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Plan for meters to save peak power

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POWER companies are planning a new generation of remote-controlled electricity meters able to shut down automatically during peak periods and cut bills by up to 25 per cent.

NSW-based supplier Energy Australia has revealed that it will test a new generation of smart meters with 10,000 users in a trial scheduled to begin later this year.

In contrast to the smart meters already in use by Energy Australia customers, the new units will be able to communicate directly with the company's other systems via a range of links, including the powerlines.

Smart meter technology is being installed around the country as suppliers move to change pricing to manage demand, a change needing meters capable of adjusting charges according to the time the power is used.

The changes come as power companies try to reduce peak demand on their networks, hoping to push increasingly power-hungry consumers into using more off-peak power. They also want to stave off the need for new power stations built specifically to deal with peak-period demand, which can remain unused 80 per cent of the time.

Smart meter technology is also being encouraged by governments around the country as part of Council of Australian Governments changes designed to deliver a national retail electricity market.

Victoria announced last week that the use of smart meters would be mandated in the state from 2008. West Australian utility Western Power changed to smart meters for new homes in March. Power companies including Energy Australia and Country Energy have already installed thousands of smart meters.

While the new meters often have the ability to send data back and forth to the power company, the potential remains largely untapped. But with increasing competition pushing power prices down, suppliers are looking for ways to improve the services they offer customers and cut their own operating costs.

In the future, the communications link could see power-hungry home appliances such as air conditioners and pool-filter pumps shut down by remote control during periods of high demand, metering equipment supplier Bayard Group executive director Catherine Zoi said.

The technology is already being used in the US, with customers being paid incentives by utilities to allow them to shut down appliances, she said.

