

AMI FAQs – Victoria Electric Cooperative

These Frequently Asked Questions explain Victoria Electric Cooperative's Advanced Meter Infrastructure (AMI) project.

Q: What is AMI?

A: Advanced Metering Infrastructure, or AMI, is the term used to describe the full set of technologies and systems that create two-way communication between members' electrical meter and the utility's billing, distribution and control systems. This is part of what's typically called the "smart grid." Historically, information and energy have flowed in one direction only – from the utility to the meter. With AMI, Victoria Electric Cooperative (VEC) and its members will have the ability to share information about energy usage in real time and, as a result, boost efficiency. The new meters often are referred to as "smart meters" due to their ability to send and receive data.

Q: What is a smart meter?

A: "Smart meters" are only one component of a "smart grid." A smart meter is a digital electric meter equipped with wireless communications technology. Smart meters are a key part of establishing the smart electric grid of the future. In time members will be able to proactively manage their energy use, save money and reduce their impact on the environment with advanced meters.

Q: Why are the traditional meters being replaced with smart meters?

A: In a time of increasing concerns over energy prices, regulatory influences, and the environment, smart meters are a more energy efficient option. With near-immediate reports on energy use, members can exercise options on how and when electricity is used. Those smart choices will, in turn, help meet current and future energy needs.

Q: Who is installing my meter?

A: VEC has contracted HD Supply to convert most of the meters, with VEC technician's handling the balance. HD Supply technicians are identifiable by their uniforms, ID badges, and vehicle markings including the VEC logo and vehicle signage identifying them as VEC contractors.

Q: When will the meter be installed at my home/business?

A: Every VEC member will be notified by U.S. mail a few weeks in advance of their change-out. HD Supply installers will knock at homeowners' doors to alert them at the time of the change-out. If no one is home, HD Supply will proceed with the conversion. Technicians will speak with business owners before any conversion takes place to ensure minimal impact on their activities. The meter installation period is 2 years long and we will work to keep you informed by posting broadly stated schedules on our website.

Q: Will VEC have the ability to disconnect/connect my meter?

A: Some VEC 100amp and 200amp meters will be equipped with a remote disconnect switch.

Q: Can appointments for the meter installation be made?

A: Because so many meters must be changed, businesses can schedule appointments. VEC will make every effort to notify members in advance of meter installation.

Q: How will the conversion affect my service?

A: Other than a brief power outage, which is necessary to make the conversion safely, there will be no noticeable change in service. Due to the outage, you may have to re-set clocks and other electronic equipment.

Q: How do I benefit from having a smart meter?

A: Deploying smart meters to all of our members will enable VEC to operate more efficiently and cost-effectively, which lowers costs and reduces pressure on members' rates. Meter readers will no longer have to enter your property for monthly meter readings. Trips by VEC personnel to your property will become rare events. This will reduce labor, fuel and vehicle costs. Your meter will be read more regularly; increased frequency helps resolve billing disputes more easily. In some cases, our ability to communicate with your meter also can give us precise information about the timing and location of outages, making some power restoration efforts more efficient. In such situations, we can reduce line crews' labor, fuel and vehicle costs because we will be able to pinpoint outages more comprehensively and achieve total restoration faster. Consumers also will be able to monitor their electricity usage in daily measurements by going to a secure, password-protected portion of the VEC website. In the future, once all advanced meters have been installed, VEC may develop programs enabling members to more closely manage when and how they use electricity.

Q: Can I choose to not have a smart meter?

A: All of our members' homes and businesses will need to be equipped with the new meters. The efficiency of our billing, technology and electrical system operations will depend upon the instantaneous exchange of information, so all parts of our system must be integrated. Leaving any existing meters in place will create "holes" in our system that would hurt efficiency and drive up costs.

Q: Will a member be able to read his or her own smart meter?

A: Yes. Smart meters have an easy-to-read digital display, instead of a series of dials. In the coming months, a member could also track daily electricity use on the Internet.

Q: Will a meter reader still need to come around to read the meter?

A: After full deployment, a meter reader will not have to enter a member's property every month. However, VEC employees will continue to need access to the meter at all times.

Q: Will my new meter be fully functional after it's installed?

A: VEC is building and testing the advanced metering infrastructure (AMI) to insure proper functionality.

Q: What is a Home Area Network (HAN)?

A: Many companies are developing home area network (HAN) technology, such as a home energy monitor, which allows a member to remotely connect to and control automated digital devices or appliances in their home. A smart meter can integrate with the HAN so a member can remotely turn equipment on or off to help conserve energy.

Q: Where can members access their electricity usage information?

A: Once a meter is installed, the member will have the ability to view his or her electricity usage through a web portal. The website address and more information about this and other features will be provided in the coming months. Having access to more timely and detailed information about electricity usage will allow a member to make informed energy use choices.

Q: Will member account and energy use information remain secure and confidential?

A: Yes. The G.E. meters and the communications systems reside on a secure network. The meters and the associated communications system are encrypted and equipped with security features to prevent unauthorized access. In addition, VEC is required to comply with all state and federal laws regarding privacy, protection and disclosure of personal information.

Q: Do smart meters use radio frequency communication?

A: Yes, and all communications equipment used for the VEC complies with federal licensing requirements.

Q: Will the communications system interfere with home equipment?

A: Since the smart meter utilizes wireless technology, there should not be any interference with other equipment. All communications equipment meets criteria set by the Federal Communications Commission.

Q: What if I don't want the utility monitoring my electricity usage?

A: We already do monitor your electricity usage, it's just that now we measure it monthly and must send a meter reader into the field to do so. With the new metering technology, we will be able to instantly monitor your electricity usage remotely and on-demand. Under certain circumstances we will read the usage on a daily basis. We will be monitoring on a bulk basis only – the sum total of how much electricity you used in a 24-hour period. We will not be able to identify the specific ways you are using your electricity.

Q: I have heard that people's electricity bills go up after the new meters are installed. Is this true?

A: In some instances, yes. This is because the old, mechanical meter was running slower than it should and therefore was giving artificially low usage readings. The new meters use electronics to measure usage and this may result in some members having higher bills despite no change in their behavior, a direct result of more accurate metering. With no moving parts to wear down, the new meters will provide more accurate readings for a longer period of time. Once the new meters are installed, all co-op members will now be more fairly billed for the actual amount of electricity used.

Q: What about these stories I hear about the utility controlling my thermostat and other electrical appliances?

A: These are called demand-management programs and are programs VEC may offer in the future. Any such programs would require the member to volunteer to participate.

Q: Is this going to raise my rates?

A: Any changes in rates will not be driven by this program.

Q: How will I know when I will have a smart meter installed at my home/business?

A: We will notify members in advance of the installation in their area by mail. We also will leave a notice at your home or business after installation to let you know technicians have completed the installation.

Q: I have heard that signals emitted from the new meters pose a health hazard. Do Victoria Electric's new meters put me at risk?

A: As indicated in the fourth quarter issue of the "UTC Journal" a study was done. Results showed the meters run on low power radio frequency (5.9 GHZ and 2.4 GHZ) levels comparable to a baby monitor and garage door opener. The meter will not cause health issues.