

Cargo Theft A Growing Problem; Automated Loading Dock Solutions Can Help Prevent It

By Walt Swietlik*

National headlines were made when two shipments of cheese worth a combined \$160,000 were stolen in Wisconsin earlier this year. Although the mainstream media made the incident into a punchline, this story is anything but funny for people in the food industry. Even though both shipments of cheese were eventually recovered intact, the case doesn't really have a happy ending either. Security seals were broken in the heists, making the cheese unlawful for sale. That stinks.

This high profile case might not have had a happy ending, but it can serve as a real world example of a problem that's growing in the US – cargo theft. Cargo theft isn't just an opportunistic crime anymore. It has become an organized criminal activity that is estimated to be a \$30 billion problem in the United States, according to the FBI.

Food facility managers can't think that the large quantities of stolen cheese are isolated incidents, either. According to CargoNet, food isn't just being stolen; food is being stolen at the highest rate of any product category in the US. The report indicates that 28 percent of all thefts involve food and beverage products with the next largest categories of stolen products being electronics and household, each at 13 percent. Even cheese is being targeted.

On top of that, nearly a quarter of all cargo thefts occur at distribution centers and warehouse yards, according to CargoNet. While these areas might have reputations for being secure, not all of them are.

Fortunately for food facility managers there are automated

loading dock solutions that not only help protect the integrity of the food that passes through their doors, but also help prevent those products from being stolen or tampered with. Cheese, nor any type of dairy product or cargo, needs to be at risk for theft or tampering when at the loading dock.

Automatic Vehicle Restraints

Automated restraints have become nearly as ubiquitous as loading docks themselves. While they were first implemented to enhance employee safety by ensuring the trailer can't be mistakenly pulled away when a forklift is still inside, they have another benefit; automated restraints can help prevent cargo theft.

An automatic restraint wraps around a trailer's rear-impact guard (RIG) or rear wheels, securing the trailer to the loading dock. Some automatic restraints feature a control panel that can be integrated into building management or security systems, providing another level of security and protection against external tampering. The most advanced restraints will actually re-fire if there is tampering or the trailer attempts to pull away when in the locked position.

The most advanced automatic vehicle restraints offer a vertical engagement range of 9 to 30 inches. Some models can even help secure intermodal overseas container chassis, which have become increasingly common across the food industry supply chain and will only increase due to the impending full re-opening of the Panama Canal at the end of June.

The Gap From Dock To Trailer

Once a trailer is secured at the loading dock, the next step is linking the gap between the loading

dock floor and the trailer bed. A vertical-storing dock leveler is considered the gold standard for maintaining cold chain integrity, environmental control and security. This is because security seals and trailer doors can be opened and closed inside the loading dock ("drive-thru" application) instead of on the drive approach, which improves cold chain integrity and enhances the security of products and processes.

Unlike a pit-style leveler, a vertical leveler (when in the stored position) allows the loading dock door to close directly on the pit floor – rather than the leveler itself – reducing energy loss by minimizing outside air infiltration. The vertical design makes it easy to clean or wash down the pit floor when the leveler is in the upright and stored position.

Sealing The Dock Perimeter

In addition to securing the trailer and providing safe access to that trailer, the loading dock should have the appropriate dock seal or shelter to create an environmental barrier between the back end of the semi-trailer and the inside of the loading dock. This connection helps companies regulate their environment by keeping wind, rain, dust, bugs, and other contaminants outside the building, while preventing the escape of valuable energy from inside the building.

Some of the newest dock shelters have been specifically designed with the food industry in mind. In particular, some shelter designs complement the vertical storing dock leveler, allowing the trailer doors to be opened inside the building for security purposes (part of the drive-thru application). Special design features ensure tight sealing against trailer sides, across the full width of the trailer top and at the corners, without interfering with trailer doors being opened

and closed after the trailer has been parked at the dock.

An effective dock sealing system also helps prevent weather-related product damage and contamination, protecting and securing the integrity of products as they move in and out of a facility during manufacturing, processing, and shipping. Seals and shelters can also provide deterrence against theft at the loading dock by sealing gaps that could otherwise be passageways for thieves to move product.

Automating The Dock

Protecting cargo from being stolen or contaminated isn't something facility managers should hope for. It takes a plan.

A systematic approach that incorporates automatic vehicle restraints, vertical dock levelers and appropriate seals/shelters is the best way to safely secure a loading dock. These products can work together as a true system that will enhance security, protect employees, reduce contamination and improve environmental conditions within a building and throughout a given supply chain.

When thinking of ways to avoid being the next cheese theft victim, facility managers should start at the loading dock and consider upgrades to dock equipment.

***Walt Swietlik is director of customer relations and sales support for Rite-Hite, a global leader in the manufacture and sale of loading dock equipment, industrial doors, safety barriers and HVLS industrial fans.**

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