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## Report Says Heat, Not Smart Meters, Hiked Bills

By *TODD WOODY*

After [Pacific Gas & Electric](#), the giant California utility, began installing smart meters in the state's Central Valley, the company was swamped with complaints from residents that their utility bills had increased.

But [an independent review](#) of the smart meters released Thursday found that the devices were functioning properly and attributed the high charges to a heat wave last year that coincided with their installation as well as poor customer service by P.G.&E.

"They are accurately recording usage and throughout our evaluation we found no systemic issues," Stacey Wood, an executive with the [Structure Group](#), a Houston consulting company, said on Thursday at a meeting of the California Public Utilities Commission. "We did identify there were weakness in the focus on customer service."

The utilities commission hired the Structure Group to test P.G.&E's smart meters and conduct a technical review.

The digital devices wirelessly transmit data on a home's electricity and natural gas usage to utilities while allowing residents to monitor their electricity consumption in real time. Smart meters are considered a linchpin for the development of a smart power grid and tens of millions of the gadgets are set to be installed nationwide in coming years.

But the rollout has been anything but smooth in California, where nearly 10 million smart meters will be deployed.

"By the fall of 2009, the C.P.U.C. had received over 600 smart meter consumer complaints about 'unexpectedly high' bills and allegations that the new electric smart meters were not accurately recording electric usage, almost all of which were from P.G.&E.'s service area," according to the Structure report.

The consulting firm said it then tested more than 750 smart meters in the laboratory and in the field and reviewed utility account records for 1,378 customers, including those that had complained of abnormally high bills.

"Of the 613 smart meter field tests, 611 meters were successfully tested, and 100 percent passed average registration accuracy," the report stated.

The study attributed some residents' higher bills to a 2009 heat wave in Kern County as well as increased electricity usage due to new swimming pools or additions to their homes.

Then there was P.G.&E.'s handling of the controversy.

"P.G.&E. processes did not address the customer concerns associated with the new equipment and usage changes," the report said. "Customer skepticism regarding the new advanced meter technology was not effectively addressed by P.G.&E. on a timely basis."

Michael R. Peevey, the president of the utilities commission, said he anticipated the study's results.

"I have been personally confident the meters are sound," he said. "But P.G.&E. needs to improve customer education. This is not a surprise."

At press conference, P.G.&E. executives said they got the message.

"We heard loud and clear that what was lacking was customer communication and customer service," said Helen Burt, the utility's chief customer officer. "We want to make our program better to earn their trust."

But in recent months, the billing disputes over smart meters have been overtaken by a new and rapidly growing problem over claims that the devices emit electromagnetic frequencies that are harmful to people.

Several California cities have moved to ban installation of smart meters in response to protests about health effects. On Thursday, a dozen people appeared before the utilities commission to say they or friends and loved ones had sustained severe health problems after smart meters were installed in their homes or when they visited cities where the devices were widespread.

Kate Bernier, a resident of Berkeley, Calif., denounced the smart meter program as a result of "misguided, Big Brother green ideology" while others demanded an immediate statewide moratorium on smart meter installations.

But Mr. Peevey noted that the Federal Communications Commission has certified smart meters as meeting government standards.

"If people feel the standards are outdated they should direct their attention to the F.C.C.," he said.

There has been no scientific evidence to date for health effects from the meters. But Ms. Burt said the utility had commissioned two health studies before rolling out the smart meter program.

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