



JANUARY 2024 HIGHLIGHTS

As we head into a new year, we are filled with hopes for better things to come. Despite all the hate and violence in the world, or perhaps because if it, the start of this year is no exception.

For Maine utility consumers, we start the year with a big win – a 35% decrease in standard offer (SO) prices from approximately 17 cents/kWh to 11 cents. That will provide much needed relief from last year's exorbitantly high cost of electricity for households and businesses. The Maine Legislature also has come through with \$15M of desperately needed financial aid, to increase funding for the LIAP program by approximately 50%. This is critically important for those low income customers forced to decide between paying their utility bills or buying needed food or medicine for their family. And we are surpassing our goals for deploying cost effective heat pumps, needed to reduce our dependence on fossil fuels for heating our homes and businesses. If we can build on these promising developments, 2024 will be a good year.

We cannot become complacent, however, as there are storm clouds on the horizon. First, more rate increases may be on the way. Versant has just announced it will file a new rate case in March and CMP may not be far behind. One program putting upward pressure on rates is the controversial and ill-conceived Net Energy Billing program. This program provides large unneeded and unaffordable subsidies for small solar projects. It is currently burdening ratepayers with approximately \$100M/yr. of additional costs and OPA estimates that when the dust settles, ratepayers will be paying approximately \$220M/yr. of additional costs or \$4B over the next 20 years, just for this one program. We simply must find a way to control NEB costs.

And we cannot lose our focus on finding cost effective ways to transition away from fossil fuels to cost effective renewable energy. At this point, two of our largest renewable projects, the Northern Maine wind project and the Offshore wind project are both facing serious challenges in the form of local opposition, higher costs, and supply chain issues. We need both of these projects in order to meet our goals to mitigate climate change. We also need to focus on natural gas and the role we want it to play in meeting our future energy needs. If we are ever going to substantially reduce the amount of damaging methane released into the atmosphere, we must stop the expansion of our gas utilities and develop a thoughtful and successful way of winding down our reliance on natural gas.

There is much to be done but I am an optimist who believes that if we all work together, we can make 2024 a good year for both consumers and the environment.

William Harwood

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Legislative Advocacy

The Second Regular Session of the 131st Legislature began on January 3rd. The EUT Committee will continue its work on bills carried over from the First Session as well as new bills referred to the committee. The OPA will continue its advocacy for Maine ratepayers on these bills but is especially focused on five pieces of specific legislation which the Office helped introduce this session:

- 1. An Act Regarding Fair Service for All Electricity Supply Customers, (Sen. Nicole Grohoski, D-Hancock) LR 2863.** This bill follows up on our earlier efforts to protect residential ratepayers, especially low-income ratepayers, from the predatory pricing activities by competitive electricity providers (CEPs). It is intended to avoid customers paying a CEP price that is substantially above the Standard Offer price.
- 2. An Act to Continue Arrearage Management Program Availability for Low-income Residential Electricity Customers, (Rep. Foster, R-Dexter) LD 2067.** This bill would remove the September 2024 sunset on the Arrearage Management Program that helps ratepayers who cannot afford to pay off large arrearages in the amount owed.
- 3. An Act to Clarify the Right to Appeal Certain PUC Decisions, (OPA Agency Bill, Rep. Warren, D-Scarborough) LR 2895.** Current law gives the PUC discretion to deny a customer's or utility's request that the PUC conduct a formal proceeding to review the merits of a customer complaint after the customer and utility have participated in the Consumer Assistance and Safety Division (CASD) informal customer complaint review process. A recent Law Court decision held that a customer or utility is foreclosed from appeal to the Law Court if it disagrees with the informal, non-adjudicatory CASD decision and the PUC declines to hold a formal proceeding to review the merits of the dispute. *Gen. Marine Constr. Corp. v. PUC*, 2022 ME 20, P1, 271 A.3d 1166, 1167, 2022 Me. LEXIS 20, *1. This bill mandates that the PUC must hold a de-novo adjudicatory proceeding upon request by either the customer or the utility if they disagree with the results of the CASD informal customer complaint review process.
- 4. An Act Regarding Customer Costs and the Environmental and Health Effects of Natural Gas (OPA Agency Bill, Rep. Zeigler, D-Montville) LD 2077.** This bill would direct the PUC to review the role of natural gas in meeting Maine's future energy needs. The PUC would have the opportunity to consider how much to reduce the role of natural gas in generating electricity and how best to address the environmental, public safety and public health risks of using natural gas in homes and businesses for heating and domestic use.
- 5. An Act to Dedicate the Proceeds of the Sales Tax on Electricity to Low-income Ratepayer Assistance, (OPA Agency Bill, Rep. Sophie Warren, D-Scarborough) LR 2894.** This bill will build on our successful effort last session to secure \$15M of state tax funds for the biennium to support LIAP. It is estimated that the sales tax on electricity brings in approximately \$15M/yr.

