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More Fires, More Smart Meter Recalls for Sensus



Utilities pull 105,000 meters in Canada, 70,000 in Oregon; Sensus says it's not at fault

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Smart meter maker Sensus is back in the news for a problem it would rather believe is not its fault: smart meters that overheat and catch fire.

Late last month, utility Portland General Electric announced it was replacing 70,000 Sensus meters -- specifically, its 2S Gen3 RD models -- after three reports of fires caused by overheating of the meter-home interconnection.

That blow was followed by the Saskatchewan government's Wednesday decision to remove 105,000 Sensus smart meters deployed by utility SaskPower, after finding eight reports of overheating, some resulting in fires on the outside of the home. SaskPower is expecting the replacement to take six to nine months and cost about \$15 million, compared to the \$37 million it has spent so far on its entire smart meter rollout.

Sensus announced Monday that it had tested the eight meters in question, out of an installed base of 175,000 meters for the utility. The results indicated “long-standing industry issues: one was caused by an issue with a meter base attached to a home, three were caused by utility over-voltage, two were caused by water intrusion through the meter base, and one remains under investigation,” it wrote.

In other words, it appears there’s no link between reports of fires and problems with Sensus’ meters themselves. Unfortunately, that didn’t help the Raleigh, N.C.-based smart meter and grid communications vendor back in 2012.

That’s when Pennsylvania-based utility PECO halted installation of Sensus meters after reports of about two dozen fires. PECO’s investigation did not find that Sensus’ technology was at fault. Still, PECO replaced Sensus with Landis+Gyr meters for rest of its rollout.

Fires are far from unknown in other smart meter deployments, and can usually be traced back to improper installation, water leakage or other mundane causes. They’re also part of a broader set of fire risks and dangers associated with connecting buildings to the grid, as the Vancouver Sun reported in 2012 after utility BC Hydro saw backlash for two reported smart-meter-caused house fires.

That report notes that there are about 480 fires related to electrical malfunctions in homes over any given five-year period in British Columbia, and about twenty-two of those are related to the meter and distribution panel. It also noted that smart meter installers had actually discovered more than 1,000 instances of old meters being improperly installed, potentially preventing fires rather than causing them.

BC Hydro is using Itron meters, and we haven’t seen that smart meter maker’s name connected to fire concerns. Sensus, on the other hand, has been linked to several fires in a row. That could be giving it a serious public relations problem with anti-smart-meter customers and risk-averse utility executives alike.

TAGS: ami, bc hydro, customer, fire, grid edge, itron, meter, peco, portland
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