

Economy

PG&E conducts its own meter tests

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Images:



Felix Adamo / The Californian

PG&E meter technician Pat Sullivan checks the progress during testing of a SmartMeter in southwest Bakersfield. The meter is mounted to a test jack to get the readings while under a phantom load.



Felix Adamo / The Californian

PG&E meter technician Pat Sullivan, left, explains the testing on homeowner Steve Townsend's

SmartMeter.



Felix Adamo/The Californian

A PG&E SmartMeter is mounted to a test jack on a southwest Bakersfield home as it is tested under a phantom load to check if it is working accurately. The new testing program is being rolled out systemwide starting Wednesday.



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A new kind of SmartMeter testing kicked off Wednesday as Pacific Gas and Electric Co. began installing old-style residential meters alongside some of the newer, remotely reporting models that have drawn complaints in Bakersfield and beyond.

The idea is to show how closely the old and new technologies match up in terms of measuring electricity use over a three-month period. That would address one but not all of the theories put forward as possibly causing some of the soaring power bills seen locally last summer.

Outrage over those high bills has prompted two other inquiries into PG&E SmartMeters. One is a four-month investigation sponsored by the state Public Utilities Commission; the other is a narrower, industry-supported examination expected to begin this summer.

The PG&E-run tests begun Wednesday are to be conducted at no more than 150 homes across PG&E's territory. Only one such test has been scheduled in Bakersfield, though the company invited volunteers who it said can sign up for the test on a first-come, first-served basis. (To volunteer, call PG&E at 800-743-5000.)

The company hopes to enlist 75 customers for testing south of the Bay Area, and 75 north of it.

"Basically the idea is we want to get a good representative sample" across PG&E's service area, local PG&E spokesman Denny Boyles said.

The southwest Bakersfield man who enrolled in the new testing, computer engineer Steve Townsend, said he never experienced the "crazy, unexplained" high bills he heard others talk about. But after joining a PG&E customer advisory group, he said he was among those who suggested the tests as a way to determine whether the SmartMeters are recording usage accurately.

"All I care is that it's right," he said of his first-generation SmartMeter, which, unlike the more advanced version installed in some Bakersfield homes, sends remote signals along power lines instead of transmitting independently.

PG&E said the meter installed Wednesday on the side of Townsend's Westporte Court home is made by a different manufacturer but is otherwise similar to the old meter that the company replaced with a SmartMeter after it started a systemwide rollout in 2006. The company said it no longer owns many of the original meters that it removed and replaced with SmartMeters.

The utility said it has previously done three side-by-side meter tests in response to complaints by individual Kern customers. It maintains that the meters have been shown to record usage accurately.

The biggest contributors to last summer's high bills, PG&E says, are hot weather and rate increases. The company has acknowledged communication problems in its first- and second-generation SmartMeters but insists their impact on bills is relatively minor; this new test is not set up to evaluate such problems.

A leading critic of PG&E's SmartMeter system, State Sen. Majority Leader Dean Florez, D-Shafter, wrote in an e-mail that he welcomes the new testing even as he took the company to task for not sharing the results of its prior tests of the meters.

He pressed the company to be more forthcoming with results of this latest test.

"Unless these tests are completely transparent," he said, "any results will be suspect."

PG&E emphasized that updates and results from the new testing will be available on its website, pge.com. Spokesman Boyles added that the company extensively tested the devices before installing them.

"We tested meters, hardware and software interfaces and also conducted field tests," he said. "All of the meters are tested during the manufacturing process by the manufacturers. PG&E also, as part of the program approved by the (state commission), conducts random additional testing before accepting the meters. The meters undergo further testing before and during the installation process, and perform self-diagnosis once they are installed. We have found some issues, which we expected based on the size of the program, and we have in every case worked to make it right with our customers," he said.

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