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## Smart Meters Allow Ameren to Accurately Read Bills Without Treading on Customers' Property

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By Tony Reid, Herald & Review, Decatur, Ill.

Aug. 9--DECATUR -- An army of smart, communicating electric and gas meters is marching across Central Illinois.

The Ameren Illinois utilities -- AmerenIP, AmerenCIPS and AmerenCILCO -- have installed more than 670,000 of the meters, more than half its 1.1 million goal in a program that began in 2006.

The meters send information through radio signals and can be read remotely, so the utilities don't have to access customers' property. And because the meter information can be received any time, the new meters cut the need for estimated bills.

"The meters can also report when power is out, which helps identify a trouble area for better outage response," Ameren spokesman Leigh Morris said.

"They also give customer service representatives information that helps them assist with billing questions and allows meters to be read on the day a customer moves into or out of a residence."

But there is way more to these new meters than easy billing. The company providing them, Landis+Gyrco, says they pave the way for the next generation in electrical distribution: The "Smart Grid," which uses precise monitoring and communication to make power distribution systems more efficient.

Customers can be signaled when power prices spike and the system is strained, offering a chance to save money and prevent outages by cutting back. It would be like the "Power Smart Pricing" the utilities now provide to families who opt for it, only this system would cover a much bigger area.

In the future, smart appliances might even be able to communicate with the power grid through the meters and adjust their consumption to ease loads.

Bruce Hollibaugh, the managing supervisor for smart grid and meter reading services for Ameren utilities, said in a statement that the new meters "position us for smart grid applications."

But Morris, the utilities spokesman, said any prospect of a smart grid "was still down the road" with no immediate plans to install it, a project likely to be expensive.

The Citizens Utility Board, a consumer watchdog group, said that, done right, a smart grid system could add up to significant savings for consumers. It wants the utilities to move ahead with the project, using guidelines worked out carefully by lawmakers and the state's power system regulators.

"If the smart grid is done right, we're very much in favor of it," said David Kolata, the utility board's executive director. "But we all need to make sure Ameren does it right."

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