

Interview with BC Hydro on opt-out fees and collection process
by Jan McMurray

We've had reports of people receiving automated phone calls from BC Hydro, giving people 24 hours notice that their electricity will be cut off unless they pay their legacy meter fee. (Some people have paid their bills minus the legacy meter fee, so the fee is outstanding.) Does BC Hydro use automated phone calling to give people notice of electricity cut-off? What is the procedure BC Hydro uses when people are in arrears?

In fairness to all customers, every BC Hydro customer must pay their bill in full. We have flexible payment options for those who need them. Just like any other service, and consistent with our long-standing policy, customers who do not pay their bills – for whatever reason – enter our collections process.

As we have always done in the past, BC Hydro contacts customers several times to inform them their accounts are overdue and request that they make payment arrangements.

While it's always a last resort, customers who continue to refuse to pay their bills face the risk of being disconnected. This prevents the expense of unpaid accounts being passed on to other ratepayers.

There is a class action lawsuit against BC Hydro, as some people feel they should have a choice about their meter at no extra cost. Why isn't BC Hydro waiting until the conclusion of that lawsuit before it charges fees for the legacy and radio-off meters?

BC Hydro is accountable to the BC Utilities Commission. The Meter Choices fees were approved by the B. Utilities Commission on April 25, 2014. The fees are now part of the BC Hydro Electric Tariff, which governs the terms and conditions under which service is provided by BC Hydro. The Tariff is legally binding on BC Hydro, so retaining an old meter at no cost is not an option.

The fees ensure the vast majority of customers who have accepted smart meters do not have to subsidize the choices of a very small number of customers.

The costs for non-communicating meters offset the additional and ongoing expenses of providing and maintaining these options. More specifically, the fees include:

Adding additional infrastructure needed to ensure the smart grid can work as planned.

Smart meters work together to create a communications network that supports the electricity grid. Non-communicating meters create gaps in this network and BC Hydro will have to install additional telecommunications equipment to bridge the gaps so that the modern grid can work as planned.

Setting up and maintaining separate metering and billing processes.

BC Hydro's metering and billing processes are now set up to process information from smart meters. In order to accommodate non-communicating meters, we have to set up and maintain additional processes. For example, trucks, equipment and people must be retained to read the meters and manually input the data back into the billing system.

Manually performing services that are now automated by smart meters.

There are a number of other systems that are automated by smart meters including: outage management, grid-load forecasting, voltage alerts and equipment maintenance alerts. For example, the new system automatically sends a voltage alert when equipment needs upgrading because it is overloaded. The new system also enables us to address billing enquiries on the spot because we can now view the bill-to-date while the customer is on the phone helping to resolve billing enquiries.