
December 10, 2009 – *For Immediate Release*

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PSC Investigation Nets Montanans More than \$80,000

Many Montana companies are receiving refund checks this week from a Delaware company for unauthorized “crammed” charges on their phone bills. The Montana Public Service Commission (PSC) began investigating Basic Access Communications, Inc. after receiving several complaints from Montanans about a mysterious \$7.99 “conference call” charge appearing on their phone bills. The PSC has uncovered more than \$80,000 in these illegal charges, which the company had agreed to refund, and there could be more.

“This is a classic cramming scheme that easily could have gone unanswered if not for vigilant Montanans closely watching charges on their bill,” observed PSC Chair Greg Jergeson of Chinook. “I am extremely proud of the work of the PSC staff on this issue and that we are able to get this money back where it belongs. I cannot stress the lesson here strongly enough, closely monitor your phone bill and if an item appears out of place, give us a call and we will look into it for you.”

The investigation revealed that the charges appeared from November 2007 – March 2008 on some Qwest customer phone bills. To ensure that the situation is not more wide-spread, the PSC is asking the public to double-check their Qwest billing statements for a “conference call” charge. Contact the PSC toll free at 1-800-646-6150 if you feel you have any unauthorized charges. While the charges appear on Qwest bills, that company is not implicated in any way in the cramming investigation. Basic Access Communications, Inc. has refunded the \$80,000 in either credit on phone bills or payment via checks directly to the customer.

Made up of 5 elected commissioners, the PSC works to ensure that Montanans receive safe and reliable service from regulated public utilities while paying reasonable rates. Utilities regulated by the PSC generally include private investor-owned natural gas, electric, telephone, water, and sewer companies. In addition, the PSC regulates certain motor carriers, and oversees natural gas pipeline safety and intrastate railroad safety.

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