

Opinions

No Evidence To Support Claims of 'Smart Meters' Being Unsafe

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Editor's note: Taylor Fire Marshal John Hager recently conducted an investigation into "Smart Meters." The following is Hager's response to Interim Fire Chief Dan Reynolds on the subject.

After doing some research pertaining to the "Smart Meters" (also known as AMI Meters), I found no evidence to support the claim that the meters are unsafe.

I did view several websites that had videos and pictures of fires which supposedly had been started by smart meters. In my opinion, the websites seemed biased and/or were created by individuals who are opposed to the use and installation of the devices. I found videos depicting a meter burning, but the video did not indicate the details pertaining to the fire investigations. I also viewed several photographs of meters that appeared to have been melted. Again, the photos did not include any fire investigation report indicating the cause.

I did find one report about a fire in Livonia, which started at the time of installation. The report indicated that the meter blew up in the installer's face while he was changing out the AMR meter to the AMI meter.

A smart meter is an electronic device that records consumption of electric energy in intervals of an hour or less and communicates that information at least daily back to the utility for monitoring and billing purposes. Smart meters enable two-way communication between the meter and the central system.

Unlike home energy monitors, smart meters can gather data for remote reporting. Such an advanced metering infrastructure (AMI) differs from traditional automatic meter reading (AMR) in that it enables two-way communications with the meter. Communications and homeowner's privacy is of great concern for some individuals. Their concern has caused great debate with the installation of the AMI meters. According to the Electric Power Research Institute, there are vendors who offer different AMI systems, but all are required to conform to standards established by the American National Standards Institute (ANSI).

I spoke with a DTE Energy representative, who stated, "Out of all of the people we supply service to in Michigan, only 1,800 people opted out of having the meters installed." Regarding health concerns, he stated that any microwaves that are emitted by the devices are less than those from a cell phone or a TV's remote control unit. When I asked about firefighter safety, he stated "They are no more dangerous than those which are currently installed and should be treated the same in an emergency response."

He concluded by stating he has not heard of any fires due to the AMI meters in the Detroit Metro area.

I have spoken with Michigan's State Fire Marshal about the AMI meters. He stated he has not heard of any fires related to smart meters within the state. We did speak about Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) creating a section for any fires pertaining to smart meters when they change the reporting format of the National Fire Incident Reporting System (NFIRS). This would allow us to obtain more definitive information.

I also contacted the Consumers Product Safety Commission (CPSC). I have not yet received a return phone call from them.

I have spoken with five large private investigation firms that conduct fire investigations all over Michigan and the surrounding states. All five investigators I spoke with reported that they have not conducted any fire investigations for the insurance industry where the AMI meter was the origin and cause of the fire.

Of course, the safety of our residents comes first, and I don't want to say a fire won't ever occur or is not possible. I will state that we have not had any fires in the City of Taylor or other Downriver communities due to the AMI meters. There is not sufficient evidence to support the claim that the meters are more hazardous than those already installed. I am certain someone may have a difference of opinion. If someone has definitive proof, I would be more than happy to schedule a meeting with him/her. According to NFIRS, we have more kitchen fires attributed to careless cooks than we have because of the installation of AMI meters.

I will continue to follow any future developments pertaining to the issue.