

Fleet Operations – Warning Notice March 2021

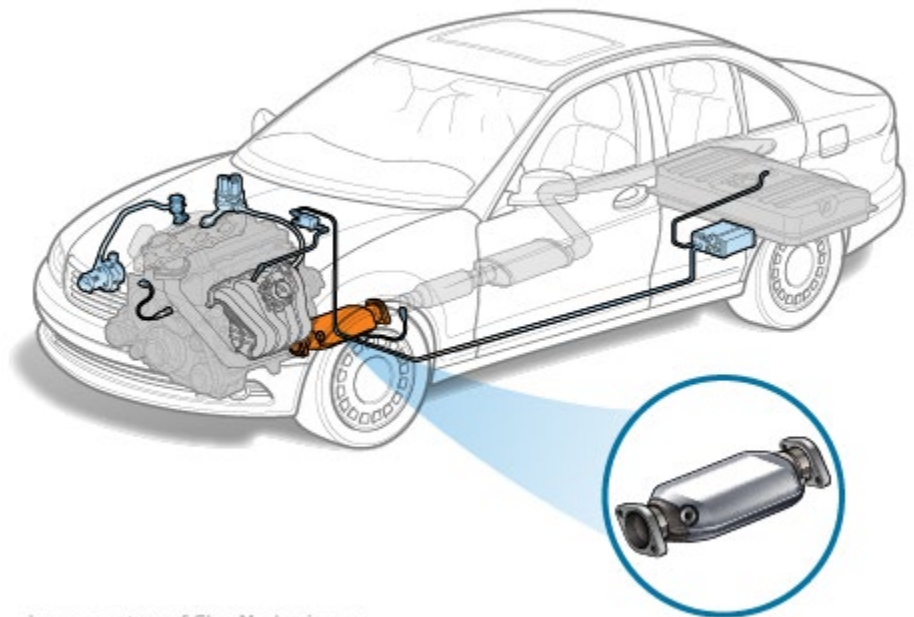
Catalytic converter theft - For fleet and personal cars

Risk level – High

Be aware - There is a dramatic increase of catalytic converter thefts in Washington State and across the US.

More than 20 Fleet Operations vehicles have fallen victim to this stealing spree over the last six months.

The current situation requires the use of additional vigilance when parking Fleet vehicles to avoid costly repairs to you and your agency.



How are catalytic converters stolen and why?

What is a Catalytic Converter -

[Catalytic converters](#) (sometimes known as "cats" or "cat-cons"), turn the harmful chemicals in vehicle exhausts into harmless gases such as steam. These devices are mounted underneath vehicles as part of the exhaust system. [Vehicles have been required](#) by the Environmental Protection Agency to have a working catalytic converter since 1975.

Why do thieves want them?

Catalytic converters contain "rare earth" materials such as platinum, palladium, and rhodium, which is worth a premium price. Currently an ounce can be worth thousands of dollars. Thieves fence them to scrap metal dealers who in turn sell them to overseas markets.

Theft happens fast-

Thieves can remove a catalytic converter quickly, often in less than two minutes. These thefts can even occur in broad daylight. The only tools a thief needs are a wrench (for converters that are bolted on) or a reciprocating saw (for converters that are welded in). Some thieves have even worn work or safety gear to look official. If you see something unusual, like people under cars in parking lots, report it.

- [Edmunds, April 2009](#)
- [Q13, Brian Flores, 11/24/2020 - 10 seconds on camera](#)

How do you know your catalytic converter is missing?

You will be able to tell that something is wrong immediately after turning on the car after your catalytic converter has been stolen. You will notice the following three symptoms:

- A loud rumbling or roaring sound will emanate from the engine, which will increase in volume as you press the gas pedal.
- The car will drive rough and feel like it is sputtering while changing speeds.
- If you check beneath the car from the backside, you will notice a gaping hole in the machinery, near the middle of the exhaust system, as well as pieces of torn-away piping.

[Your Mechanic, Abigail Blake, February 11, 2019](#)

What do you do if it happens to your vehicle(s)?

If you have Fleet vehicles that are the victim of catalytic converter theft-

- Contact local law enforcement and file a report
- Contact your customer account representative directly or contact the CARS team by email at mpmail@des.wa.gov or call 364-664-9210. Let us know as soon as possible as a car without a catalytic converter is illegal to drive.

The problem is growing-

The number of thefts of catalytic converters has risen dramatically in recent months. *“In 2019 there were only 13 catalytic converter thefts in Seattle. But in 2020, more than 700. And this unusual trend is also playing out in many other communities.”* - [KOMO News, Johnathan Choe 2/11/2021](#)

- Automobile dealers and repair shops in Spokane are seeing a rise in thefts of catalytic converters. [KHQ-6 Spokane, February 2021](#)
- Spree of catalytic converter thefts in region, Olympia police say [Olympian, Sara Gentzler, October 2020](#)

Prius older than 2011 are higher targets-

With two power sources, hybrids process fewer pollutants through their catalytic converters. This means the precious metals are less likely to corrode, increasing the value of the part. Thieves are attracted to that increased value. [Auburn Examiner, Elizabeth Miller, November 25, 2020](#)

What is DES recommending?

Take steps to prevent theft-

Fleet Operations is looking at advanced methods for theft prevention from state vehicle, but in the meantime, here are some steps your agency can take to deter thieves.

- If possible, park in a garage.

- If indoors is not a possibility, park in secured, well-lit and highly visible areas.
- If possible, park near patrolled areas.
- Park vehicles with high ground clearance next to low clearance vehicles to make it harder for thieves to get under vehicles.
- Check vehicles routinely. Vehicles left unattended for long periods are more susceptible to theft and damage.
- If something looks suspicious, report it. Some thieves are using work vests or clothing to look official and stealing converters in broad daylight.
- Park where surveillance cameras are prevalent and visible.
- Increase car alarm sensitivities to go off if the vehicle is being tampered with by thieves.

Information on advanced prevention techniques for Fleet vehicles will be shared with agencies and ATOs as they are identified and approved.

Who is responsible for repair costs?

Repairs are costly-

“Unfortunately, it’s costing the victims \$3,000 to \$4,000 to fix these things each time, and they don’t find out about it till they go to start their car and it makes a really loud noise,” - Sgt. Josh McClure with the Edmonds Police Department. [King 5, Kaila Lafferty, December 4, 2020.](#)

As customers leasing fleet vehicles, agencies are responsible for damage done to leased vehicles while in their possession. Unfortunately, this means that costs to repair the vehicle after a catalytic converter theft are charged to the agencies. This could include the totaling of the vehicle if repair costs are high compared to the value of the vehicle.

- [Enterprise-wide Transportation Policy](#) sec A, #5 State Agency Responsibilities
- **Every state agency having jurisdiction and control of motor vehicles shall:**

#5 - Be financially accountable for all costs resulting from the authorization and use of state-owned or leased motor vehicles, including costs for damage to state-owned vehicles and property, and costs charged through the Washington Self-Insurance Liability Program for third-party injuries and vehicle damage.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact your customer account representative by email mpmail@des.wa.gov or call 360-664-9210.