



County of Santa Cruz

BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

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September 15, 2010

California Public Utilities Commission
505 Van Ness Avenue
San Francisco, CA 94102

RE: SMARTMETER™ TECHNOLOGY

Dear Members of the Commission:

I am writing on behalf of the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors to request a response from the Commission concerning an article published in the September 6, 2010, edition of the San Jose Mercury News alleging interference by SmartMeters™ with common household devices. A copy of the article is attached for your review.

As you will note, a significant number of concerns have recently been raised alleging that after SmartMeters™ were installed, interference with the proper functioning of common household devices like wireless phones, baby monitors and satellite televisions was observed. The mere thought that a baby monitor might not work properly because of this technology should sound very loud warning bells for all concerned.

Our Board believes that every necessary precaution must be made to ensure that the SmartMeter™ technology does not interfere with any common household device. Therefore, we would ask that the Commission provide a response to the concerns outlined in the attached article. Customers have a right to know what, if any, negative impacts are created by this technology.

Sincerely,

TONY CAMPOS, Chairperson
Board of Supervisors

TC:ted
Attachment

cc: Clerk of the Board

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The Mercury News

MercuryNews.com

Readers: SmartMeters interfere with baby monitors, other household gadgets

By Dennis Rockstroh
drockstroh@mercurynews.com

Posted: 09/06/2010 09:15:39 PM PDT

Updated: 09/08/2010 08:54:55 AM PDT

You've read about problems with PG&E's SmartMeter, especially the folks who claim it's causing huge increases in their electrical bills. But that's not the only issue with the vaunted high-tech device.

As Pacific Gas & Electric's SmartMeter installation has rolled across Northern California, dozens of readers have contacted Action Line complaining about newly found erratic behavior with their household electronic gadgets. A conflict occurs, apparently, when the SmartMeter electronically transmits information back to the utility.

Cordless phones and crib monitors, patio speakers and wireless headsets are spitting out static and startling pops and crackles, they complained. Also affected, they said, are

wireless microphones, security systems, motion detectors and remotely controlled garage doors. This equipment operates largely on the 900- to 928-megahertz radio spectrum.

"Right about the time that SmartMeters were installed, our phone went insane," wrote Jane

Meckman of San Jose

This is something PG&E is loath to talk about even though the company promised transparency when it brought SmartMeters to our homes.

When Action Line asked PG&E about the complaints, the utility said little and put up a bureaucratic hurdle to get responses to readers' concerns, going so far as to require notarized waivers of confidentiality.

That's the definition of stonewalling:

PG&E knew it had a problem as far back as early 2009.

"During the second quarter of 2009, PG&E discovered a limited number of cases of SmartMeter radio interference with customer electronics," the company wrote in a report to the California Public Utilities Commission. The report indicates that PG&E was working on a solution, but officially it is mum.

Of course, it is unlikely that all of the problems with household electronics are the fault of the SmartMeter. Radio spectrum pollution is all around us. But the SmartMeter makes a major – and for many people, unexpected – contribution: When it communicates with PG&E, it is sending data from a house to local data-gathering points and back to PG&E central. Many folks, of course, don't realize that's happening – until the buzzing starts.

Action Line became aware of the interference when members of a mothers' group in the Palo Alto-Menlo Park area started reporting that they were suddenly awakened in the middle of the night by loud crackles and pops on their baby monitors. They

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The Mercury News

MercuryNews.com

suspected their recently installed SmartMeters were the cause.

I asked PG&E about it. Nothing, at first. I asked again. Then a month after I asked about this, PG&E spokesman Paul Moreno said that the families needed to update their two-year-old baby monitors with improved shielding. (Action Line tip: Make sure any new equipment you buy is "shielded." Ask to make sure.) In one case, PG&E paid for a new monitor.

Moreno finally responded in an e-mail: "We are sorry the customer encountered this inconvenience. The SmartMeter device meets all Federal Communications Commission standards, so in cases like this, the baby monitor wasn't built to a standard where it would not receive interference from legally transmitted equipment like a SmartMeter meter. It is likely that the replacement monitor was designed so it would not receive interference from legally transmitting equipment, which is why it is no longer experiencing interference. This reader might want to seek a refund from the store or maker of the first monitor she purchased."

Then PG&E started to take a different approach to my inquiries: stonewalling.

The company decided that written complaints to Action Line could be responded to only if the customer signed a waiver of confidentiality. "These either need to be notarized or signed in front of a PG&E employee at one of our service centers," said spokesman Matt Nauman.

Meanwhile the complaints keep flowing in to Action Line, about 60 so far.

"Your article concerning the PG&E SmartMeter was exactly what I needed to see," wrote Mario after one

of my earlier columns. "Ever since PG&E has installed that stupid device, our DirecTV has been having massive signal issues."

Violeta Perez of San Jose wrote that, "Ever since my SmartMeter was installed, my home alarm system has been going off randomly."

"A mystery has been solved for us," wrote Veronica Wong, complaining that her baby monitor has suddenly picked up static.

PG&E – which was dinged by the Public Utilities Commission last week for its customer service – has handled this poorly. Radio interference from the SmartMeter and other electronic devices is an irritating fact of life. But when the company brought this device into homes without giving us a choice about whether we wanted it, PG&E owed its customers an honest discussion of what we could expect.

Failing to do so has turned an annoyance into a major pain.

Contact Action Line at actionline@mercurynews.com or 408-626-6796.

- Move your equipment around to see if you can find an interference-free spot around the house.
- Reorient or relocate the receiving antenna of the device experiencing the interference.
- Try plugging in to different electric outlets.
- Connect the equipment base to an outlet on a different household circuit.
- Consult the dealer or an experienced radio/TV/wave spectrum technician for help.
- If all else fails, you may have to replace the equipment with "shielded" equipment that is designed to withstand interference.

Source: FCC

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