



Advertise on NYTimes.com

New Electricity Meters Stir Fears



Annie Tritt for The New York Times

Katharina Sandizzell, at home with her sons Jacob, left, and Luca, helped block meter trucks in Marin County.

By FELICITY BARRINGER
Published: January 30, 2011

INVERNESS PARK, Calif. — Pacific Gas and Electric's campaign to introduce [wireless smart meters](#) in Northern California is facing fierce opposition from an eclectic mix of [Tea Party](#) conservatives and left-leaning individualists who say the meters threaten their liberties and their health.

Related

[Green Blog: Are We Hard-Wired to Doubt Science?](#) (February 1, 2011)

Green

A blog about energy and the environment.
[Go to Blog >](#)



[Enlarge This Image](#)



Annie Tritt for The New York Times

Deborah Tavares in Sebastopol. She was arrested this month for protesting the installation of the meters near Santa Rosa.

In the San Francisco Bay Area, "[Stop Smart Meters](#)" signs and bumper stickers have been multiplying on front lawns and cars. Four protesters have been arrested for blocking trucks seeking to deliver the meters.

Since 2006, PG&E has installed more than seven million of the devices, which transmit real-time data on customers' use of electricity.

But in Santa Cruz County, south of San Jose, the Board of Supervisors [recently extended](#) a yearlong moratorium on installations. Officials in Marin County, north of San Francisco, [approved a ban](#) this month on meters in unincorporated, largely rural areas, where about a quarter of its population lives.

The meters are a crucial building block for what the Obama administration and the industry envision as an efficient

Log in to see what your friends are sharing on nytimes.com.
[Privacy Policy](#) | [What's This?](#)

[Log In With Facebook](#)

What's Popular Now

[Mixed-Race Growth in Mississippi Signals a Shift in Attitudes](#)



[The Japanese Could Teach Us a Thing or Two](#)



I'd like to stop working someday. Seems like my broker already has. SWITCH TO SCHWAB » charles SCHWAB TALK TO CHUCK

MOST POPULAR

E-MAILED BLOGGED SEARCHED VIEWED

- 1. Cultural Studies: Don't Call Me, I Won't Call You
- 2. Nicholas D. Kristof: The Japanese Could Teach Us a Thing or Two
- 3. Thomas L. Friedman: Washington vs. the Merciless
- 4. Race Remixed: Black and White and Married in the Deep South: A Shifting Image
- 5. Quinoa's Global Success Creates Quandary at Home
- 6. Op-Ed Contributor: Teaching to the Text Message
- 7. The Asia Issue: 37 Asian Odysseys
- 8. Czech Village in Cedar Rapids Struggles for a Comeback
- 9. Talking Business: An Advocate Who Scares Republicans
- 10. Patient Money: Pre-existing Condition? Now, a Health Policy May Not Be Impossible

[Go to Complete List >](#)

RECOMMEND

TWITTER

COMMENTS

(169)

SIGN IN TO E-MAIL

PRINT

SINGLE PAGE

REPRINTS

SHARE



Readers' Comments

Readers shared their thoughts on this article.

[Read All Comments \(169\)](#) »

“green grid.” The goals are to help utilities allocate power more smoothly and to give people more information on how they consume energy and incentives to use less.

At first, the backlash against PG&E focused on the notion that the meters were giving artificially high readings, but that died down after [studies confirmed](#) their overall

accuracy.

The new wave of protests comes from conservatives and individualists who view the monitoring of home appliances as a breach of privacy, as well as from a cadre of environmental health campaigners who see the meters' radio-frequency radiation — like emissions from cellphones and other common devices — as a health threat.

Hypervigilance on health questions has long been typical of Bay Area residents; some local schools ban cupcakes or other sugared treats for classroom birthday celebrations in favor of more nutritious treats like crunchy seaweed snacks, for example.

The health concerns about the smart meters focus on the phenomenon known as “electromagnetic hypersensitivity,” or E.H.S., in which people claim that radiation from cellphones, WiFi systems or smart meters causes them to suffer dizziness, fatigue, headaches, sleeplessness or heart palpitations. (At a recent Public Utilities Commission hearing on smart meters, an audience member requested that all cellphones be turned off as a gesture to the electrosensitive people in the audience.)

