

Citizens Utility Board of Wisconsin: Encourages consumers to weigh in to keep natural gas meters safe

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Public Comment Period Coming to a Close

A pair of Wisconsin utilities are proposing changes that would permit fewer inspections of natural gas meters to ensure they are working properly and safely.

The Citizens Utility Board of Wisconsin is encouraging customers to submit public comments by noon Monday about the proposals, filed by Xcel Energy Corp.'s Northern States Power Co. and Alliant Energy Corp.'s Wisconsin Power & Light Co.

"The PSC's short window for allowing public comments is closing in just a few days, so we encourage customers to weigh in," said Tom Content, CUB executive director.

"Utility regulation is all about making sure that we have a system that's reliable, affordable and safe. The utilities are looking for a small amount of savings but Wisconsin's reputation for a safe, reliable system could be undermined if the PSC moves forward with approval of these requests," Content said.

At issue in the cases is the frequency of meter surveys for natural gas meters that the utilities must conduct. The utilities are proposing to permit up to three years between meter inspections and to be relieved of a reporting requirement concerning gas meter hazard surveys.

When the PSC authorized utilities to install automated meter reading infrastructure, the agency expressed concerns about less frequent visits to check meters. Before

installing advanced meters, a utility employee would see a gas meter on a monthly basis. Now, with advanced meters, inspections must take place at least once a year. Under the new proposal there could be up to three years between meter inspections.

The concern, CUB noted, is that with less frequent visual inspections, problems with meters wouldn't be identified in a timely manner. That is why the PSC, when it approved advanced meters, said the utilities should "continue to view every meter annually through the use of leak surveys, corrosion surveys, and hazard surveys."

Based on information provided by the utilities these annual inspections have identified thousands of maintenance issues per year. Under the utilities' proposal the companies would no longer have to file annual reports about problem meters.

CUB would like the PSC to require that utilities continue to conduct annual inspections of gas meters and continue to file annual reports about hazards and problems they find with meters. CUB wants the commission to deny action on these requests and undertake a broader statewide investigation to analyze the issue in more detail, as the deployment of advanced metering infrastructure is likely to continue.

Customers of WPL and NSP are encouraged to file comments via the PSC's website by noon Monday. NSP customers should look for the "File a Comment" link for the case number 4220-CG-136. Customers of WPL should look for the "File a Comment" link for case number 6680-CG-152.