# The great meter reading fiasco

**Got grid-connected solar and receiving incorrect bills from your electricity retailer? You're not alone. Matthew Dunk shares his story: the message is persistence pays off.**

This week I went onto the roof to read the inverter; it is a week that marks one year of grid-connected solar power. Coincidentally, it is a week that also marks another milestone: our first *accurate* power bill since installing the system.

I guess that every person who installs a grid-connected PV system can hardly wait for that first power bill. Probably, like us, they have no idea what exactly to expect—anything from dreams of a bill so much in credit that the system will pay itself off in a year, to a mild dread that they have missed something critical and the total saving will be less than ten cents.

What I am sure about, though, is that none of them would expect the bill to be higher than usual.

Last March I opened the mailbox and saw what we'd been eagerly waiting for: our first power bill since the installation. Here it was, the first pay-off for our sacrifices. There had been no big holiday and a leaner than usual Christmas—all in anticipation of a lower power bill and the pleasant sense of *doing* something about global warming; something more than just changing the light globes and unplugging recalcitrant appliances.


Photo: Matthew Dunk

## This doesn't look right

I opened the bill and went straight to the total. I read it again. That's not right, is it? I turned it over and read the next page, looking for the supporting figures. There were multiple rates for the time of year, pro rata based on the number of billing days plus a couple of new entries: the feed-in figures and two more lines, with more numbers the same as the feed-in figures. Actually, there were numbers everywhere and for the first time in my life I was unable to read my electricity bill. But I could read the total, and it had gone up.

In desperation, I looked at the daily-use figure and saw that we had actually used *more* than usual for this time of year. Okay, that was unexpected, but we had endured a 16-day heatwave and, after three days, I had given up and plugged in our little window-mounted air-conditioner. It must have used a lot more power than expected! Imagine what the bill would have been like if we didn't have the solar panels! A little disappointed, we redoubled our efforts at saving power around the house and paid the bill on the due date.

In June, the next bill arrived. I opened it and, again, the total was higher than the same time last year, again with pages of totally indecipherable numbers and the feed-in numbers appearing twice. There had been no heatwave during that bill and the air-conditioner was back in the shed collecting dust. Something was not right with the bill, I was sure of it now. This time I decided to find out what all the figures meant.

I called our electricity retailer and pushed the numbers for billing: "Hello, I would just like someone to explain my power bill to me before I pay it."

They said that someone would call to discuss it within four weeks and suggested that I might like to pay my bill now to avoid a late payment fee.

The due date was more than four weeks away, so I decided to take a chance and wait to see if someone would call me.

No one called.

I paid the bill on the due date, but I was not happy about it. Reading it carefully, it looked as if, under one line on the bill, we were being credited for the power we had generated, and then, under another line, being billed right back for it.

Power bills can be hard to read. There is always a rate change in the billing

period; sometimes it's a winter-summer rate change, other times it's a rate increase. Then there are different rates based on the quantity used: the first number of kilowatt-hours at rate A, the next at rate B. Looking at the bill, the mysterious extra amount seemed to be adding itself to rate B (the higher rate) and pushing the bill higher than usual by negating the buyback amount that (at the time) was significantly less than the low rate. All these double-ups meant the bill figures ran to something like 20 lines of numbers.

## Taking it further

Two weeks after paying the bill I was still waiting on a call from our retailer. I received an email from the Alternative Technology Association (ATA); it was a survey, asking people to share their experiences of the photovoltaic buyback scheme. I filled out the survey and included a remark about the confusion with my power bill. The ATA contacted me straight away and told me to get in touch with my local energy industry ombudsman (in South Australia EIOSA) and explain my case. The ATA had heard of similar cases and said there was probably a mistake with the bill.

Following their advice I contacted EIOSA by phone and after hearing me out they said they would contact the retailer for me. After the mandatory 20 working days, I had not been contacted by my electricity retailer, so I called them. I was put through to the person who was handling my 'case'. She told me the matter had been investigated, the bill found to be correct and the matter closed. I asked her to help me read the bill and she reiterated that the bill was correct and that if I had further concerns I would have to contact EIOSA.

I was told by EIOSA that I could request another reading of the meter to clarify things. They made the request to the retailer on my behalf. Another 20 working days passed and I was contacted again, this time by EIOSA. They told me that the retailer had organised a new meter reading, that the reading was correct and that the extra amount was for off-peak use. There was no supporting documentation for any of this from the retailer, just statements of 'fact'.

I must admit at this point I was tempted to give in. Everyone was telling me the bill was correct, although nobody was willing to discuss the actual figures on the bill.

