

# Electric and Magnetic Fields

---

The California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) and the California Department of Health Services (CDHS) have not concluded that exposure to magnetic fields from utility electric facilities is a potential health hazard. Many reports have concluded that the potential for health effects associated with electric and magnetic field (EMF) exposure is too speculative to allow the evaluation of impacts or the preparation of mitigation measures.

EMF is a term used to describe electric and magnetic fields that are created by electric voltage (electric field) and electric current (magnetic field). Power frequency EMF is a natural consequence of electrical circuits, and can be either directly measured using the appropriate measuring instruments or calculated using appropriate information.

## Electric Fields

Electric fields are present whenever voltage exists on a wire, and are not dependent on current. The magnitude of the electric field is primarily a function of the configuration and operating voltage of the line and decreases with the distance from the source (line). The electric field can be shielded (i.e., the strength can be reduced) by any conducting surface, such as trees, fences, walls, buildings, and most types of structures. The strength of an electric field is measured in volts per meter (V/m) or kilovolts per meter (kV/m).

## Magnetic Fields

Magnetic fields are present whenever current flows in a conductor, and are not dependent on the voltage present on the conductor. The strength of these fields also decreases with distance from the source. However, unlike electric fields, most common materials have little shielding effect on magnetic fields.

The magnetic field strength is a function of both the current on the conductor and the design of the system. Magnetic fields are measured in units called Gauss. However, for the low levels normally encountered near power systems, the field strength is expressed in a much smaller unit, the milligauss (mG), which is one thousandth of a Gauss.

Power frequency EMF is present where electricity is used. This includes not only utility transmission lines, distribution lines, and substations, but also the building wiring in homes, offices, and schools, and in the appliances and machinery used in these locations. Typical magnetic fields from these sources can range from below 1 mG to above 1,000 mG (1 Gauss).

Magnetic field strengths diminish with distance. Fields from compact sources (i.e., those containing coils such as small appliances and transformers) decrease in inverse proportion to the distance from the source cubed. For three-phase power lines with balanced currents, the magnetic field strength drops off inversely proportional to the distance from the line squared. Fields from unbalanced currents, which flow in paths such as neutral or ground conductors, fall off inversely proportional to the distance from the source. Conductor spacing and configuration also affect the rate at which the magnetic field strength decreases.

The magnetic field levels of PG&E's overhead and underground transmission lines will vary depending upon customer power usage. Magnetic field strengths for typical PG&E transmission line loadings at the edge of rights-of-way are approximately 10 to 90 mG. Under peak load conditions, the magnetic fields at the edge of the right-of-way would not likely exceed 150 mG. There are no long-term, health-based state or federal government EMF exposure standards. State regulations for magnetic fields have been developed in New York and Florida (150 mG and 200 mG at the edge of the right-of-way). However, these are based on limiting exposure from new facilities to levels no greater than existing facilities.

The strongest magnetic fields around the outside of a substation come from the power lines entering and leaving the station. The strength of the magnetic fields from transformers and other equipment decreases quickly with distance. Beyond the substation fence, the magnetic fields produced by the equipment within the station are typically indistinguishable from background levels.

## Possible Health Effects

The possible effects of EMF on human health have come under scientific scrutiny. Concern about EMF originally focused on electric fields; however, much of the recent research has focused on magnetic fields. Uncertainty exists as to what characteristics of magnetic field exposure need to be considered to assess human exposure effects. Among the characteristics considered are field intensity, transients, harmonics, and changes in intensity over time. These characteristics may vary from power lines to appliances to home wiring, and this may create different types of exposures. The exposure most often considered is intensity or magnitude of the field.

There is a consensus among the medical and scientific communities that there is insufficient evidence to conclude that EMF causes adverse health effects. Neither the medical nor scientific communities have been able to provide any foundation upon which regulatory bodies could establish a standard or level of exposure that is known to be either safe or harmful. Laboratory experiments have shown that magnetic fields can cause biologic changes in living cells, but scientists are not sure whether any risk to human health can be associated with them. Some studies have suggested an association between surrogate measures of magnetic fields and certain cancers while others have not.

# California Public Utilities Commission Decision Summary

## Background

On January 15, 1991, the CPUC initiated an investigation to consider its role in mitigating the health effects, if any, of electric and magnetic fields from utility facilities and power lines. A working group of interested parties, called the California EMF Consensus Group, was created by the CPUC to advise it on this issue. It consisted of 17 stakeholders representing citizens groups, consumer groups, environmental groups, state agencies, unions, and utilities. The Consensus Group was charged to 1) consider a balanced set of facts and concerns; 2) define near-term research objectives; and, 3) develop interim policies and procedures to guide the electric utilities in educating their customers, reducing EMF, and responding to potential health concerns. The Consensus Group's fact-finding process was open to the public, and its report incorporated concerns expressed by the public. Its recommendations were filed with the Commission in March 1992.

