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## Georgia Public Service Commission

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**For immediate release**

**Consumer Advisory**

**2-16**

### **Commission Urges Consumers to Prepare for the Winter Heating Season**

ATLANTA, October 4, 2016 – The Georgia Public Service Commission advises consumers to start preparing now for the upcoming winter heating season. Consumers need to ensure their homes and heating systems are ready for the cold weather as well as making sure they are getting the best value for their natural gas dollar.

“If you wait until the last minute you could be shivering while you wait for a service technician or pay higher winter prices. I urge Georgians to prepare for the upcoming winter season before the cold temperatures arrive,” said Commission Chairman Chuck Eaton.

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

- First, maintain your heating system. Homeowners should have a qualified service technician check out their heating system at least once a year. There is nothing worse than turning on the thermostat on that first cold day and nothing happens.
- Replace an older thermostat with a newer digital and programmable one. Many can be programmed to adjust the temperature setting several times during the day.
- Winterize and caulk around windows, outside doors, dryer vents, openings where pipes enter the house and other openings.
- Insulate pipes in crawl spaces.
- Keep furnace vents unblocked by drapes and rugs.
- Add insulation whenever possible. Improving your attic insulation can save from 10 to 50 percent of heating costs.

"Senior citizens who make 150% of poverty level and who own their own homes may qualify for a replacement gas hot water heater or furnace," said Commissioner Tim Echols. "For more information, they should contact HopeWorks at 404-872-0167," Echols added. The Commission recently approved more than \$2.8 million in funding from the Universal Service Fund for HopeWorks to fund these programs through 2021.

Consumers can take steps now to reduce the impact of higher natural gas prices during the winter. The Commission urges consumers to look into budget billing plans and compare marketer pricing options. 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, unexpectedly cold weather has the potential to drive up natural gas costs. 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.

This month 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 – senior, variable, fixed and pre-pay on our web site, [www.psc.state.ga.us](http://www.psc.state.ga.us). Once on the site, you then click on “Natural Gas Marketers’ Prices.” 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.

The Commission does not regulate the price of natural gas. Natural gas marketers in the Atlanta Gas Light delivery area which serves approximately 1.5 million customers are allowed to set prices according to market conditions. The marketers’ natural gas prices can change on a monthly basis for variable rate plans. Liberty Utilities, 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:

- Amount of natural gas in storage.
- Mild or colder than normal winters that contribute to reduced or increased consumption.
- Natural gas is increasingly used year round at newer combined cycle base load electric generating power plants.

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

## **CONSUMER FACT SHEET**

**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 levelized 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 an energy efficient 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 ensure 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 Finance 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. 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. The application period for LIHEAP opens on November 1, 2016 for senior citizens with other eligible recipients able to apply on December 1, 2016.

Consumers may also be eligible for assistance through other programs sponsored by their local utilities or social service agencies. Natural gas customers may be able to obtain help through H.E.A.T. Inc at [www.heatga.org](http://www.heatga.org) or 678-406-0212. Natural gas and electric customers may also contact Project SHARE

which is operated through the Salvation Army at 800-25-SHARE. You must apply through the local SHARE Partner Agency.

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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