I was fairly sure I could see what was wrong: the retailer was putting the numbers from the feed-in meter into a non-existent off-peak meter register. I took a different approach: I rang ETSA, South Australia's primary electricity retailer, and asked them to explain how to read the meter. (Here's a tip: don't ring ETSA and tell them you are in a protracted dispute with your retailer about a power bill. You can imagine them ducking for cover on hearing that. Try this instead: call ETSA and tell them how thrilled you are with your new meter and you'd just love to know how it works so that you can see how much power you are generating.)

ETSA were terrific and after five minutes of instruction I knew all there was to know about reading the meter. And, no, there was no off-peak service on the meter—they could tell me that from the programming code it was displaying.

I went back to EIOSA to request another meter reading but this time I asked that I be present for the reading. EIOSA made the request to the retailer and another 20 working days elapsed without contact. By now it was September and I contacted EIOSA to tell them that the mandated time had passed without a response. Within two days ETSA called. They would read the meter the following morning. I took the morning off work and I stood beside the meter reader as he read it. He agreed there was no off-peak service on the meter. He also showed me the records of previous readings, and there was no record of an additional reading. He was emphatic: if the meter had been read, even for a re-reading, it was recorded in that particular record system.

## Try another retailer

At this point I decided to change my electricity and gas to a new retailer. I can certainly understand and forgive a mistake; I find it harder to forgive poor customer service and follow-up and I simply cannot tolerate what appears to have been a blatant lie about the extra reading.

Now that I could see what was wrong, I just had to convey that to the EIOSA. I put it all in writing, scanned all of the bills, recalculated the amounts (no small job) and put everything in the hands of the EIOSA. It was now mid-September and all I could do was sit back and see what happened next.

As it turned out, not much happened at all.

Another incorrect bill was received from the original retailer in September, which I scanned and sent on to EIOSA.

In early October, there was one email from EIOSA saying they were still working on the matter.

Then, late in October, there was a flurry of activity. It started with a call from my original retailer. This was going to be interesting. It was someone from their customer service team. "Is this about the bill?" I asked. No. They were calling me to find out why I had changed retailers.

I made the reasons pretty clear.

Another bill arrived from my original retailer, this one different from the previous ones: it had no covering letter or explanation; just a new amount, greater than the previous bills and overlapping the period of the new retailer. I scanned it and sent it to EIOSA.

The first bill from my new electricity retailer arrived. It had *exactly* the same billing problem as the original retailer, with the feed-in amount entered as an off-peak usage. I scanned it and sent it to EIOSA. (I was getting quite good at scanning and emailing bills by now.)

Finally, at the end of October, I was

contacted by EIOSA. They were pleased to inform me that my original retailer had agreed that the bills were incorrect and they had waived all outstanding amounts owing as a gesture of goodwill. ETSA were also sending me a cheque as a kind of goodwill gesture for their part in the matter. My new retailer would also be sending me an amended bill for the correct amount.

This was terrific news, and it was nice to share it with the ATA in particular. It turns out to have been a slightly premature celebration. Another month went by and then, in early December, the mail arrived; there were three letters in one day, all relating to my electricity service.

Letter one was from my original retailer explaining that they had investigated my billing query, that they agreed with my assessment and that they were waiving all outstanding amounts (about $160) as a gesture of goodwill. I was tempted to send them a bill for my work on the matter, based on my standard hourly rate and see how far that gesture of goodwill really extended.

Letter two was a bill from my original retailer. It ran to about four pages of apparently random numbers each negating the other, except for the final item, which was a total of $1.47 and was listed as 'sundry charges'. The total of the bill was $1.47.

Letter three was from my new retailer stating that *they* had noted and fixed a problem in my billing and here was my new bill. This bill, however, had a completely new set of meter readings on it, totally different from the previous set, although at least they were all in the correct places.

## Finally fixed

Back to EIOSA I went. It took a further week or two, but I got confirmation that the $1.47 could be ignored and that the readings on the second bill from the new retailer were actually correct. (There had been a bit of a mix-up with the readings on the first bill from the new retailer.) So, finally, here I am with my cheque for $50 from ETSA, a pleasant note from my new retailer telling me that my power bill is in credit, and, most importantly, a lesson learned: persistence pays!

It took a year to sort it all out. I don't know how many times I doubted myself and was ready to give in. Throughout, the support and advice from Brad Shone at the ATA was invaluable. Brad regularly sent me encouraging emails with articles on the various retailers getting it wrong and having to refund their clients—a kind of modern day battle cry to rally the weary. The EIOSA were helpful, in their way, hearing me out and advising on the next step, but don't expect them to do all the work: you still have to work it out for yourself and be prepared to stick to your guns.

A final tip: when all else fails, remember what Kermit says: 'It isn't easy being green.' Perhaps he knew something!