



## this issue

From the Public Counsel P.1

Regulatory News P.2

Energy Efficiency P.5

OPUC Calendar P.6

## Did You Know?

Compact fluorescent light bulbs (CFLs) can save you \$30 per bulb over the lifetime of each bulb. The average home has 45 light bulbs.

That's a potential savings of \$1,350!

Have a utility complaint or question?

Call OPUC toll-free at:  
1-877-782-8477

or e-mail us at:  
customer@opc.state.tx.us

## From the Public Counsel

Last winter, I visited the Public Utility Commission's (PUC) website, [www.powertochoose.org](http://www.powertochoose.org), to shop for a new retail electric provider (REP). I did my research and found one that satisfied my family's requirements—a fixed, 12-month, 100 percent renewable energy product for an 11 cent per kilowatt-hour (kWh) rate. Then, I received my first bill from my new REP.

There was an added monthly charge on my bill, amusingly titled "Your Low Monthly Fee\*/Minimum Usage Fee," of \$4.99 with an asterisk next to the fee. I did not recall reading about this fee when I originally researched and signed up with the REP. This minimum usage fee, along with my energy charges, smart meter cost recovery factor, energy efficiency cost recovery factor, and public utility assessment averaged together, brought my seemingly low-at-the-time 11 cent per kWh average rate up to 13.1 cents per kWh one month and 12.8 cents per kWh the following month, according to my bill.

Sure enough, after reviewing both my REP's Terms of Service and my Electricity Facts Label (also linked on the PowertoChoose [website](#) and my REP's website), it states on pages 1 and 6 of the 14-page contract respectively, "For ESI-IDs with energy consumption values less than or equal to 499 kWh per billing period, a Minimum Usage Fee of \$4.99 per ESI-ID shall apply" and "A charge of \$4.99 will be assessed for any billing period where usage is less than 499 kWh."



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## *From the Public Counsel*

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Somehow, I had apparently skimmed over these provisions, and having only used approximately 350 to 450 kWh each month, for two months, I was now being charged the extra fee. Since discovering my usage fee, I have reviewed other REPs' bills and found that some charge as much as \$9.99 a month for a minimum usage fee and may require usage of over 1,000 kWh to avoid the fee.

Of course, with the warm summer months we experienced, and my air conditioner running in overdrive, my usage tipped over the 499 kWh, and "my low monthly fee" disappeared. My rate is now back to the 11 cents per kWh that I signed up for initially, but I'm sure the fee will reappear this fall as the weather cools and I start to shop for a new REP.

So, customers—be aware, be savvy, and always read the fine print of your terms of service. Or, call your REP, before signing up for service, to determine if there are additional charges. Oh, and by the way, that great 11 cent per kWh I signed up for back in January is now lower at 9.7 cents per kWh, so shop now and shop often to compare REP prices.

- **Sheri Givens**  
Public Counsel

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## *Regulatory News*

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### **Sunset Commission Staff Report**

Sunset is the regular assessment of the continuing need for a state agency to exist, and the Sunset Advisory Commission is a 12-member body appointed by the Lieutenant Governor and Speaker of the House of Representatives. In July, the Commission approved the Sunset Staff's recommendation to continue OPUC for an additional 12 years. In November, the Sunset Staff recommended continuing the Public Utility Commission, which regulates electric and telecommunications utilities in the state, for an additional 12 years and recommended adding gas and water/wastewater ratemaking to the PUC's regulatory authority. Hearings related to these most recent Sunset Staff recommendations will be held by the Commission on December 15-16, 2010.

For more information on how to shop for a retail electric provider, logon to [www.powertochoose.org](http://www.powertochoose.org) or contact the Texas Electric Choice Answer Center:

Phone: Toll-free 1-866-PWR-4-TEX (1-866-797-4839)

TTY: Toll-free 7-1-1

Email: [info@powertochoose.org](mailto:info@powertochoose.org)

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# Regulatory News

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## **Smart Meter Update**

The PUC's independent review of advanced meters (smart meters) was published in August. Navigant Consulting, the independent tester chosen by the PUC, tested 5,627 advanced meters in use by Oncor Electric Delivery, CenterPoint Energy, and AEP Texas.

Out of the total meters tested for accuracy, 2,400 were new meters (meters not yet deployed in the field); 2,706 were deployed meters (meters that had been deployed in the field and were removed for lab testing); and 521 were meters in the field (meters that had been deployed and were tested onsite with portable testing equipment).

Based on the accuracy results, 5,625 of the 5,627 (99.6%) meters tested to be accurate. Navigant went on to conduct other tests on both smart meters and the older electromechanical meters.

