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[PUC approves 'smart' meter opt-out options](#)

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HALLOWELL — Central Maine Power Co. customers who don't want wireless smart meters installed at their homes and businesses will have options, following a landmark decision at the Maine Public Utilities Commission.

People can opt out of the program by keeping their existing, analog meters, or having a modified smart meter installed with its wireless transmitter turned off, the PUC decided. Customers also have the option of moving a wireless smart meter to another location on their property.

Both CMP and the PUC say they're unaware of any other state where utility regulators have approved a smart-meter opt out plan, although one is being considered in California. Because smart meters have become controversial around the country among a vocal and well-organized minority of customers, today's decision was expected to be watched closely elsewhere.

The plan was approved during deliberations on a consolidated smart-meter complaint case by two of the three PUC commissioners, Vendean Vafiades and David Littell. The PUC's new chairman, Thomas Welch, most recently worked for a law firm that represented CMP and didn't participate in the decision.

The choices approved in Maine come with costs, however, that must be paid by the customers who want to opt out. Choosing a digital smart meter with the wireless transmitter turned off will carry an initial charge of \$20, plus a monthly charge of \$10.50. Keeping an existing mechanical meter will cost \$40 upfront, plus \$12 a month. The cost of relocating an existing meter is highly variable, but typically expensive.

Low-income residents can qualify for a subsidy that could pay up to half the opt-out cost. The costs are likely to be adjusted over time, depending on how many customers ultimately want something other than a standard smart meter. An estimated 7,000 people – just over 1 percent of all customers – so far have asked not to have the new meters installed at their homes and businesses. CMP will continue to honor these requests until a formal opt-out process is put in place.

CMP will explain to customers how to exercise these options in the near future, on its website and through other means. The company is asking customers not to call about the procedure until details become available.

"We're just glad to be able to move ahead," said John Carroll, a CMP spokesman.

CMP had strongly objected to offering any options, saying they would be costly and dilute the effectiveness of the technology for the vast majority of customers who want smart meters. In the end, the company chose not to appeal the decision and deferred to the PUC, saying it was up to regulators to set the policy for smart meters.

Smart meter opponents, who had mobilized scores of residents to contact state officials about their concerns, were generally pleased with the commission's action.

"I'm happy it has reached a conclusion," said Suzanne Foley-Ferguson of Scarborough, one of the intervenors.

Foley-Ferguson had argued that all ratepayers should help pay the cost of opting out, unless the PUC could determine that the meters were safe.

"At least we got the existing meter option," she said.

Elisa Boxer-Cook, the Scarborough activist who spearheaded the opposition, said her priority now was helping residents become educated about their choices.

"I think it's really important that people do their homework," she said.

Boxer-Cook suggested a Website maintained by opponents:

<http://smartmetersafety.com/>

The PUC's action comes seven months after CMP began its effort to replace 600,000 mechanical electricity meters with wireless digital meters. The \$200 million project is receiving half of its funding from the federal government, part of a push to upgrade the nation's power grid.

The project reflects directives from the PUC and the last Legislature to promote grid technologies that could reduce operating costs, improve service and increase energy efficiency. More than 200,000 meters have been switched so far.

The changeover spawned numerous complaints, however, including worries about health, safety, cybersecurity and privacy. Many of the issues relate to the radio-frequency network that's being built to support communications between the meters and CMP's offices.

In approving the opt out plan, the PUC sidestepped most of these issues, saying it didn't have the expertise to consider them. By focusing more narrowly on the concept of giving people a choice, it expressed the view that customers who share these concerns have a right to feel safe in their homes.

In explaining her vote, Vafiades said the opt out plan was reasonable and in the public interest.

"For the long term success of smart meter implementation and to maximize its potential to the fullest, the public needs to be actively engaged in monitoring their usage and real-time price of electricity and modifying their behavior accordingly," she said. "To achieve this goal, we need to shift the focus to the benefits of smart meters and allow the small minority to opt out."

The PUC also made decisions on two related cases.

The commissioners voted to dismiss a complaint which requested an investigation into safety issues, including fires associated with smart meters. They decided that CMP had adequately addressed the concerns, and that the commission had already required a opt-out options.

The PUC also voted to dismiss a request for an investigation into the interference of CMP smart meters with consumer electronics and medical devices. It found that CMP is adequately addressing concerns about electrical device interference; it also found that the Federal Communications Council and Federal Drug Administration have expertise on the medical devices issue and had approved smart meters.

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