## Findings

Based on the work of the Consensus Group, written testimony, and evidentiary hearings, the CPUC issued its decision (93-11-013) on November 2, 1993, to address public concern about possible EMF health effects from electric utility facilities. The conclusions and findings included the following:

We find that the body of scientific evidence continues to evolve. However, it is recognized that public concern and scientific uncertainty remain regarding the potential health effects of EMF exposure.

We do not find it appropriate to adopt any specific numerical standard in association with EMF until we have a firm scientific basis for adopting any particular value.

## Interim Policies

The decision specifically requires:

- No-cost and low-cost steps to reduce EMF. In response to a situation of scientific uncertainty and public concern, the CPUC felt it appropriate for utilities to take no-cost and low-cost measures where feasible to reduce exposure from new or upgraded utility facilities. It directs that no-cost mitigation measures be undertaken, and that low-cost options be implemented through the project certification process. Four percent of total project budgeted cost is the benchmark in developing EMF mitigation guidelines, and mitigation measures should achieve some noticeable reductions.
- Workshops to develop EMF design guidelines. The decision directs the CPUC Advisory and Compliance Division to chair public EMF design guidelines

workshops to incorporate EMF mitigation options and to share information. The utilities are directed to establish written guidelines that incorporate concepts and criteria such as siting new facilities in alternative locations, increasing right-of-way widths, altering line or tower geometry, using higher voltages to reduce current levels, and undergrounding of electric lines.

- Uniform residential and workplace EMF measurement programs. The major utility companies already had implemented EMF measurement programs. However, the CPUC directed them to compare their EMF measurement policies and establish a standard policy. The CPUC confirmed the educational value of providing measurements beyond the point of the utility meter. This includes sources beyond the control of utilities such as appliances, house wiring, and grounding systems.
- Stakeholder and public involvement. The CPUC decision designated the CDHS as the research and education program manager, and asked CDHS to determine the form of stakeholder and public involvement to best meet its needs in developing the program.
- A \$1,489,000, 4-year education program. The utilities should continue to work with CDHS and incorporate EMF educational information developed by CDHS into their EMF education programs. This includes yearly bill inserts subject to review by the CPUC's Public Advisor's Office.
- A \$5,600,000, 4-year nonexperimental and administrative research program. CDHS will develop and administer the 4-year research program specifically related to California electric utility companies' facilities and power lines. Utilities are directed to fund this program and the education programs.
- An authorization for federal experimental research conducted under the National Energy Policy Act of 1992. The CPUC approved utility funding for the federal experimental research program established by the Act.

The CPUC will continue to monitor these issues. If new information develops in the future, the CPUC may amend its decision to reflect new scientific evidence.

## EMF Reduction

In accordance with CPUC Decision 93-11-013, PG&E will incorporate “no cost” and “low cost” magnetic field reduction steps in the proposed transmission and substation facilities. Proposed measures to reduce potential exposure to magnetic fields generated by the proposed facilities will be consistent with PG&E's Transmission and Substation EMF Design Guidelines. The design guidelines include the following measures that may be available to reduce the magnetic field strength levels from electric power facilities:

- Increase distance from conductors and equipment

- Reduce conductor spacing
- Minimize current
- Optimize phase configuration

The final field management plan will be provided to the CPUC for review. It will include the following project information:

- A description of the project (cost, design, length, location, etc.)
- A description of the surrounding land uses using priority criteria classifications
- No-cost options to be implemented
- Priority areas where low-cost measures are to be applied
- Measures considered for magnetic field reduction, percent reduction and cost.
- Conclusion - which options were selected and how areas were treated equivalently or why low cost measures cannot be applied to this project due to cost, percent reduction, equivalence or some other reason.

## Reviews of EMF Studies

Hundreds of EMF studies have been conducted over the last 20 years in the areas of epidemiology, animal research, cellular studies, and exposure assessment. A number of nationally recognized multi-discipline panels have performed comprehensive reviews of the body of scientific knowledge on EMF. These panels' ability to bring experts from a variety of disciplines together to review the research gives their reports recognized credibility. It is standard practice in risk assessment and policymaking to rely on the findings and consensus opinions of these distinguished panels. None of these groups have concluded that EMF causes adverse health effects or that the development of standards were appropriate or would have a scientific basis.

Reports by the National Research Council/National Academy of Sciences (NRC/NAS), American Medical Association (AMA), American Cancer Society (ACS), National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS), and CDHS conclude that insufficient scientific evidence exists to warrant the adoption of specific health-based EMF mitigation measures. The potential for adverse health effects associated with EMF exposure is too speculative to allow the evaluation of impacts or the preparation of mitigation measures.

