

By Elizabeth Denham

Privacy was mentioned as a relevant issue in “***Smart meters tap BC’s growing need for power***” (June 26) but the article did not examine privacy issues faced by consumers.

In 2012, BC Hydro plans to install more than 1.8 million smart meters throughout the province as part of its initiative to modernize BC’s electricity system. Privacy and security of consumption data is a very real issue for British Columbians.

Rather than measuring energy use for each billing period, smart meters provide more granular information about when and where people are using electricity. This information is potentially detailed enough to reconstruct a great deal of our lives – such as when we sleep, cook, travel, or have house guests.

Smart meters are one of many elements that make up the smart grid. Characteristics of the smart grid include the ability to determine in near real time what devices are using power and when they are using it.

With an increase in the granularity of information comes an increased potential for abuse and my office is working with BC Hydro to ensure that privacy is built into the smart grid at the earliest stage.

Some of the key privacy and security issues relating to the smart grid include ensuring BC Hydro protects personal information while it moves along the grid and that BC Hydro provides secure customer access to enable it to correctly identify each customer.

Customers should have access only to their own, and not to other householders’ usage data.

Another key privacy element is that BC Hydro only use customer personal information for the purpose for which it was collected – for example BC Hydro should not share customer personal information with marketing organizations.

Consumers’ usage information should not be mined or matched with other government data.

Transparency to citizens is a critical element of any public initiative. BC Hydro must ensure that customers know how their personal information is used, and who has access to it. Customers expect to be able to ask questions and voice concerns about smart meters.

BC Hydro is cooperating with my office and has been responsive to our concerns and suggestions.

While BC Hydro’s installation of smart meters will continue well into the future, now is the time to ensure the roll-out of this new technology includes robust measures to protect British Columbians’ personal information.

Elizabeth Denham is the Information and Privacy Commissioner for British Columbia