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PG&E customers can delay SmartMeter installation

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PG&E customers who have safety or other concerns about SmartMeters can now delay installation.

The company announced April 25 that customers who have not yet received a SmartMeter could temporarily delay the installation of their new meter. PG&E began installing the controversial meters in Plumas County last month.

Customers who wish to postpone their SmartMeter installation can do so by calling a dedicated toll-free number: (877) 743-7378. There is no fee associated with this delay.

Under pressure, PG&E filed a proposal with the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) in March that, if approved, would provide customers the option to turn off the radios in their SmartMeters. The commission is currently reviewing the proposal.

If the commission approves PG&E's radio-off option, customers who have requested a delay would still receive a SmartMeter, but they could have PG&E turn off the radios in their meters. But that option comes at a cost: an up-front fee of \$135 – \$270 and a monthly cost of \$14 – \$20 for a meter reader to come out and read the meter. These fees would be in addition to customers' regular monthly energy bills.

Critics say the radiation from the wireless meters poses a health risk. PG&E spokesman Paul Moreno said the devices emit 1 watt of power and transmit for 45 seconds a day — a rate of exposure that would take 1,000 years to equal a typical month's worth of cellphone use. But critics also argue that radiation from cellphones endangers users' health. Groups like Stop Smart Meters are holding out for the return of analog meters.

The SmartMeters have also come under fire for being inaccurate and causing customers' bills to skyrocket. PG&E claims an independent third-party study has verified the accuracy of the new meters. Moreno said that over time some of the old analog meters slow down, resulting in under reporting of energy use and artificially low bills.

Background

The SmartMeters attach to traditional electric meters and record hourly meter reads that are periodically transmitted via a dedicated radio frequency network to PG&E. The technology is part of the CPUC's effort to upgrade the state's energy infrastructure.

SmartMeter installation began in southern and central California, where it has suffered a huge backlash. The CPUC has received hundreds of complaints from customers, and Bakersfield

customers have filed a class action lawsuit. Assemblyman Jared Huffman introduced legislation, currently on hold, that would compel PG&E to offer an opt-out.

Complaints about the meters include the loss of jobs (meter readers will no longer be needed), much higher electric bills and loss of privacy (the company can tell what appliances customers are using when).

PG&E has said there is nothing wrong with the meters and the higher bills are a result of other factors: rate hikes, summer temperatures and customers not shifting their use to off-peak times when rates are lower.

The promise of SmartMeters is that they will allow customers to monitor their electric use so they can make more informed decisions about energy conservation.

The problem: Currently, PG&E's meters do not have any in-home energy management displays or dashboards, so customers don't know how much energy they are using. PG&E does have plans to install these in the future.

One industry observer has cautioned that if there is too much of a lag time between installation of the SmartMeter and installation of the monitoring technology, the "consumer starts to feel disenfranchised."

Others in the utilities industry warn that companies like PG&E need to educate consumers about time-of-use rates. Under this model, consumers are charged a different rate according to when they use electricity. Shifting use to low-demand times results in lower rates, thus delaying or preventing construction of expensive new power plants and preventing the need for blackouts. End