

California utility addresses security, privacy concerns about smart meters

The municipal electric utility run by the city of Santa Clara, Calif., is addressing the privacy and security concerns its customers have about advanced electric meters prior to introducing smart meters this year and next year. Silicon Valley Power says its SVP Meter Connect data security will be on a par with the encryption level of sensitive government agencies such as the U.S. Department of Defense.

"We share our customers' concern about both protecting their privacy and assuring security of electricity usage data," said Silicon Valley Power Director John Roukema. "We have a very high level of confidence in the advanced metering infrastructure and network technology that we are going to deploy in Santa Clara," he said.

SVP Meter Connect's advanced meters are manufactured in North Carolina by Elster Group. Tropos Networks of Sunnyvale, Calif., and Elster together will provide the networking and infrastructure necessary to transmit encrypted information from the meters to the Silicon Valley Power, the municipal utility said.

The wireless network will have iron-clad security, said Narasimha Chari, chief technology officer for Tropos Networks. "SVP Meter Connect protection utilizes the same underlying security encryption technology standard used by the U.S. Department of Defense," he said.

The utility said it also will contract with Milton Security Group to analyze and evaluate the privacy and security measures installed in the SVP Meter Connect program.

The wireless equipment and network installed for the SVP Meter Connect program will provide residents with free outdoor access to public Wi-Fi, the Santa Clara utility said. The public Wi-Fi data streams, or channels, "are not encrypted by SVP and will be completely segregated from the highly-encrypted and separate advanced meter data management system," the utility said.

"We will not install the advanced meters until we are absolutely certain they are accurate, secure and safe," said Larry Owens, manager of customer service for the utility. "Elster and SVP will validate meter accuracy by testing both the new meters going in and the old meters coming out. Security protocols are state-of-the-art and continually evaluated."

A recent survey of SVP's customers found that privacy was a concern even though more than two-thirds of the customers believe advanced meters are a "good idea." The survey was conducted by RKS Research of New York.

"Our customers are remarkably well-informed about the smart grid," said Owens, noting that nearly 90% of SVP customers are familiar with advanced electric and water meters.

Santa Clara residents' knowledge of advanced electric metering contrasts sharply with a national Harris Poll taken 11 months ago showing that 63% of Americans did not know what a "smart" or "advanced" meter was, the utility said. —[JEANNINE ANDERSON](#)

Source: Public Power Weekly Issue No. 1 (January 10, 2011)