

Bend Residents to Pay More: Natural Gas Rates Increase 7.9%

by Bend Weekly News Sources

Bend residents will pay more for natural gas beginning November 1, but the rate increase is less than previously expected, the Oregon Public Utility Commission (OPUC) announced Wednesday. The rate hike is in the single digit range in comparison to the previous two years in which some customers experienced double digit increases. Rates will increase 7.9% for residential customers, and from 9.0% to 9.4% for commercial and industrial accounts. The new rates for Cascade Natural Gas take effect November 1 to reflect the higher commodity cost of natural gas compared with a year ago. The companies make no additional profit from these rate adjustments, said the OPUC news release. "The silver lining here is the rate increase is less than the company predicted to us back in mid-July and are not nearly as high as we experienced the last two years," Commission Chairman Lee Beyer said. "The lower prices are due to a combination of factors which include reduced demand, no major hurricanes to disrupt supply, and increased domestic production."

With these changes, the monthly bill for a typical Cascade Natural Gas residential customer using 62 therms per month will increase \$5.73, or 7.9%, from \$72.34 or \$78.07. In January, a typical residential customer who uses 117 therms would result in a billing increase from \$133.84 to \$144.67. The change for commercial and industrial customers will range from 9.0% to 9.4%.

The Commission adjusts the company's rate once a year to reflect the actual cost of the wholesale price of natural gas. The mechanism allows natural gas companies to pass through their actual cost of purchasing gas, without any mark-up. The adjustment also accounts for differences from the purchased cost of gas in the previous year with actual costs. Customers are encouraged to explore the following measures to reduce how much gas they use:

Contacting your gas company to set up an equal payment plan to spread high winter bills over a 12-month period.

Turning your thermostat down can save up to 3% for each degree of reduction. A programmable thermostat that automatically reduces heat at night or while the house is unoccupied can lower heating bills by 5 to 10%.

Asking for an energy audit by the utility that provides your heating. Utilities are required to provide free energy audits. They also provide incentives such as rebates or loans available to customers.

Sealing gaps, leaks and small holes in ductwork account for as much as 25 percent of home heating loss. You can get a tax credit of up to \$250 for a well-designed and sealed duct system in your new home or for sealing existing ductwork. Contractors doing the work must be certified by the Oregon Department of Energy, so call 1-800-221-8035.

Updating low-efficiency furnaces and water heaters with higher-efficiency models. All three Oregon natural gas companies offer a rebate for doing so. Premium efficiency furnaces can also qualify for a state tax credit from the Oregon Department of Energy. Check qualifying equipment at www.oregon.gov/energy.

Fully insulating your residence generally results in up to 30% savings on a heating bill.

Clean or change the furnace filter once a month during the heating season.

Bill payment assistance information is available from all gas utilities.

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