



Media Release

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OREGON PUC APPROVES FRAMEWORK TO PROTECT UTILITY CUSTOMERS IMPACTED BY COVID-19

SALEM, Ore. – The Oregon Public Utility Commission (PUC) has conducted an investigation and approved a framework designed to protect residential and small commercial utility customers by ensuring continued access to essential services during COVID-19 and in the aftermath of the pandemic.

“During the pandemic, Oregonians have found themselves more reliant on their utility services as they now stay at home to combat the pandemic, stay home to work where possible, and even educate their children at home,” said Mark Thompson, PUC Commissioner. “This increased reliance on utility services also comes at a time where many customers’ ability to pay for these services has diminished due to the economic impacts COVID-19 has had on so many in our communities.”

In June 2020, the PUC held a public meeting to hear from the regulated investor-owned utilities, as well as customer groups and interested stakeholders on the impacts of COVID-19 and actions taken by utilities to protect customers. Even prior to this time, investor-owned utilities proactively suspended disconnections of residential and non-residential accounts, stopped issuing late and final notices, suspended assessing late fees, and offered more flexible payment options for their customers in recognition of the hardships caused by the pandemic, and the importance of utility services.

“In addition to confirming the actions taken by the utilities, the Commission also wanted to further investigate the impacts of the pandemic on customers, and further evaluate additional and future actions to protect utility customers, especially low income and vulnerable populations, during and after the pandemic,” added Commissioner Thompson.

As part of the investigation, the PUC engaged participants in a dynamic and inclusive public process, which provided invaluable feedback, collaboration, and compromise from stakeholders representing utility and customer interests across Oregon. The results of these discussions were separate agreements, which had broad support from the participants in the investigation, for energy, telecommunications, and water utilities that would benefit utility customers through a variety of measures. These included establishing terms on service disconnections, reconnections, time payment arrangements, waiver of fees related to late payments, provisions to protect customers’ credit, self-certification of medical certificates, and work on programs that can assist people in donating funds to help neighbors unable to pay their bills, among others. The agreement for energy utilities also includes a condition concerning arrearage management plans to assist residential customers with outstanding balances.

The terms of the agreements are being finalized by PUC Staff and regulated energy, water, and telecommunications service providers, including: Portland General Electric, NW Natural Gas, Pacific Power, Avista, Idaho Power, Cascade Natural Gas, Avion Water, Oregon Water Utilities, NW Natural Water, Oregon Telecommunications Association, Lumen (formerly CenturyLink), and Ziply Fiber (formerly Frontier); as well as numerous stakeholders including Citizens' Utility Board, Community Action Partners of Oregon, Verde, Northwest Energy Coalition, and Multnomah County Office of Sustainability, among others.

"We value stakeholders' active participation in this process and willingness to compromise and work together to develop agreements that benefit utility customers, especially as Oregonians are still dealing with the effects of the pandemic and now the wildfires that have impacted so many in our state," added Commissioner Thompson. We also recognize the need to further examine systemic problems that low-income and vulnerable populations face with high energy burden on an ongoing basis, which were explored in our investigation. The Commission is committed to taking this challenge on."

Staff Counsel will develop stipulations based on the tentative agreements. These stipulations will be brought back to the Commission for final approval at a later date.

For additional information, view the [PUC's COVID-19 Aftermath Report](#) with details on the agreements for energy, telecommunications and water utilities.

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The Oregon Public Utility Commission (PUC) regulates customer rates and services of the state's investor-owned electric, natural gas and telephone utilities, as well as select water companies. The PUC's mission is to ensure Oregon utility customers have access to safe, reliable, and high quality utility services at just and reasonable rates, which is accomplished through thorough analysis and independent decision-making conducted in an open and fair process.