, some 20 miles away, ready to start a day's work.

He thought the tire tracks leading from the shed doors were peculiar; but he wasn't prepared for what happened next.

"I saw the lock on the shed was broken," Dirks recalls. When he opened the doors, a sickening feeling came over him: His John Deere 8300 tractor

was nowhere to be found.

"I was pretty stunned," he recalls.

Dirks called the Lane County sheriff, and a deputy arrived on the scene to take photographs. Law enforcement advised him against trying to find the tractor on his own, although he didn't listen.

Dirks and his father began following



CRIME VICTIM: An 8300 John Deere tractor owned by Greg Dirks, Scott City, Kan., was recovered about five months after it was stolen from a storage building last winter.



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the tractor tracks and eventually lost them near Bazine — about 40 miles away. When that search came up empty, the thought began to sink in that he might never see the tractor again. And even if he did, he wasn't sure what kind of shape it would be in. The thieves had driven the tractor over fences and through gullies, ravines and hills.

The thought that someone had stolen his tractor gnawed at Dirks. He had done everything right: The shed was locked, and the key was removed from the tractor. The thieves worked diligently to break the lock. And since the tractor was a late-model John Deere, it was easy to find a key that would fit the ignition, as most John Deere keys are interchangeable.

Lost — then found

Fortunately, Dirks had the tractor insured, and a few months after the theft, the insurance settlement was paid. Dirks used the proceeds to buy another 8300. About four months later, however, his tractor was recovered. It was sitting in a storage building near Chase, splattered with mud, the hour meter showing about 80 additional hours, but otherwise in good shape. "I bought the tractor back," he says. "I was going to update machines eventually, but hadn't planned on it happening like that."

From the theft, Dirks learned some hard lessons. He travels more frequently to his farm locations to check on machinery and buildings; he also disables the tractors after use. Finally, he makes sure that insurance policies are current; his tractor was under-insured, and the policy didn't cover the complete replacement cost.

And he believes neighbors pay more attention to what's going on in the area and keep an eye out for nefarious activity. "I would like to think that, anyway. But the neighbors aren't as close together as they used to be," he says.

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