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SOFTWARE, SYSTEMS WON'T BE READY UNTIL 2011, UTILITIES SAY

EXCLUSIVE: Smart meters and solar panels don't mix

Story

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By ERIC WOLFF - ewolff@nctimes.com | Posted: Friday, May 28, 2010 6:50 pm

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Customers who add solar panels to their homes may be surprised when the utility takes their brand-new, computerized "smart meter" off their house and installs an old-school meter with a spinning dial.

After all, the utilities have been heavily promoting the meters for their ability to provide hourly data on electricity usage, to automate tasks such as meter

reading, and to make the power grid more capable of handling the uneven electricity generation from solar panels and windmills.

San Diego Gas & Electric Co. and Southern California Edison have been swapping out old rotary electric meters for smart meters over the past year: At last count, Edison had installed 770,000 of the meters, though none yet in Southwest Riverside County, and SDG&E had installed 800,000, including those of almost all their North County customers.

But, because of how utilities have configured the new meters and their back-office systems, the meters can't "spin backward," or reduce the bills of customers who put electricity back onto the grid, via solar panels or other green technologies. The shortcoming undermines net metering, a key incentive aimed at persuading customers to install their own generation systems.

A executive of Itron Inc., the manufacturer of the smart meters, said they have the capacity for net metering, but utility officials said their systems won't be ready until next year.

Charles Curley already had a smart meter when he went to install a solar system in March. The Escondido mortgage consultant wanted to cut down his \$400 summer electric bill by installing solar panels on his house.

During the day, Curley's solar panels would produce more energy than he could use, and the surplus would go back into the grid. At night, he'd revert back to normal consumption.

Under net metering rules, SDG&E should subtract the power he put into the grid from the power he used at night, and bill him for the difference.

But SDG&E didn't get around to replacing his smart meter before the system was installed, so one sunny afternoon, Curley watched his meter overcharge him.

"The electricity was running backward --- there was an arrow --- but since it doesn't have the capacity to tell which way the electricity was going, it was charging me for it," he said.

SDG&E came and swapped Curley's meter the next day, but the point was made: The high-tech meter couldn't correctly account for his solar system.

Southern California Edison spokesman Charlie Coleman said Edison's meters also don't have the software to handle net metering, but the software is being tested and should be ready by the start of next year. Meters with the older software will be updated en masse over the network.

SDG&E has to update its back-office computer systems to process the flood of data the meters can provide, said Ted Reguly, director of smart meters for the utility.

Reguly said they plan to process net metering by taking hourly readings from the meters, and then compiling the data through the utility's billing system. He said they are running a pilot program for net meter users in the Tierrasanta neighborhood of San Diego, and they expect to roll out the system for everyone in April, along with several other initiatives.

The software and hardware of the sophisticated meters the two utilities are buying, called the OpenWay CENTRON, is fully capable of doing net metering, said Itron's director of electricity metering, Lowell Rust.

"The device can handle it. This version of the product has always been able to," Rust said.

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The meter tracks power generated in one "bucket" or computer registry, and it tracks power used in another, and it has plenty of storage to hold that data for a monthlong billing cycle, Rust said.

Reguly conceded that the smart meter roll-out has suffered some technical delays, including a problem in which a few Escondido customers had their power shut down when a software update went awry last week.

"We've always known that the interval billing wasn't going to go on until later in the project," Reguly said. "We've had some delays in delivering the functionality that were a little unexpected."

The April roll-out will come with a few other changes for SDG&E customers: in addition to hourly meter readings, the utility will offer customers discounts for using less power at certain times of day, especially during the summer when power is most needed.

Call staff writer Eric Wolff at 760-740-5412.

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