Upon conclusion of its study, Navigant reported to the PUC that "the vast majority of advanced meters currently installed by Oncor, CenterPoint, and AEP Texas are accurately measuring and recording electric usage as well as communicating that information through the respective advance metering systems for use in customer billing."

See the full report at:

[http://www.puc.state.tx.us/electric/reports/ams/PUC-CT-Final-Report\\_073010.pdf](http://www.puc.state.tx.us/electric/reports/ams/PUC-CT-Final-Report_073010.pdf).

For questions regarding your smart meter, you should contact your retail electric provider (REP), visit your utility's website, or call the utility's customer service number:

- Oncor:  
[www.oncor.com/tech\\_reliable/smarttexas/](http://www.oncor.com/tech_reliable/smarttexas/)  
or 1-800-518-2380.
- CenterPoint:  
[www.centerpointenergy.com/services/electricity/residential/smartmeters/imagine](http://www.centerpointenergy.com/services/electricity/residential/smartmeters/imagine)  
or 1-800-332-7143.
- AEP Texas:  
[www.aeptexas.com/save/SmartMeters/](http://www.aeptexas.com/save/SmartMeters/)  
or 1-877-373-4858.

## **Smart Meter Texas Web Portal**

The Smart Meter Texas Web Portal, a consumer website that allows electric customers to monitor and manage their energy usage, is fully operational. Customers with smart meters in the Oncor, CenterPoint, and AEP Texas service areas can access the portal and view their daily energy usage on a day-after basis. The portal is located at [www.smartmetertexas.com](http://www.smartmetertexas.com).

It may take up to 60-days after installation of your smart meter to actually access your information, so please continue to check the website. It is easy to register, and you will need your ESI ID and meter number, both of which are available on your REP electric bill, or by calling your REP.

## **ERCOT and Nodal**

On December 1, a new wholesale electric market launched in Texas.

Before December 1, Texas was divided into four zones, or a zonal market design ([ERCOT Zonal Map](#)). In the zonal market, congestion costs are directly assigned to zones and shared by participants in those zones. There is zonal congestion and local congestion, and both require participants to share the costs of maintaining the electricity on the grid while dealing with the challenges of congestion. The nodal market design was created to lower these costs, which in turn will lower costs for consumers.

It has been estimated that the nodal market design ([ERCOT Nodal Map](#)) will save consumers approximately \$5.6 billion over the first 10 years of operation (CRA International, Update on the ERCOT Nodal Market Cost Benefit Analysis, Dec. 18, 2008, PUC Project No. 31600). It is believed that more transparent electricity pricing will result in new generation and transmission investment throughout the state in desirable locations.

For additional information on nodal, go to [www.nodal.ercot.com](http://www.nodal.ercot.com).

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# Regulatory News

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## **Customer Protection**

### **New Rules on Payment Plans**

The Public Utility Commission has changed the rules on levelized, average, and deferred payment plans. The major change is that customers who enter into one of these plans cannot switch to a new retail electric provider (REP) until they have a zero balance with their REP.

This new restriction is called a “switch hold.” It differs from the old rule, where customers were allowed to switch REPs while still owing a balance to their current or former REP.

Customers should note that if a switch hold is placed on their account and their service is disconnected, the customer will have to pay the past due balance before service can be restored. [More](#)

### **IMPORTANT:**

- Guidelines stating which customers can enter into a payment plan and when become effective January 1, 2011.
- The switch hold requirement goes into effect on June 1, 2011.

### **New Rules on Critical Care Status Effective January 1, 2011**

The Public Utility Commission (PUC) has changed the rules on critical care status and disconnections. The PUC also added a status type separate from critical care, called chronic care. Some customers who had critical care status under the old rule will be reclassified as chronic care customers.

Effective January 1, 2011 critical care status is only for customers who need electricity because they are on life support equipment. Once granted, this status is good for two years and will protect against disconnection if certain steps are taken by the customer.

Chronic care status does not protect against disconnection for non-pay and is for the following customers:

- Customers who have a serious medical condition and need electricity for air conditioning or heating to prevent them from becoming more ill.
- Customers that need electricity for medical equipment to prevent them from becoming more ill. [More](#)

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# Energy Efficiency

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## **Texas Appliance Rebate Program**

This winter, the state comptroller is offering an appliance rebate program. The goal of the program is to promote awareness of ENERGY STAR appliances and decrease energy consumption by encouraging appliance replacement. A similar program was offered in April. For more information, please visit [www.texaspowerfulsmart.org](http://www.texaspowerfulsmart.org) or call 1-888-334-4112.