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Federal Proceedings

FERC Approves Settlement of Versant Power Treatment of Certain Overhead Expenses

On November 28, 2023, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) approved a settlement among Versant Power, the Maine OPA, and the Maine PUC that resolved an issue regarding Versant Power's improper accounting treatment of certain overhead expenses included in its rates for high voltage transmission service. In September 2021, FERC's Office of Enforcement had issued an Audit Report that found, among other things, that Versant improperly capitalized certain overhead costs that instead should have been recorded as operating expenses, causing Versant to overstate its wholesale transmission revenue requirement and overbill wholesale transmission customers. At that time, the Office of Enforcement directed Versant to provide refunds to wholesale transmission customers but failed to address the impact on customers paying for transmission service through their retail rates. In April, Versant requested that FERC allow it to recover these costs over time through an amortization. The OPA intervened in opposition to the request. Following negotiations, the parties agreed to allow Versant to amortize these expenses over time, however, with no return allowed on the outstanding unamortized balance. The settlement allows the company to recover its expense while minimizing the rate impact on customers and denying the company any opportunity to profit from its mistake.

PUC Electric Proceedings

Versant Proposes 26% Increase in Distribution Rates

On December 29th, Versant Power gave the PUC formal notice that it intends to file a rate case in two months (Dkt. No. 2023-00336). The proposed increase will raise distribution rates by \$35M/yr. or 26%. For an average Versant residential ratepayer, the increase will be approximately \$13/month. This comes on top of a 28% (\$30M/yr.) increase that took effect in two steps of \$14M each on July 1, 2023 and January 1, 2024.

PUC Halts Procurement for Aroostook Renewable Gateway Project

The PUC has issued an order terminating its procurement to implement the Northern Maine Renewable Energy Development Program (Northern Maine Program). That procurement was initiated by the PUC through a request for proposals (RFP) issued on November 29, 2021 in Docket No. 2021-00369, in accordance 35-A M.R.S. § 3210-I, which established the Northern Maine Program. Section 3210-I required the PUC to issue an RFP for: (1) the development and construction of a 345-kilovolt double circuit "generation connection line" or a transmission line or lines of greater capacity, to connect renewable energy resources located in northern Maine with the electric grid operated by ISO-NE; and (2) the development and construction of renewable energy generation projects that are designed to connect to and transmit power across the transmission line or lines. In its RFP, the PUC selected a project submitted by LS Power Grid Maine (LS Power) and the King Pine Wind Generation Project submitted by Longroad Development Company, LLC.

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In its Order Terminating Procurement, the PUC noted that in filings made at the PUC, LS Power made clear that it could no longer hold to the fixed price contained in the term sheet that was approved through the RFP process and that it required a price adjustment. The PUC found that by requesting a change to its approved bid price, LS Power had effectively withdrawn its original fixed-price bid. The PUC found that it had no choice but to terminate the procurement. The PUC also stated in its Order that it would initiate a new procurement for the Northern Maine Program and in the meantime would consider what changes, if any, could be made to the RFP process to increase the likelihood of success in implementing the Northern Maine Program.

