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Mass Manhole Cover Theft Harming Sochi

By The Moscow Times

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With less than three months left until the Winter Olympic Games, city authorities in Sochi are embroiled in a battle with an unexpected vice: the theft of manhole covers by metal scavengers.

Some 800 manhole covers were stolen in the last couple of weeks, most of them sold as scrap metal to any one of 20 recycling companies, city officials said.

Between 30 and 50 manhole covers are being stolen every day, forcing the city to spend money on new ones.

"I'm telling you, it's already become a business that's seriously harming the city," Sochi Mayor Anatoly Pakhomov said at a meeting with members of the local metals industry on Monday.

The more metal is stolen, the more recycling plants spring up to process it, creating an illicit business cycle that is becoming increasingly costly for city authorities. Police accused metal recycling companies of complicity in the business.

Cast-iron manhole covers can sell for more than $100 each in Russia, costing the city budget tens of thousands of dollars over just a few weeks.

Three criminal cases have been launched over metal theft, authorities said. Fines for stolen metal range from about $125 to $1,250. Still, recycling companies continue to accept stolen scrap metal, authorities said.

Authorities said that the problem dates back to the 1990s, but has increased with the construction boom preparing the city for the 2014 Winter Olympics. With more roads being built, there is more metal to steal, officials said.

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