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UTILITIES

Reports shed light on PG&E's digital meters

May 11, 2010 | By David R. Baker, Chronicle Staff Writer



An old analog meters used by PG&E.
 Credit: Courtesy

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Acting on orders from California regulators, Pacific Gas and Electric Co. on Monday released 667 pages of reports on the installation of the utility's SmartMeters, whose accuracy has been questioned by a growing number of customers.

PG&E posted on its Web site four years' worth

of update reports that the utility had filed with the state, detailing both progress and problems with installing the digital electric and gas meters, which transmit their data via wireless technology.

The California Public Utilities Commission launched an investigation into the meters' accuracy after customers blamed the devices for soaring utility bills. Last week, the commission's president ordered PG&E to make public all the monthly updates filed with the commission.

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But PG&E, California's largest utility, also used the reports' release on Monday to strike a new, more contrite tone with the public.

When complaints about the meters surfaced last year, the company responded by blaming the soaring bills on hot weather and a change in electricity rates. But in recent weeks, San Francisco's PG&E has admitted finding problems in more than 43,300 meters, out of the 5.7 million that have been installed. The company has criticized its own initial response to the controversy and promised to do better, while insisting that more than 99 percent of the devices installed appear to be working perfectly.

"We have confidence in this technology and in our program," said Helen Burt, senior vice president and chief customer officer for PG&E. "At the same time, we recognize that some customers question whether they can have faith in our SmartMeter program, and frankly, in PG&E. Restoring this trust is absolutely critical to us."

The company is still unwilling, however, to stop installation of SmartMeters while investigators study their accuracy.

"We know the information is out there, we know the meters work, so no, a moratorium is uncalled for," Burt said.

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The reports released Monday provide extensive details on the project, although the language is sometimes cryptic for a lay reader, relying heavily on acronyms and jargon.

But they do reveal interesting twists in the program. In March, for example, one of the companies that makes SmartMeter components - Silver Spring Networks - found a problem with a component that helps the devices communicate over a computer network. PG&E placed a hold on installing 290,000 of the meters that could be affected by the problem.

In another instance, the company returned 117,000 meters - under warranty - to one of the device manufacturers, after the manufacturer found that some of the meters weren't storing or sending their data properly.

The reports' release did not placate SmartMeter critics.

"There is still the unanswered question as to why so many customers have seen a spike in recorded energy usage following installation of a SmartMeter in their residence," said state Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter (Kern County).

Headline

To read PG&E's update reports on SmartMeter deployment, go to www.pge.com/smartmetercpucreports

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