ENERGY STAR products meet efficiency guidelines that, in some instances, can save hundreds of dollars per year in energy costs. According to the energy department and the Environmental Protection Agency, products earn the ENERGY STAR label if they reduce greenhouse gas emissions by increasing energy efficiency and save consumers money without sacrificing performance, features, and comfort.

The ENERGY STAR website, [www.energystar.gov](http://www.energystar.gov), includes key criteria and program requirements for various products that will qualify them as efficient ENERGY STAR models.

Products that earn this label, on average, will save 10-25 percent more energy than those that do not earn the label. With the average electric and natural gas bills for Texans nearing \$93 and \$15 per month respectively, replacing worn-out products with ENERGY STAR-rated alternatives can help reduce energy bills and save money.

An ENERGY STAR clothes washer can save about \$135 annually on utility bills compared to a regular washer; replacing an old refrigerator from the 1980s with a new ENERGY STAR-rated model can save \$100 per year on utility bills; and one of the biggest savers, compact fluorescent light bulbs, can save consumers \$30 per bulb over the lifetime of the bulb. And with the average home packed with 45 light bulbs, changing a light bulb is among the most economical ways to save money on energy.

## **Federal Tax Credits for Consumer Energy Efficiency**

If you purchase an energy-efficient product or renewable energy system for your home, you may be eligible for a federal tax credit. This tax opportunity expires December 31, 2010. For [more](#) information, go to [www.energystar.gov](http://www.energystar.gov).

## **Utility Energy Efficiency Programs**

Texas utility companies offer numerous energy efficiency programs to residential customers. For more information, you may contact Oncor at 1-866-728-3674; CenterPoint at 1-800-332-7143; or AEP at 1-877-373-4858.

## **Winter Quick Tips**

- Open your curtains and blinds during the day. The sun will naturally warm your home, and it's free! Close them later in the day, as the sun sets, to keep the cold air out. Each degree you lower your thermostat can save up to 8 percent on your energy bills.
- Service your heating system once a year, and replace furnace filters monthly. It will help the unit run more efficiently, keep you warm, and save you money.
- Ceiling fans aren't just for keeping you cool in the summer. They can help to keep you comfortable in the fall and winter too. Most ceiling fans have a reverse switch on them that will allow you to change the direction of the blades so warm air is pushed down into the room. Fans should turn clockwise in the winter to ensure a warmer home.
- Recycle those extra, old fridges and freezers running day and night in the garage. Those can cost you about \$150 a year and aren't used very much.

# OPUC Calendar

## OPUC Community Outreach

Between June and December, OPUC visited Temple, Waco, Dallas, Houston, Killeen, and Denison, presenting to social service organizations, neighborhood groups, Rotary Clubs, legislative constituencies, and at town hall meetings. Topics covered include energy assistance, weatherization, retail electric choice, smart meters, and savings tips.

## **Need A Speaker?**

OPUC travels the state, reaching out to inform Texas electric and telephone customers about the issues affecting them.

If you represent an organization and would like OPUC to come speak to your group, please contact our office at 1-877-839-0363 or send an e-mail to [customer@opc.state.tx.us](mailto:customer@opc.state.tx.us) with your organization's name, phone number, and person we may contact with questions.

## Looking Ahead

January 11<sup>th</sup> marks the first day of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Legislative Session convening at the State Capitol in Austin, Texas. Already, numerous bills have been pre-filed, beginning November 8<sup>th</sup>, by members of the Texas House of Representatives and Senate that will affect you as a residential or small business electric customer. For 140 days, lawmakers will meet to discuss issues affecting all Texans. The last day of session is May 30, 2011.

OPUC is actively following these bills and will be present to testify as a resource witness on such legislation, keeping you informed of those bills that are signed into law and affect you.

### Legislative Dates of Interest

#### **Monday, November 8, 2010**

Pre-filing of legislation for the 82<sup>nd</sup> Legislature began.

#### ***Session Begins***

Tuesday, January 11, 2011 (1<sup>st</sup> day)

#### **Monday, May 30, 2011 (140<sup>th</sup> day)**

Last day of 82<sup>nd</sup> Regular Session; corrections only in house and senate.

#### ***Session Ends***

**Sunday, June 19, 2011** (20<sup>th</sup> day following final adjournment)

Last day governor can sign or veto bills passed during the regular session.

**Monday, August 29, 2011** (91<sup>st</sup> day following final adjournment)

Date that bills without specific effective dates (that could not be effective immediately) become law.

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