PUC Investigates Reimbursement Requests that Exceed Funding Levels of the Oxygen Pump and Ventilator Program

The Oxygen Pump and Ventilator Program, offered by the transmission and distribution utilities (T&Ds), provides financial assistance to low-income customers who, for health-related reasons, must use an oxygen pump or ventilator at least eight hours each day and the benefit is intended to cover the full cost of operating an oxygen pump or ventilator (Docket No. 2023-00208). Funding for Program Year 2022-2023 was set at \$250,000. But by the end of the second quarter of the Program Year, the Maine State Housing Authority informed the PUC that the T&Ds had already filed reimbursement requests for approximately \$350,000. On August 15, 2023, the PUC opened a formal investigation to find out why. The PUC required all T&Ds participating in low-income programs for information on the participation and benefits paid, the materials used to verify eligibility, and their processes for calculating benefits. On December 21, 2023, the PUC announced it will prepare an Examiner's Report to describe its conclusions.

More Net Energy Billing Good Cause Exemptions Requested

On December 22, 2023, a solar developer filed a request for a good cause exemption of the statutory deadline of December 31, 2024 for a solar project to become operational to participate in the Net Energy Billing (NEB) program under Chapter 313 of the PUC's rules (Docket No. 2023-00328). This follows other good cause exemption requests filed by multiple developers in Docket Nos. 2023-00236 and a single developer in Docket No. 2023-00304. These cases will set an important precedent for other projects seeking good cause exemptions. Applicable law permits developers seeking to participate in the NEB program to request good cause exemptions to allow for facility competition to occur after the applicable statutory deadline in the event of external delays outside of the developer's control, which the PUC may grant if it finds that, without the external delays, the entity could reasonably have been expected to meet the applicable deadline.

The OPA estimates that the NEB program will cost ratepayers \$220 million per year, once all eligible projects are online. The projects requesting extensions represent millions of dollars in annual ratepayer costs if they are allowed to participate in the NEB program. The PUC has issued a briefing schedule in the first of these cases (Docket No. 2023-00236), with initial briefs due January 12, 2024, and reply briefs due on January 26, 2024.

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PUC Asked to Rule on Whether Adjacent Projects Are Discrete Electric Generating Facilities

On December 8, 2023, UGE USA, Inc. (UGE), a developer of commercial and community solar projects, petitioned the PUC for an Advisory Ruling finding that two pairs of solar facilities that are in various stages of development should be determined to be discrete generating facilities pursuant to Chapter 313 of the PUC's rules governing Net Energy Billing (NEB) (Docket No. 2023-00321). The two pairs of projects that are the subject of UGE's petition comprise:

- One facility of 999 kW that is already under development; and
- One facility of 999 kW that is contingent to the first project.

UGE states that the 999 kW project size is driven by Cluster Study process being conducted to evaluate transmission system impacts of distributed generation projects. In order to take advantage of more favorable regulations for small projects under 1 MW, UGE asserts that each project should be treated as separate independent projects, rather than combined into a single larger 2 MW project which must begin commercial operation by December 31, 2024 (absent the receipt of a good cause exemption). Chapter 313 of the PUC rules sets forth restrictions on co-location of facilities that seek to be eligible for NEB.

PUC Issues RFP Requesting Competitive Bids from Qualifying NEB Projects

In response to enactment of recent legislation to reform the controversial NEB program, on December 29th the PUC issued a formal Request for Proposals (RFP) soliciting bids from developers of qualifying NEB projects (Dkt. No. 2023-335). The winning low bidders will be rewarded with a binding enforceable 20 year Power Purchase Agreement (PPA) to sell the output either to CMP or Versant at the bid price; at which point their projects will no longer be subject the variability of the NEB price formula or at risk of future program changes as a result of the political controversy surrounding the NEB program. Bids are due by March 15, 2024.

OPA Continues to Fight for Sensible Rate Design Changes

Since July, the OPA has been participating in a stakeholder process to explore potential rate design changes for CMP that would better reflect time of day cost differences and thereby encourage efficient use of electricity for new technologies such as electric vehicles and heat pumps. On December 1, CMP filed its Recommendations resulting from the stakeholder process. On December 14, the OPA filed comments in support of the CMP Recommendations.

