

Farmers: beware of propane fire dangers

By Joyce Bupp
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YORK — Beware farmers and rural homeowners.

If you're heating a farm shop, or part of your home, with a propane gas cabinet heater, not only are you courting danger you're also breaking the law.

That's the word from Trooper James Boyle, of the York State Police fire marshal's office. Boyle, the chief investigator of the rash of barn arsons in southern York County, is painfully aware of the financial and emotional problems that follow the wake of a fire.

The Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry recently issued warnings on the indoor storage of propane gas tanks used with small cabinet heaters. Estimates are that about 5,000 of the cabinet units have been sold, primarily through hardware and farm supply and equipment stores.

While noting that as yet no explosion of the heavily pressurized containers has been reported, Boyle wants to do his part to "stop it before it becomes a problem."

He issues additional words of warning to farmers understandably nervous over the series of barn burnings that have erupted periodically for two years, centered in the Stewartstown-

Fawn Grove-New Freedom area of southern York County.

Earlier this year, the arson plague edged across the Mason-Dixon, with the torchings of several northern Maryland barns.

"Don't shoot," he emphasizes, and reemphasizes several times.

"It's a point of law. You have the right to kill a person only if you feel your life is in danger and there is positively, absolutely, not any other possible way out."

"That doesn't mean shoot if you think your property is in danger. You could be criminally arrested for it, and could even conceivably lose your farm in court if you injured someone and were later sued for damages in a civil case," warns Boyle.

Nevertheless, a property owner does have some rights if he believes a trespass with criminal intent is occurring.

"There's nothing wrong with physically restraining a prowler at nighttime, or during the daytime, if a theft or obvious crime is being committed."

Caution is the key. The law simply does not allow a property owner to take a shot at, or punch out, someone who walks inside a barn.

According to the fire marshal, February 7, 1983, changes to the state law strengthened the

penalties to persons convicted of intentionally setting, or paying for the setting of, arsons.

If a death from an arson, results to a farmer or fireman, for instance, who was fighting a set barn blaze, the person or persons convicted of setting the fire would be given either a death sentence, or life imprisonment with no parole.

Conviction for arson in which no lives are lost earns a penalty of the maximum of twenty years imprisonment, or \$25,000 in fines, or a combination of both.

Another change in the arson-related law more directly affects property owners.

Any farmer who wishes to burn out a fence row or brushpile must plant control measures ahead of time, such as enlisting extra help to be on hand if the flames accidentally spread.

If such a fire spreads to neighboring property, the law requires that the property owner notify the fire department. If no such report is made, the property owner who started the fire could be liable for arrest.

While Boyle is not able to comment on the series of York County arsons, due to continuing investigations, he did relate some reasons, from past cases, why farm fires and theft may occur.

Some past investigations have turned up burnings that resulted from attempts to cover up other crimes, such as stealing gasoline or resalable materials such as wire or copper.

According to Boyle, thieves may simply set a barn afire in anger from not having found anything valuable to steal.

Then there are cases that border on the bizarre, like the gasoline thief who couldn't hear the fluid running as he was attempting to siphon it out, so he flicked on a lighter for a better look - and set a building a fire.

Seemingly unrelated outside events are sometimes tied to rural crime.

One such incident occurred sometime ago, when police received a long list of farm machinery theft reports. During



For every arson investigation, Trooper James Boyle is faced with a lot of paperwork.

the same five-day time period during which the thefts occurred, investigators learned that a ship destined for an underdeveloped foreign country had been docked in the Baltimore harbor.

"I know it's hard to tell a farmer that he has to change, but crops, equipment, chemicals, nearly every part of farming has changed," he figures.

"Now, a farmer needs to change the kind of barn he'll build. He needs to think security."

Security means building away from roads, unlike the historic trend toward building near the roadways for easy access.

Old barns still standing, especially those along highways, need extra precautionary measures. Locks on doors and screen on windows facing the road could mean the difference between a serviceable building and one reduced to smoldering timbers in the wake of tossed incendiary device.

The same principle applies to deterring thieves.

"If a thief must work at it, and make noise to get in somewhere, it's likely he'll move off to something simpler," says the investigator.

Alarm systems for barns are still not perfected in Boyle's opinion, since they can too easily be set off by such variables as electrical storms, or even a flock of pigeons, flying through the area.

Electrical problems remain the prime cause of fires across the nation, and a major cause of accidental barn fires.

"Look at the wiring in a barn 20 or more years old," Boyle warns. "It becomes brittle with age, develops cracks, and then moisture during heavy rain periods or spells of dampness will short, causing sparking and fires. Barns expand and contract with the weather, stretching electrical

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Trooper James Boyle, York fire marshal, examines sections of frayed electrical wiring, a major cause of accidental barn fires.

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