## National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences

In June of 1999, the federal government completed a \$60-million EMF research program managed by the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS) and the Department of Energy (DOE). Known as the EMF RAPID (Research And Public Information Dissemination) Program. In their report to the U.S. Congress, the NIEHS concluded that:

The NIEHS believes that the probability that ELF-EMF exposure is truly a health hazard is currently small. The weak epidemiological associations

and lack of any laboratory support for these associations provide only marginal, scientific support that exposure to this agent is causing any degree of harm.

The NIEHS report also included the following conclusions:

The National Toxicology Program routinely examines environmental exposures to determine the degree to which they constitute a human cancer risk and produces the 'Report on Carcinogens' listing agents that are 'known human carcinogens' or 'reasonably anticipated to be human carcinogens.' It is our opinion that based on evidence to date, ELF-EMF exposure would not be listed in the 'Report on Carcinogens' as an agent 'reasonably anticipated to be a human carcinogen.' This is based on the limited epidemiological evidence and the findings from the EMF-RAPID Program that did not indicate an effect of ELF-EMF exposure in experimental animals or a mechanistic basis for carcinogenicity.

The NIEHS agrees that the associations reported for childhood leukemia and adult chronic lymphocytic leukemia cannot be dismissed easily as random or negative findings. The lack of positive findings in animals or in mechanistic studies weakens the belief that this association is actually due to ELF-EMF, but cannot completely discount the finding. The NIEHS also agrees with the conclusion that no other cancers or non-cancer health outcomes provide sufficient evidence of a risk to warrant concern.

Epidemiological studies have serious limitations in their ability to demonstrate a cause and effect relationship whereas laboratory studies, by design, can clearly show that cause and effect are possible. Virtually all of the laboratory evidence in animals and humans and most of the mechanistic work done in cells fail to support a causal relationship between exposure to ELF-EMF at environmental levels and changes in biological function or disease status. The lack of consistent, positive findings in animal or mechanistic studies weakens the belief that this association is actually due to ELF-EMF, but it cannot completely discount the epidemiological findings.

The NIEHS suggests that the level and strength of evidence supporting ELF-EMF exposure as a human health hazard are insufficient to warrant aggressive regulatory actions; thus, we do not recommend actions such as stringent standards on electric appliances and a national program to bury all transmission and distribution lines. Instead, the evidence suggests passive measures such as a continued emphasis on educating both the public and the regulated community on means aimed at reducing exposures. NIEHS suggests that the power industry continue its current practice of siting power lines to reduce exposures and continue to explore

ways to reduce the creation of magnetic fields around transmission and distribution lines without creating new hazards. We also encourage technologies that lower exposures from neighborhood distribution lines provided that they do not increase other risks, such as those from accidental electrocution or fire.

## **U.S. National Research Council/ National Academy of Sciences**

In May 1999, the National Research Council/ National Academy of Sciences, an independent scientific agency responsible for advising the federal government on science, technology, and medicine, released its evaluation of the scientific and technical content of research projects conducted under the U.S. EMF RAPID Program, concluding that:

The results of the EMF-RAPID program do not support the contention that the use of electricity poses a major unrecognized public-health danger. Basic research on the effects of power-frequency magnetic fields on cells and animals should continue, but a special research-funding effort is not required. Investigators should compete for funding through traditional research-funding mechanisms. If future research on this subject is funded through such mechanisms, it should be limited to tests of well-defined mechanistic hypotheses or replications of reported positive effects. If carefully performed, such experiments will have value even if their results are negative. Special efforts should be made to communicate the conclusions of this effort to the general public effectively.

The following specific recommendations are made by the committee:

1. The committee recommends that no further special research program focused on possible health effects of power-frequency magnetic fields be funded. Basic research on the effects of power-frequency magnetic fields on cells and animals should continue but investigators should compete for funding through traditional research funding mechanisms.
2. If, however, Congress determines that another time-limited, focused research program on the health effects of power-frequency magnetic fields is warranted, the committee recommends that emphasis be placed on replications of studies that have yielded scientifically promising claims of effects and that have been reported in peer-reviewed journals. Such a program would benefit from the use of a contract-funding mechanism with a requirement for complete reports and/or peer-reviewed publications at program's end.
3. The engineering studies were initiated without the guidance of a clearly established biologic effect. The committee recommends that no further engineering studies be funded unless a biologic effect that can be used to plan the engineering studies has been determined.

4. Much of the information from the EMF-RAPID biology program has not been published in peer-reviewed journals. NIEHS should collect all future peer-reviewed information resulting from the EMF-RAPID biology projects and publish a summary report of such information periodically on the NIEHS Web site.
5. The communication effort initiated by EMF-RAPID is reasonable. The two booklets and the telephone information line are useful, as is the EMF-RAPID Internet site. There are two limitations to the effort. First, it is largely passive, responding to inquiries and providing information, rather than being active. Second, much of the information produced is in a scientific format not readily understandable by the public. The committee recommends that further material produced to disseminate information on power-frequency magnetic fields be written for the general public in a clear fashion. The Web site should be made more user-friendly. The booklet *Questions and Answers about EMF* should be updated periodically and made available to the public.

