



“Smart Grids” & Monitoring Your Power Use

As Americans continue to wonder what happened to the \$787 billion in stimulus money and the economic recovered our leaders said would arrive in the aftermath of passage of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, another \$3.4 billion has surfaced. Yesterday, The New American reported on the \$400 million that the Department of Energy will be distributing over the next two years through ARPA-Advanced Research Projects Agency-Energy (or Arpa-e) grants. The expenditure examined in today’s article is also linked to the \$36.7 billion given to the Department of Energy in “stimulus” funding, but this time it concerns support for development of the “Smart Grid.”



According to a report ([“Obama Putting \\$3.4B Toward ‘Smart’ Power Grid”](#)) from the Associated Press:

President Barack Obama made a pitch for renewable energy Tuesday, announcing \$3.4 billion in government support for 100 projects aimed at modernizing the nation’s power grid.

Touring a field of solar energy panels in west-central Florida, the president urged greater use of several technologies to make America’s power transmission system more efficient and better suited to the digital age. The projects include installing “smart” electric meters in homes, automating utility substations, and installing thousands of new digital transformers and grid sensors.

“There’s something big happening in America in terms of creating a clean-energy economy,” Obama said, although he added there is much more to be done.

He likened the effort to the ambitious development of the national highway system 50 years ago. He said modernization would lead to a “smarter, stronger and more secure electric grid.”

The President has certainly learned the value of packaging the news, but the analogy to the highway system is inaccurate. The highway system provided faster transportation between cities; although originally implemented for national security reasons, easier transportation made less expensive transportation of goods and services between locations possible. But the “Smart Grid” is, for the most part, not about getting power to consumers, but about monitoring and controlling that power once it reaches its destination.

The dangers that the “Smart Grid” pose to privacy have already been highlighted in a [recent story](#) at JBS.org, so a brief summary will perhaps suffice. Whereas present electric meters simply measure the total power consumption of a home or business, “smart” meters will collect far more specific information on power usage. As Bob Sullivan at the *Red Tape Chronicles* observed regarding the “Smart Grid,” the tale your new electric meter will be able to tell about your life and habits may be of interest to criminals and other people with an inclination to snoop on you:



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Utility companies, by gathering hundreds of billions of data points about us, could reconstruct much of our daily lives — when we wake up, when we go home, when we go on vacation, perhaps even when we draw a hot bath. They might sell this information to marketing companies — perhaps a travel agency will send brochures right when the family vacation is about to arrive. Law enforcement officials might use this information against us (“Where were you last night? Home watching TV? That’s not what the power company says ...”). Divorce lawyers could subpoena the data (“You say you’re a good parent, but your children are forced to sleep in 61-degree rooms. For shame ...”). A credit bureau or insurance company could penalize you because your energy use patterns are similar to those of other troublesome consumers. Or criminals could spy the data, then plan home burglaries with fine-tuned accuracy.

‘Smart Grid’ meters are not necessarily going to lead to a “smarter, stronger and more secure electric grid,” but they will gather a great deal of information regarding how consumers are using the power that they’ve purchased. But that fact is not part of the sales job. Again, according to the AP:

Obama said a modern grid could give consumers better control over their electricity usage and costs, and spur development of renewable energy sources such as wind and solar.

The \$3.4 billion in grants from the government’s January economic stimulus program will be matched by \$4.7 billion in private investments. The smallest grant will be \$400,000 and the largest \$200 million.

“We have a very antiquated (electric grid) system in our country,” Carol Browner, assistant to the president for energy and climate change, told reporters. “The current system is outdated, it’s dilapidated.”

Matt Rogers, the Energy Department official involved in the program, said the 100 projects were selected from 400 proposed. The money will be distributed over the next two months and the work is expected to be done over the next one to three years, he said.

As noted previously, power companies may choose to give discounts to those customers who choose to have a “Smart Grid” meter, and certainly an informed customer may decide that the potential sacrifice of personal information is worth the money they are saving.

Advocates of the “Smart Grid” will also note that the power company monitoring and controlling the appliances within the homes and businesses of its customers will probably also reduce the problems of summertime brownouts by turning off the air conditioning of people who are not at home. But many of these savings could also be accomplished by customers taking responsibility for exercising the same sort of control over their own habits and behaviors.

Whether or not one agrees with the assessment that the present electric grid is “outdated” and “dilapidated,” there are crucial questions that remain: Is it necessary for the federal government to subsidize profitable power companies with \$3.4 billion in grants? If the “Smart Grid” is of such benefit to consumers and the “bottom line” of the power industry, surely the “Smart Grid” can pay its own way. And how is a “Smart Grid” supposed to spur renewable energy sources — if wind and solar are efficient sources of power, shouldn’t they be able to prove it with their profitability?

The conclusion to the AP article well summarizes the situation:

Even as Obama pitched more efficient and renewable energy use, his trip to Arcadia made it clear that old habits and dependencies die hard. He arrived in a motorcade of gas-guzzling SUVs. While waiting for the motorcade to get started, several vans kept their engines running to provide air



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conditioning for occupants escaping a hot Florida sun.

As the hypocrisy of former Vice President Al Gore's jet-setting lifestyle has stood in marked contrast to his jeremiads on behalf of environmental extremism, Mr. Obama's lack of concern for personal energy use highlights the fact that energy efficiency, in the end, is something to be imposed on the masses, not the ruling elites, and has more to do with control than conservation.

Photo: AP Images



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