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# Texas utilities admit billing errors with SmartMeters

Wednesday, April 14, 2010



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Two major utilities in Texas have confirmed that some customers received inaccurate and sometimes inflated bills after turning to SmartMeters to measure their energy usage. PG&E is under fire for its program to install SmartMeters in Northern California. 7 On Your Side has been following the debate since last year.

Hundreds of consumers have blamed SmartMeters for overcharges and sudden spikes in their bills. Consumer advocates say the billing problems that occurred in Texas should be a lesson learned in California.

More than five million SmartMeters will be installed in Texas by the year 2012. It is the second-largest rollout in the country -- second only to California's. In both states, hundreds of consumers have filed formal complaints about SmartMeters with their public utilities commissions; at least 600 in California and up to 800 in Texas.

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But unlike PG&E, the utilities in Texas have actually admitted to billing errors.

"It's a software glitch," says Floyd LeBlanc with Centerpoint. "We found the software glitch and corrected it."

Centerpoint blames a communication error in the software for sending the meter readings for 5,200 customers back to the utility incorrectly; 3,500 of those were overbilled. Another Texas utility has also acknowledged problems. Oncor says it under-billed 2,000 consumers when the communication software it used failed to sync up with the device.

"We're now measuring data every interval, which may be an hour or every 15 minutes. So, there's more data being transferred and there's more opportunities where an error can occur," says Matt Wakefield with the industry funded non-profit The Electric Power Research Institute.

The institute says industry standards call for SmartMeters to have an error rate of one-half of 1 percent and its testing shows that SmartMeters meet that standard. PG&E is just now beginning to acknowledge the possibility of even minor problems in its SmartMeter installation program.

In January 2010, Paul Moreno with PG&E said, "In every situation, the meters have been shown to be accurate."

In March 2010, David Eisenhower with PG&E said, "With any rollout of this magnitude, you can expect to run into some issues and that's what's going on."

This week, Eisenhower said, "There were, on a handful of occasions, the meters were not transmitting any information. When that happens, we immediately work to correct it."

PG&E says no bills have been impacted. Both Oncor and Centerpoint use communication software from IBM. PG&E uses a different company called Silver Springs Network of Redwood City.

"There's a number of differences. They're using different equipment, different technology, different communication devices," Eisenhower explained.

The admission of billing errors in Texas came from monthly reports from the utilities required by the PUC of Texas.

The California PUC has made no such requirement of PG&E, and PG&E has thus far refused to conduct side-by-side testing of SmartMeters with the old meters. That is something Oncor in Texas has voluntarily done.

"We chose people who weren't necessarily happy with us and didn't trust the data they were getting from those new meters," says Chris Schein with Oncor. "So therefore, our biggest skeptics then become our testers."

The PUC in California has now hired the Structure Group to conduct an independent investigation into SmartMeters. The PUC says side-by-side tests will be part of that investigation. The Utility Reform Network (TURN) is now calling for citizen oversight of that investigation.

"TURN is very concerned about the Structure Group because of the fact that they have been a consultant to PG&E from 2002 to 2008," says TURN spokesman Mark Toney. "What that means, is they have a vested interest making sure that the SmartMeters are exonerated."

TURN says the findings of billing errors in Texas are yet another reason why the California PUC should impose a moratorium on SmartMeter installations until an investigation is completed.

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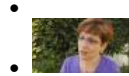
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