

A Salt Spring family of four that refused to let BC Hydro crews swap out their old electrical meter accuses the Crown corporation of playing tough to impose the new generation of smart meters on consumers.

BC Hydro cut power to Melissa Weigel's home last week after the company failed to get authorization to visit the family's south-end property. Hydro staff asked for a site visit to replace the home's outdated meter.

The family spent several days without power as temperatures dropped to the low single digits. They resorted to using a camping stove on their deck to cook meals and relied on nearby friends to make phone calls and do laundry.

"The hardest part is that all the food in our fridge and freezer is spoiled," Weigel said.

Since the power was shut off, the family has reluctantly agreed to let BC Hydro install a radio-off meter. These are new smart meter units that are not connected to the wireless network. Readings are taken manually and residents who choose the radio-off option are required to pay a monthly service fee of about \$20.

BC Hydro has also slapped the family with a \$700 reconnection fee.

"It's been intimidating," she said. "We're just hoping that it stays 'radio-off'".

The family is among about 15,000 households across British Columbia who refuse to let BC Hydro connect their homes to the wireless smart meter grid based on fears about potential health and safety concerns.

Sharon Noble, who heads up the Victoria-based Coalition to Stop Smart Meters, said that number is down from about 250,000 residents who opposed smart meters when BC Hydro rolled them out about five years ago.

Noble said she's seen a sharp increase in the number of confrontations between BC Hydro crews and smart meter skeptics. In an email newsletter distributed to members of her group shortly before Weigel lost power, Noble wrote, "Be warned that, on Salt Spring, workers are coming to homes unannounced seven days a week and from before 8 a.m. in the morning.

"I assume the efforts will be sustained as the end of the year nears."

When asked to comment on the Weigel matter in an interview late last week, Noble said she'd yet to hear about the family's plight but is keen to get in touch and document the experience so that it can be added to her growing file of similar conflicts reported across the province.

At the heart of the matter, Noble said in an interview, is the right of residents to reject smart meters due to health and safety concerns associated with wireless smart meter technology.

Noble said BC Hydro has repeatedly promised residents who have rejected smart meters that meters due for replacement would be replaced with digital meters. Trying to sway smart meter opponents to have new meters installed represents a doubling back on that original promise, Noble said.

Now she wants the British Columbia Utilities Commission to force BC Hydro to "amend its ways and provide all of these people with the digital meters they should have been given, even if the Crown corporation needs to go out and buy more."

Use of the radio-off smart meters represents a step beyond the threshold of acceptability and opens the door to the possibility of smart meter network connectivity, she added.

Company spokesperson Ted Olynyk said BC Hydro is required to inspect and replace meters on homes and businesses across the province to comply with regulations set out by Measurements Canada, a federal government agency that's responsible for the integrity and accuracy of measurement in the Canadian marketplace.

He said BC Hydro faces the prospect of steep fines if it doesn't make sure electricity meters are replaced according to a pre-established timeline.

Olynyk said BC Hydro has offered non-smart meters when requested but said the company is no longer restocking them and supplies are nearly out. Residents who are unable to get an older version are given the option of having a radio-off smart meter.

Visits to inspect and replace meters are always preceded by efforts to notify the homeowner by mail and telephone and disconnection is used in a minority of cases, he said.

"We don't just show up," he said. "Disconnection is pretty harsh, and we don't want to do that, but if we are continually blocked then we'll disconnect."

Though Weigel's power has been reconnected, the experience has left her thinking about ways to go off-grid when solar and wind-generating technologies become more affordable.

"We'd love to do something like that," Weigel said. In the meantime, the family has filed a complaint with the B.C. Office of the Ombudsperson about their treatment.