### American Cancer Society

In the journal, *A Cancer Journal for Clinicians*, the American Cancer Society (ACS) reviewed EMF residential and occupational epidemiologic research in an article written by Dr. Clark W. Heath, Jr., ACS's vice president of epidemiology and surveillance research. Dr. Heath reviews 13 residential epidemiologic studies of adult and childhood cancer. Dr. Heath wrote:

Evidence suggesting that exposure to EMF may or may not promote human carcinogenesis is mostly based on...epidemiologic observations.... While those observations may suggest such a relationship for leukemia and brain cancer in particular, the findings are weak, inconsistent, and inconclusive.... The weakness and inconsistent nature of epidemiologic data, combined with the continued dearth of coherent and reproducible findings from experimental laboratory research, leave one uncertain and rather doubtful that any real biologic link exists between EMF exposure and carcinogenicity.

### American Medical Association

The AMA adopted recommendations of its Council on Scientific Affairs (CSA) regarding EMF health effects. The report was prepared as a result of a resolution passed by AMA's membership at its 1993 annual meeting. The following recommendations are based on the CSA's review of EMF epidemiologic and laboratory studies to date, as well as on several major literature reviews:

- Although no scientifically documented health risk has been associated with the usually occurring levels of electromagnetic fields, the AMA should continue to monitor developments and issues related to the subject.



- The AMA should encourage research efforts sponsored by agencies such as the National Institutes of Health, the U.S. Department of Energy, and the National Science Foundation. Continuing research should include study of exposures to EMF and its effects, average public exposures, occupational exposures, and the effects of field surges and harmonics.
- The AMA should support the meeting of an authoritative, multidisciplinary committee under the auspices of the National Academy of Sciences or the National Council on Radiation Protection and Measurements to make recommendations about exposure levels of the public and workers to EMF and radiation.

## California Department of Health Services

In its report entitled, *Electric and Magnetic Fields: Measurements and Possible Effects on Human Health*, the CDHS discusses biological effects from magnetic fields and states that they have not been able to set a “safe” or “dangerous” level of magnetic field exposure from available scientific information. The CDHS explains why at this time it is inappropriate to try to set levels:

Laboratory experiments have shown that magnetic fields can cause biologic changes in living cells, but we are not sure whether there is any risk to human health associated with them.

A number of research studies are now under way to determine with greater certainty if magnetic fields do indeed pose any health risk and, if so, what aspect of the field is harmful. At this time, for example, no one knows the relative importance of average long-term exposure, exposure to sudden high intensities, exposure to different frequencies, or various combinations of all these with other factors. Stronger fields may not always pose a greater risk than weaker fields, and we do not have enough information to say that more is worse.

An EMF research and information program has been established as a result of the 1993 decision by CPUC. This 4-year EMF research and education program is managed by CDHS and funded by the utility ratepayers. The purpose of the program is to perform research and policy analysis and provide education and technical assistance to benefit Californians.

Input to CDHS is provided by a Stakeholders Advisory Consultant Group, which consists of representatives from the public, consumer groups, health and scientific experts, and labor and utility representatives. Additional input can be provided by state agencies, consultants, and special interests groups during the open forum discussion periods at Stakeholder Advisory Consultant meetings. These meetings are open to the general public. The program is expected to be completed sometime in 1999.

## References

American Cancer Society. 1996. "Electromagnetic Field Exposure and Cancer: a Review of Epidemiologic Evidence." *A Cancer Journal for Clinicians*, the American Cancer Society. January/February.

American Medical Association. 1994. *Effects of Electric and Magnetic Fields*. Report of the Council on Scientific Affairs to the American Medical Association. December.

California Department of Health Services. 1992. *Electric and Magnetic Fields: Measurements and Possible Effects on Human Health*. December.

California Public Utilities Commission. 1993. Order instituting investigation on the Commission's own motion to develop policies and procedures for addressing the potential health effects of electric and magnetic fields of utility facilities. Decision 93-11-013. November 2.

National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, National Institutes of Health. 1999. *NIEHS Report on Health Effects from Exposure to Power-Line Frequency Electric and Magnetic Fields. Prepared in Response to the 1992 Energy Policy Act*. June

National Research Council/ National Academy of Sciences. 1999. *Research on Power-Frequency Fields Completed Under the Energy Policy Act of 1992 [Final Report, 1999]*. May.

Pacific Gas & Electric Company. 1994. *Substation EMF Design Guidelines*. May 19.

Pacific Gas & Electric Company. 1994. *Transmission Line EMF Design Guidelines*. May 20.