

# ENSTAR Natural Gas

Itron Technology Facilitates Decades of Efficiency Gains

## OVERVIEW

ENSTAR Natural Gas Company, headquartered in Anchorage, Alaska, is a regulated public utility serving 137,000 customers—more than 57 percent of the population of Alaska, across a rugged service territory known for harsh winter weather conditions.

## OPPORTUNITY

Prior to exploring automation in the mid-90s, ENSTAR had struggled to find an efficient way to obtain meter readings for meters behind gates equipped with locks that were often frozen many months of the year. Combined with day-to-day accessibility hazards such as extreme weather conditions, unfriendly dogs and a large service territory, ENSTAR was in search of a way to read meters more efficiently while enhancing the safety of field personnel.

## SOLUTION

In 1996, ENSTAR began deploying Itron communication modules and handheld meter reading technology in key areas of its service territory. Initially, ENSTAR offered customers the option to pay a one-time fee of \$100 for ENSTAR to read the customer's meter without having to set foot on the customer premise. Upwards of 8,000 ENSTAR customers took advantage of this program to improve their customer experience and help finance the project. Over the years, if a customer had a gate that froze or a dog who posed a threat to field personnel, ENSTAR would equip the customer's meter with a communication module and begin collecting monthly reads remotely.

In the years that followed, ENSTAR began utilizing Itron's mobile collection system for drive-by data collection, realizing even greater operational efficiencies, including time and personnel savings, fuel cost savings and most importantly enhanced safety for field personnel due to not having to leave the vehicle to obtain meter reads.

In 2000, ENSTAR conducted a system wide installation, deploying an additional 90,000 communication modules over the course of the summer, bringing automation to their entire service territory. Since this time, ENSTAR has been able to fully automate meter reading, leaving remaining field personnel to focus on special projects including move-in and move-out readings.



## CUSTOMER

» ENSTAR Natural Gas

## SERVICE TERRITORY

» 137,000 residential, commercial and industrial customers in and around the Anchorage and Cook Inlet area

## TECHNOLOGY

» ChoiceConnect™ Mobile

“80 percent reduction  
in field personnel”



“Itron’s service is superb. Any time we’ve had issues, Itron has been available to answer questions and has even sent up a technical team to correct issues. Itron has always done a great job with support.”

### **BENEFITS**

In addition to eliminating meter accessibility issues, ENSTAR was able to realize an 80 percent reduction in field personnel. Additionally, operational savings have compounded over the years, due in part to the fewer trips necessary to gather monthly reads and the associated fuel charges, insurance costs and drive time.

Prior to utilizing Itron technology, ENSTAR had estimated customer bills each month. An added benefit from automation has been realized in the customer service department. Customer service representatives have happier customers now that they understand bills are based on actual reads versus estimation.

### **WHAT’S NEXT?**

In the next few years, ENSTAR plans to continue their adoption of new technology to enhance operational efficiencies and the safety of field personnel as well as customers, by replacing expiring communication modules with the latest Itron technology. As part of this upgrade, ENSTAR is planning to deploy Itron’s advanced metering infrastructure solution, in its populous Anchorage territory. Over the past year the utility has piloted Itron’s ChoiceConnect Network, exploring potential gains in the areas of system integrity, with options to deploy cathodic protection, methane sensing and other devices across its service territory. In addition the utility has explored leveraging Itron Analytics to pull data from communication modules and system integrity devices straight to the back office where operations staff and customer service agents can be alerted of potential hazards or abnormalities across the system before they become problematic.



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