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PG&E sued over new Sn

David R. Baker, Chronicle Staff Writer
Tuesday, November 10, 2009

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SmartMeters, which Pacific Gas and Electric Co. have been installing throughout its territory, are the subject of a lawsuit by a Bakersfield man who blames them for his soaring electric bills.

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Pete Flores has sued PG&E over the meters, claiming they caused his monthly bill to jump from less than \$200 to more than \$500. The class-action suit, filed on Oct. 16 in Kern County Superior Court, alleges that the meters aren't accurate and lead to overcharges that PG&E should be forced to refund.

"Whatever the problem is needs to be sorted out and fixed now," said attorney Michael Louis Kelly, representing Flores.

Residents of Bakersfield, Fresno and the surrounding area have been complaining for months about the SmartMeters.

The devices are designed to track electricity and gas usage with precision and transmit their data to the utility via wireless.

But residents started to question the meters' accuracy after their monthly electric bills jumped this summer.

PG&E, based in San Francisco, blames the higher bills on a combination of hot weather and recent increases in electricity rates.

"We stand behind the SmartMeter program," said company spokesman Paul Moreno. "The allegations in the suit are untrue and have no merit."

State Senate Majority Leader Dean Florez, D-Shafter (Kern County), has conducted public hearings on the meters, and the California Public Utilities Commission announced last month that it will hire a consultant to test the meters' accuracy.

Moreno said the utility already tests about 10 percent of the meters when they arrive from manufacturers. After installation, the utility also compares the usage data from each meter with past usage data from the same home or business, looking for discrepancies.

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