The two most recent [government reviews](#) of available research found no link between health problems and common levels of electromagnetic radiation. Both reports indicated that more research would be welcome; on that basis, opponents say the meters should not be installed until they are proved safe.

Although there is scientific data on the health concerns, the privacy worries can be answered only by assurances from the utility. And the groups most concerned about privacy — like the local Tea Party affiliate, the [North Bay Patriots](#) — tend to have little faith in corporate assurances.

At a meeting of the North Bay Patriots this month, Jed Gladstein, a 64-year-old lawyer, called the devices “the sharp end of a very long spear pointed at your freedoms.” Others have raised concern about how the utility would use the information about individuals' home appliance use.

David K. Owens, the executive vice president for business operations at the Edison Electric Institute, the national association of utilities, has tried to allay such concerns. “We've always gotten information about customers' usage and always kept it confidential,” he said, adding, “We're going to honor their privacy.”

Protests related to health and privacy concerns have also blossomed elsewhere in the country. In Maine, for example, residents have waged e-mail campaigns and some towns have adopted moratoriums on installations.

In Northern California, the visceral reaction against the meters and the instant bonding of “electromagnetically sensitive” people also reflects the reality that green solutions often involve new technologies. From genetically engineered seeds to solar tower arrays in the desert, those technologies elicit distrust here.

“It's not all about saving money — it's about control,” said Deborah Tavares, 61, a Republican who was arrested this month with other protesters who blocked the driveway of the dispatch center for meter installation trucks in Rohnert Park, south of Santa Rosa.

Her words echoed those of a staunch Democrat who was arrested in nearby Marin County. “It's another example of corporate control if they are going to roll over our concerns and not listen to us,” said Katharina Sandizell, 41, who helped block installation trucks here in Inverness Park, a hamlet in the environmentally sensitive precincts of Marin County.



Singing the unspeakable

ALSO IN ARTS »

'American Idol:' the top 12

[All about museums](#)

nytimes.com

ARTS

ADVERTISEMENTS



Exclusive offers delivered to your inbox

Book Review | The New York Times | Dining | The New York Times | Advance Times

Some Promise You the World. We Deliver. Save 50% on home delivery. Click now. >

Smart Meters

305

Capgemini

EDUCATION TECHNOLOGY EXPERTS

Ads by Google

what's this?

[Marin Montessori School](#)

Love to learn! Preschool-8th grade

Engaging, interactive curriculum

www.marinmontessori.org

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

INSIDE NYTIMES.COM



Correction: February 19, 2011

An article on Jan. 31 about health and privacy concerns related to the installation of wireless smart meters in Northern California misstated part of the surname of a former journalist who is leading protests against such meters in her home state of Maine. She is *Elisa Boxer-Cook*, not *Baker-Cook*.

A version of this article appeared in print on January 31, 2011, on page A12 of the New York edition.

COMMENTS
(169)

SIGN IN TO E-MAIL

PRINT

SINGLE PAGE

REPRINTS



The Times & the Bay Area - now at 50% off when you subscribe for the convenience of home delivery.

Ads by Google

what's this?

Affordable Home Solar

If You Could Go Solar & Save Money

From Day 1, Why Wouldn't You?

www.sunwize.com/affordable-solar

Get Free E-mail Alerts on These Topics

Energy Efficiency

Environment

Pacific Gas and Electric Co

California

OPINION »



Op-Art: Scenes From the Tsunami

N.Y. / REGION »



A Senator's Shadow Family

WEEK IN REVIEW »



Lessons for 'Spider-Man' From the Campaign Trail

TRAVEL »



A Rising Nanjing Thrives on Youth and Art

OPINION »

Op-Ed: Teaching to the Text Message
Learning to write concisely is a valuable skill, and more in tune with the world's conversation.

ARTS »



History's Hands

[Home](#) | [World](#) | [U.S.](#) | [N.Y./Region](#) | [Business](#) | [Technology](#) | [Science](#) | [Health](#) | [Sports](#) | [Opinion](#) | [Arts](#) | [Style](#) | [Travel](#) | [Jobs](#) | [Real Estate](#) | [Autos](#) | [Back to Top](#)

© 2011 The New York Times Company | [Privacy](#) | [Your Ad Choices](#) | [Terms of Service](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Site Map](#)