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## **Gulf Islands will soon join modern grid** ~ Sara Miles

BC Hydro plans to finish the smart meter installation by the end of this year. To date, just over 1,640,000 meters have been installed in BC. The total customer base is almost 1.9 million. Installation dates for the Gulf Islands, the last deployment area, will be announced shortly via customer letters and advertisements.

Smart meters are one part of BC Hydro's 'grid modernization program', designed to replace aging and antiquated infrastructure. The plan to use wireless smart meters has not been popular with some, but BC Hydro reports that 'the vast majority of customers—96%—have accepted them.'

As with any type of 'progress,' there is considerable debate. Some groups, such as Citizens for Safe Technology, are opposing the installation, citing health reasons and their right to be free from wireless technologies. The BC Privacy Commissioner found several areas where BC Hydro could make improvements in its management of confidential customer information. BC Hydro's mandate to use wireless, instead of wired meters, has been challenged, too.

### **The Right to Refuse Wireless**

Citizens for Safe Technology is proceeding with a class action, advocating through the BC Human Rights Tribunal for the rights of those diagnosed with electromagnetic hypersensitivity (EHS) to not have wireless technologies at their homes.

Una St Clair, founder of Citizens for Safe Technology (CST), is diagnosed with EHS. She lives away from the city in a 'wired' home—none of her connections are wireless. St Clair attributes her illness to overexposure; she and her husband were early cellular phone adopters who had a cellphone company in the 1980s. She now experiences dizziness, headaches, racing or irregular heart beat, insomnia and anxiety when exposed to certain radiofrequencies such as WiFi.

The BC Human Rights Tribunal, ruling on CST's complaint against BC Hydro, found it was too 'broad.' The Tribunal ruled that the class, as it was framed, could apply to any person with a medical condition, diagnosed or undiagnosed. If CST refines the class to include only those persons 'allegedly diagnosed with EHS and who have been advised to avoid exposure to wireless technology', the Tribunal will consider the complaint appropriate. St Clair said she was not surprised by this, but 'we were trying to protect everybody. We will just be focusing on people with EHS now.'

BC Hydro says it will work with customers to address their concerns about potential impacts of wireless meters. It says meters can be moved away from the house (at the customer's expense), and installation can be delayed. Cindy Verschoor, Communications Manager for BC Hydro's Smart Metering Program, is 'confident' that the meters do not transmit 24/7. 'There is a lot of misinformation out there,' said Verschoor. 'Unless you are using the right equipment, it's hard to tell what you are measuring.' Radiofrequency bands can be isolated for testing, but with the wrong device, one could be measuring hundreds of sources.

The debate remains: do citizens have the right to refuse wireless technologies? And on what grounds?

### **Wireless Signals & Cancer**

There is still controversy over the health impacts of wireless signals. The 'Interphone Study' appears to be the most comprehensive study on the link between cellphone use and cancer risk. No studies have included as many exposed cases, particularly long-term and heavy users of mobile phones. In its final report on Interphone last year, the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) stated that 'overall, no increase in risk of glioma or meningioma was observed with use of mobile phones' (available online at [interphone.iarc.fr/UICC\\_Report\\_Final\\_03102011.pdf](http://interphone.iarc.fr/UICC_Report_Final_03102011.pdf)). It is unclear why some news outlets reported that Interphone concluded that making cell phone calls for more than half an hour a day over ten years could increase users' risk of developing gliomas by 40%.

Director Dr Christopher Wild, is quoted in an IARC press release, 'An increased risk of brain cancer is not established from the data from Interphone. However, observations at the highest level of cumulative call time and the changing patterns of mobile phone use since the period studied by Interphone, particularly in young people, mean that further investigation of mobile phone use and brain cancer risk is merited.'

### **Why No 'Wired' Option?**

Citizens for Safe Technology says it is again going before the BC Court of Appeal, on October 18, to argue that the *Clean Energy Act* does not prescribe or require wireless smart meters. In a previous application to the BC Utilities Commission (BCUC), CST suggested that, by selecting wireless technology, BC Hydro was operating outside its mandate. The legal challenge and a

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subsequent appeal were both dismissed by the BCUC.

BC Hydro's Request For Proposal for the new meters did not specify the technology, only the functionality for the new meters: 'smart.' Of all the proposals received by BC Hydro, 'not one proponent offered a wired alternative,' said Communications Manager Verschoor. She offered some possible reasons for this, the primary one being cost. The upgrade is being built upon existing infrastructure. In a densely populated country like Italy, each transformer services about 80 customers, but in BC, the average is about eight customers per transformer. So, in BC wiring each transformer costs more per customer. 'If someone had a wired solution that met our needs, we would have looked at it,' said Verschoor.

### Electricity For The 21st Century

British Columbia's electrical grid was built mostly throughout the 1950s, '60s and '70s. Upgrading the grid and using smart meters presents several opportunities for future development, such as feed-in tariffs.

BC Hydro has some programs where customers can feed power into the grid, but it is not possible with old meters. Verschoor said the utility intends to first get the new meters installed and tested before developing the policies and programs necessary to make feed-in tariffs possible. 'It will be available to customers in future,' said Verschoor. 'All customers could potentially feed the grid.' Some critics say BC Hydro should be talking about feed-in tariffs now, rather than waiting to begin those discussions.

BC Hydro also wants to identify where we are losing electricity. New meters on the transformers will record the 'step-down' of electricity before it is delivered to a home. This will allow BC Hydro to find anomalies between what is stepped down, what is used, and what is 'lost' or stolen.

The smart grid will also optimize the amount of power sent to each customer. 'Currently we send more than is needed,' explained Verschoor, 'but with a modern grid, BC Hydro can deliver just the amount required.'

The new system will also help BC Hydro 'get the lights back on faster' in the case of outages. With a 'smart' grid, customers

will not need to notify BC Hydro by phone if their power is out.

New data management systems will give customers access to more information about their electricity consumption. Currently, daily usage is reported on a bill that arrives every two months. With smart meters, you can view hourly usage the next day, using an online account.

In addition, customers will not be required to close and open an account when moving. There will be no more estimating usage, and data entry errors will not be a factor because it will not be manually entered anymore, although meters will continue to be manually read until the upgraded system is fully in place.

### Time of Use Pricing

Some people are concerned that BC Hydro will take advantage of the smart meter's capacity for time-of-use billing, making rates more expensive. Verschoor assured *Island Tides* that BC Hydro will not be doing time of use pricing, although smart meters make it possible. Utilities commonly use time of use pricing in areas where peak demand exceeds capacity, so they use coal or gas to meet the demand. These types of generation are more expensive, so the utilities try to level out the 'peak' through rates. In BC, about 94% of capacity is from hydroelectric power, making the system quite 'flexible'. Currently, BC rates are the fourth lowest in North America.

### Privacy Concerns

Last year, the Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner (OIPA) received more than 600 individual complaints about the Smart Meter Initiative. As a result, the OIPA published an investigative report, in December 2011.

It found BC Hydro to be complying with the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* regarding the collection, use, disclosure, protection and retention of personal information. However, it issued a series of recommendations covering concerns such as access to clients' personal information, third-party disclosure, improved privacy and information security training for employees, and the introduction of read-access logging before beginning hourly consumption logging. 