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SMARTMETERS

Some PG&E customers want choice on SmartMeters

Some customers protest installation of PG&E devices

August 16, 2010 | By David R. Baker, Chronicle Staff Writer



Protesters gather outside the State Building in San Francisco to lodge complaints about PG&E's SmartMeter program.

Credit: Brant Ward / The Chronicle

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Joshua Hart does not want a SmartMeter.

But unless state officials and Pacific Gas and Electric Co. relent, he's going to get one anyway.

Hart, 34, considers the radiation from wireless devices - such as cell phones, laptops and the new SmartMeters - a health hazard. He

covered the existing electricity meter at his home in Scotts Valley (Santa Cruz County) with a sign proclaiming the premises a "SmartMeter-free zone." On several occasions, he has followed meter installers around town with a video camera, filming as residents tell the installers to leave their homes alone.

Hart, a freelance writer and transportation planner, even interrupted a speech last week by PG&E Chief Executive Officer Peter Darbee and tried to hand the executive a box labeled "dumb meter."

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But in the end, Hart probably won't have a choice. When the California Public Utilities Commission approved the SmartMeter program, the regulators didn't give PG&E customers the ability to opt out. Sooner or later, all PG&E customers will get SmartMeters for their electricity and gas service, whether they want the meters or not.

"It just rubbed us the wrong way that we can choose not to use a cell phone, we can choose not to have Wi-Fi, we can choose to make our home relatively free of (electromagnetic fields), but then here comes PG&E, and suddenly you have no choice," Hart said. "People need to feel they're in control of their own homes."

The same lack of control angers people who distrust SmartMeters for different reasons.

Accuracy concern

Many PG&E customers have questioned the meters' accuracy, a criticism that PG&E considers overblown. Other customers complain that the devices, which measure electricity use hour by hour, invade homeowners' privacy by revealing when people wake up, go to work and leave on vacation.

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The lack of choice is a common thread linking all of those issues. Regardless of whether they're concerned about accuracy, privacy or health, no PG&E customers can reject the meters - at least not for long. Meter installers will leave a home if confronted, but eventually they'll return.

"We don't necessarily say we'll be back in this amount of time," said PG&E spokesman Denny Boyles.

"What we do is try to reach out to the customer, talk to them about the program, talk to them about the benefits of the program. ... Eventually, we will install the meter."

Under rules approved by the utilities commission, PG&E has the right to enter private properties for any reason connected to providing electricity service. That includes installing a new meter.

PG&E executives and California officials view advanced meters as essential to many of the state's long-range energy plans.

In time, the meters will enable utilities to start charging different prices for electricity use at different times of day, encouraging Californians to use power in the mornings and the evenings instead of the afternoons, when demand hits its peak. Lowering peak demand, in turn, could cut the number of power plants that need to be built, helping to fight global warming. Other California utilities are installing their own versions of advanced meters.

"If you have people opting out of that, you've put a chink in the program," said utilities commission President Michael Peevey. "It's vital to have universality of service."

The commission has ordered a study of the SmartMeter's accuracy, the results of which could be available late this month or in early September. But so far, the commission has resisted calls for a SmartMeter moratorium, saying that delaying the program could add to its already considerable \$2.2 billion expense. Scotts Valley, San Francisco and other cities have asked for a moratorium across all of PG&E's service territory, and the town of Fairfax recently adopted its own temporary ban on the devices.

Helen Burt, PG&E senior vice president and chief customer officer, said other utilities that are installing advanced meters around the world are also making the meters mandatory for their customers.

"We didn't think of making it voluntary, and I don't think any utility in the U.S. or anywhere else has made it voluntary," she said. "I wish there were a way to make the grid work without everyone participating, but we haven't figured that out yet."

There has been some resistance. Last year, lawmakers in the Netherlands backed off a bill to make advanced meters compulsory after consumer advocates raised the same privacy concerns that PG&E has faced.

To individual homeowners who for various reasons don't want a SmartMeter, the lack of choice can be maddening.

Health troubles

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