

NEWS RELEASE
GEORGIA PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION

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PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION PROPOSES NEW RULES FOR NATURAL GAS BILLING

The Georgia Public Service Commission today tentatively approved new rules requiring natural gas marketers to provide consumers with timely, fair and accurate bills. The Natural Gas Marketer Billing Practices rules will be put out for public comment and then considered for final adoption at the Commission's administrative session on December 21, 2000. The Commission unanimously approved the proposed rules in response to thousands of consumer complaints over late natural gas bills. The proposed rules would require gas marketers to mail bills to consumers within 45 days after the distribution company reads the customer's meters. If the marketer fails to provide a bill in a timely manner, they must allow consumers "a reasonable time" to pay the charges that were not timely billed. This time period runs from the date the consumer's gas meter was read until they received the charges for that meter reading. Marketers may not charge interest on any of the late bill amounts nor disconnect the consumer's gas service during this period.

The rules also spell out required items each gas bill must contain. They include: the time of the billing period; the cost per unit for the specific quantity of natural gas used; interstate capacity charge; exact amount of the base charge; any customer service charge; and any credits or balance owed. The bills must also have a toll-free telephone number for customer service "in a clear and conspicuous place."

Gas marketers will have to give consumers 25 days advance notice of any new customer service charges before those charges can take effect. Those changes must be written in "clear and conspicuous" language.

If the Commission finds a marketer has willfully or repeatedly violated the rules, the Commission may hand down heavy fines and revoke or suspend the marketer's certificate of operation in the state. The Commission can levy fines as high as \$15,000 for each violation as well as a maximum fine of \$10,000 for each day the violation continues.

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