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Smart meters:

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Opponents, PG&E preparing for county rollout

Smart meters, according to PG&E, allow consumers to observe their energy usage through real-time, online monitoring. Over half a million units have been installed in California, and Mendocino County residents are receiving notices from PG&E stating local installation is imminent.

Currently about 12,000 customers statewide are using the online service. Others are rallying behind a burgeoning grass roots movement to delay or halt mandatory installations of the metering devices.

San Francisco, Santa Cruz and Marin counties voted to reject the meters, as have the cities of Sebastopol, Berkeley, Cotati, Fairfax, Santa Cruz, Piedmont, Scotts Valley, Capitola, Watsonville, Sausalito and San Anselmo.

PG&E officials will be in Ukiah Thursday and Friday to discuss the local rollout with the public. Those opposing smart meters cite a variety of reasons consumers should be concerned.

Recently, former California Public Utilities Commissioner Diane Gruenich stated at a Commonwealth Club meeting that smart meters were approved to aid "the utility side of the meter," and that the concept of charging consumers variable pricing during high usage periods would likely produce monetary savings for PG&E, not the customer. "It's really being used to enhance the efficiency and operation of the larger utility system," said Gruenich.

Hopland resident Michael Laybourn, founder and board member of the Mendocino Brewing Company,

states minimal security provisions make meters susceptible to hackers. "Someone could turn on or off your power, change the amount of power the meter shows you have used, or even determine if you were home," notes Laybourn. "Your energy use patterns and data are a gold mine to marketers. Energy signatures can indicate if you are using anything from a blender to a vibrator, within the walls of your home. Who owns this data? PG&E. They can make money from this information," Laybourn cautions. Paid hackers have already proven the network is not yet secure.

Dozens of San Jose Mercury News subscribers complain meters interfere with their cordless phones, crib monitors, wireless headsets and home security systems during the meter's data transmission periods. Greg Krouse, Anderson Valley resident and member of a statewide Smart Meter action group, notes the dual nature of the devices. "These meters are wireless telecommunications devices, not just meters," says Krouse.

"There are reports of damage to computers, appliances and stereo equipment during the installation process. How do you protect a refrigerator?" Krouse spoke to independent contractors replacing old meters who stated they receive minimal training on proper installation, and it is unclear who foots the bill if your appliances "fry" upon installation.

Since November of 2009, PG&E has received 40,000 complaints, many related to overages on customer bills. "These are very large, 100 to 500 percent overages," says Krouse, prompting state legislators to demand an investigation and resulting in Assemblymember Jared Huffman (D-Marin) introducing a bill requiring the CPUC to provide

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customers with a smart meter opt-out alternative.

Sabrina Krauss, Ukiah native and PG&E customer appointee for its Santa Rosa Customer Advisory Group, feels concerned customers have little recourse. "We asked PG&E specifically who was responsible for any liabilities. They said they weren't liable because they are mandated by the CPUC. The CPUC says they aren't liable because the devices are FCC approved," according to Krauss.

The Obama administration mandated a "smart grid" for America, but didn't specify deployment of wireless meters. Connecticut is conducting a \$13 million pilot program with 3,000 volunteer utility customers to test smart meter applications and determine if consumers modify energy usage during peak times. California will spend nearly \$5 billion on smart meter installation by 2012.

"The CPUC controls this rollout. They can tell PG&E to do something different," notes Krouse, stating the CPUC could request a moratorium or recommend utilizing wired technology. CPUC members Nancy Ryan and Timothy Simon have indicated they would consider policies allowing ratepayers to choose smart meter or wired metering applications.

Does long-term wireless exposure lead to health consequences? Radio Frequency, or RF has been the subject of more than 2,000 scientific studies. Many European countries have adopted stringent precautionary principles, particularly for children - even banning wi-fi hotspots in schools. Though electro hypersensitivity is a recognized disability, the U.S. standard of accepted exposure is hundreds of times higher than most European nations. "Exposure to X-rays, silicone or even asbestos is usually voluntary. Smart meters expose everyone to an involuntary, mandatory rollout of radiation," says Krouse.

Ukiah resident Michael Maltas has had extensive conversations with PG&E representatives. "They have been forthcoming and cordial," says Maltas, but he still has unanswered questions.

According to PG&E, onboard software inside the meters sends "bursts" of RF-transmitted data to a relay hub once every four hours - part of a "duty cycle" which, according to PG&E, takes less than one minute daily. "But a smart meter is part of a network," notes Maltas. "If I'm in a canyon, my signal goes through everyone else's to reach the hub. Meters take the path of least resistance. The unfortunate person living near a hub lives on an RF superhighway where hundreds of signals will be directed."

"I'm getting numbers that don't add up," says Maltas, whose calculations resulted in a markedly higher duty cycle - prompting concerns that daily RF exposure for households could be dramatically higher than PG&E's estimates.

"My meter is opposite my steel fridge, stove and ceramic countertops. These are classic reflector surfaces that have potential to radically increase RF signals," Maltas explains. Recent research indicates reflection may create a 1,000 percent increase in RF signal strength. "In the real world of my kitchen, the signal hits my fridge, and then what? Do I now have a super hotspot in front of my stove?"

Maltas notes PG&E plans hub installation points for Leland Lane, Oak Knoll Drive, Babcock Lane and Hastings Road.

"Study the data and contact PG&E and your elected officials if you aren't comfortable with smart meters," says Krouse, who offers guidelines on how to alert PG&E for residents wishing to forego smart meter installation.

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A PG&E Smart Meter representative will be in Ukiah to answer questions on Thursday from 1 to 5 and Friday from 9 to 1 in the County Administrative Building, Conference Room B.

PGE's official smart meter website: <http://www.pge.com/smartmeter/>

To place your household on PG&E's delay list, phone (866) 743-0263.

For information on smart meters issues, visit <http://emfsafetynetwork.org/> or contact Greg Krouse at toxicstresspass@saber.net.

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