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## Georgia Public Service Commission

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For immediate release

Consumer Advisory

4-10

### **PSC Urges Consumers to Prepare for Winter Heating Season; *Energy Prices Forecast to Remain Stable This Winter***

ATLANTA, October 6, 2010 – Consumers should begin preparing now for the upcoming winter heating season. The Georgia Public Service Commission says it is time to take steps to ensure your heating system is ready, check into current natural gas plans and make sure you know your rights and responsibilities when it comes to paying those winter heating bills.

The Commission urges consumers to look into budget billing plans and compare marketer pricing options. Consumers who might qualify for heating assistance programs such as the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) should begin preparing now for the application process which opens November 1, 2010 to the elderly and homebound and December 1, 2010 for other applicants.

The Commission anticipates that natural gas costs for the average residential natural gas customer this winter heating season will be about the same as last year. It's important to note, however, that this forecast is based on normal winter weather. As is always the case, weather has the potential to play a big role in what actually ends up happening because it can drive natural gas costs and your winter heating costs up or down. A colder than normal winter means your furnace will be running more and you'll be using more natural gas. However, a milder than normal winter means your furnace probably won't be running as much and you'll actually use less natural gas.

The Commission does not regulate the price of natural gas. Natural gas marketers in the Atlanta Gas Light delivery area which serves 1.5 million customers are allowed to set prices according to market conditions. Natural gas prices charged by marketers can change on a monthly basis. Atmos Energy, which serves customers in Columbus and Gainesville, is allowed to recover the cost of natural gas on a dollar for dollar basis.

Remember, a number of factors can influence wholesale natural gas prices:

- Disruptions to natural gas production caused by hurricanes.
- Amount of natural gas in storage.
- Mild or colder than normal winters that contribute to reduced or increased consumption.
- Summer use in electric generation. Natural gas is increasingly used at newer "peaker" power plants that generate extra electricity during periods of peak demand during summer heat waves.

As for electric prices, according to the federal Energy Information Administration, generation fuel costs have increased this year, which is expected to boost U.S. residential electricity prices by about 2.1 percent in the second half of 2010 compared with the same period last year, and by 2.4 percent during 2011.

In order to help consumers prepare for the winter heating season the Commission offers the following consumer fact sheet.

## CONSUMER FACT SHEET

Georgia consumers can take a number of steps to reduce the impact of winter heating costs. They include:

**Budget Billing:** Consumers who are on a budget, retired or on a fixed income may find budget billing to be an attractive payment option. It allows consumers to make leveled monthly payments on their bills, and is available whether consumers have fixed or variable rate plans. Budget billing can help consumers avoid the spikes in their winter heating bills.

**Energy Conservation:** Conservation is vital to any plan of action to lower one's monthly utility bill. Purchasing energy-efficient equipment such as a furnace, hot water heater and/or stove, caulking around doors and windows, insulating walls, floors and the attic, are some things consumers can do to lower their winter heating bills. Of course, if you don't need to have any of your equipment replaced, be sure to have these inspected by a professional to insure operation at maximum efficiency.

**Weatherization:** Weatherization assistance for low-income families is available in Georgia. This assistance is offered through a program administered by the Georgia Environmental Facilities Authority. For information on weatherization assistance go to: <http://www.gefa.ga.gov/> or call 404-584-1000.

**Low Income Assistance:** Low income consumers may qualify for assistance with their heating bills through the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP). It is administered by the Georgia Department of Human Services who distribute this federal grant money through local community action agencies. Consumers may also be eligible for assistance through other programs sponsored by their local utilities or social service agencies. Information about LIHEAP is available at <http://www.dhs.ga.gov/> or by calling 404-656-2323 or 1-800-869-1150 outside metro Atlanta.

It is also a good time to see if you're getting the best value for your dollar. The Commission publishes a monthly price-comparison chart of all natural gas marketers' plans – fixed and variable. Check the price you pay your marketer with the price of other marketers to see whether it is in your best interest or not to change to another marketer. Also, the Regulated Provider is available to serve low-income citizens and those who are not able to obtain service from any of the certificated marketers in Atlanta Gas Light Company's service area.

For more assistance, visit our website, [www.psc.state.ga.us](http://www.psc.state.ga.us), to get information to help you manage your utility bills, to assist in selecting a natural gas marketer, and to get additional conservation tips.

Consumers may contact the Commission for more information:  
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