

For Immediate Release

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PSC Chairman Johnson urges utility customers to prepare for higher heating bills

Helena, Mont. – As colder temperatures set in across the state, Montana Public Service Commission Chairman Brad Johnson urges utility customers to prepare for higher heating bills this winter.

“It’s no secret that it takes significantly more energy to heat and light your home when it’s colder and darker outside, but the difference can be surprising,” said Chairman Brad Johnson, R-East Helena. “A lot of customers see a high bill in January and they automatically assume rates went up when what’s really happened is their energy usage has increased dramatically.”

According to data published by U.S Department of Energy, average U.S household expenditures for all major home heating fuels are expected to rise this winter. The largest driving factor behind the possible increase is weather with Montana expected to experience a colder and wetter winter than last year.

Customers of NorthWestern Energy, Montana’s largest utility, have seen electric bills increase in recent years, with a typical residential bill rising from about \$83 per month in December 2012 to about \$89 per month in December 2017.

But natural gas customers have benefited from dropping supply prices. In December 2012, a typical residential NorthWestern customer paid about \$83 per month. In December, that same customer paid about \$74.50

Higher energy expenditures could put a squeeze on household budgets, leaving some customers wondering how they’re going to pay their bill. Johnson urges anyone who is concerned about their ability to afford their heating bills to contact their utility about payment options.

“We have very knowledgeable customer-care employees available via phone or in person at our local walk-in offices ready to help customers who may need a little extra time to pay their bill or who may be eligible for energy assistance,” said Bobbi Schroepel, NorthWestern Energy’s Vice President, Customer Care. “The sooner customers contact us, the more options we have available to help them get through the winter when utility bills are higher.”

Johnson also recommends that customers look into what forms of assistance are available through local non-profits or community agencies.

“No family should choose between heating their home and life’s other basic necessities. I urge anyone struggling with higher utility bills this winter to call 2-1-1 to learn what resources are available in your community,” he said.

The good news is that higher utility bills are primarily due to increased energy usage, a factor customers can control. Johnson recommends that customers take the following steps to reduce their energy consumption during the cold winter months:

- Set the thermostat at 68 degrees
- Add caulk or weather stripping to seal air leaks around doors and windows
- Turn down water heater to warm (120 degrees) and install a water-heater insulation blanket
- Inspect furnace filter and clean or replace if dirty
- Install compact fluorescent or LED light bulbs in areas of frequent use

Certain energy efficient upgrades may be eligible for rebates through the utility. Additionally, if they haven’t done so already, customers should consider calling their utility to find out if they are eligible for a free home energy audit.

For more energy savings tips view the *Montana Energy Savers Guidebook* published by the Department of Environmental Quality:

https://deq.mt.gov/Portals/112/Energy/EnergizeMT/Conservation/MTESG_032316_print.pdf

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