The deployment of electric technologies to replace existing applications that rely on oil and gas, so-called "beneficial electrification," is a critical element of the State's strategy to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions. To the extent the consumption of electricity by these new technologies occurs during peak periods of demand, such as the late afternoon and early evening hours on the hottest and coldest days of the year, such consumption has the potential to require the construction of incremental utility transmission and distribution facilities to serve the growing load. In addition,

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during periods of peak demand, the least efficient and most expensive electric generating units must be operated to serve that demand.

The CMP Recommendations, which incorporate substantial input from the OPA and other stakeholders, adopt time-of-use rate periods that more accurately reflect projected peak load periods and costs than rates in effect today. The Measurement and Verification Plan included in the CMP Recommendations will evaluate whether existing rate designs are efficiently motivating changes in consumer behavior, as well as customer interest in and acceptance of alternative rate designs. Such analyses are critical to ensure that the rate designs are both motivating consumer behavior and not requiring any unnecessary subsidies from other customers. Finally, the CMP Recommendations include an ongoing process for stakeholders to participate in the development and evaluation of proposed improvements in rate design.

Separately, in Docket No. 2023-00230, the Commission is investigating rate design for the recovery of stranded costs, specifically the increased costs resulting from the implementation of the State's net energy billing programs. In a previous proceeding, the Commission had decided that these costs should be collected from customers of all classes by increasing customer charges. This has resulted in rate increases that are not proportionate for all customers.

The use of customer charges attracted complaints from several large generation facilities, including wind farms, that suffered huge rate increases as a result of the change. On November 22 parties filed their initial testimony in the case. In its testimony, the OPA offered evidence that the "one size fits all" nature of customer charges overburdens smaller sized customers in all rate classes. To address its concerns, the OPA recommended that the PUC increase the number of kwh included in with the customer charge for residential and small commercial customers and should replace the increased customer charge with an increased demand charge for larger classes. The OPA believes these changes would temper the impact on those customers that have been disproportionately affected.

PUC Holds Public Witness Hearings in CMP Storm Cost Investigation

The PUC held a virtual public witness hearing on December 5 and an in-person public witness hearing the following week on December 12 in CMP's Storm Cost Investigation (Docket No. 2023-00038). Several people participated in each public witness hearing.

The OPA is challenging more than \$50 million of CMP's storm costs because CMP regularly exceeds the staffing recommendations in its Emergency Response Plan, a document CMP is required to prepare under Maine law that governs how the Company should respond to storms based on the severity level of that storm. The OPA seeks to hold CMP accountable for spending above amounts required by its own Plan. The case is currently proceeding through discovery with a hearing expected in March and a decision by the Commission this Spring.

Proceeding to Identify Priorities for Grid Planning

The OPA participated in workshops for the Commission Proceeding to Identify Priorities for Grid Planning Filings (Docket No. 2022-00322). The workshops addressed subjects required for

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developing a distribution grid to meet the modern needs of Maine’s ratepayers. The workshop topics included:

- Content of Grid Planning Filings
- Environmental, Equity, and Environmental Justice Impacts
- Forecasting and Scenario Planning
- Hosting Capacity Maps
- Solutions Evaluation methodologies

The OPA expressed concerns that high-cost grid investments plus high energy supply costs are creating an affordability crisis for many Maine households. The OPA emphasized that utility grid plans should reduce the disproportionate impact of grid investments on low and moderate-income customers.

Law Court Ruling

Law Court Upholds PUC Natural Gas Ruling

On December 28th, the Maine Supreme Judicial Court (Law Court) upheld a PUC ruling approving a special rate contract between Bangor Natural Gas Company and Bucksport Generation (Law Dkt. No. 2023 ME 77). The OPA had challenged the ruling, claiming that the rate was unreasonable and discriminatory. Relying on its well-established principle of deferring to most decisions of regulatory agencies, the Court concluded it was reasonable for the PUC to establish a principle for gas utilities, unlike T&D utilities, that any special rate above the marginal or variable cost of serving the customer would satisfy the requirements for approving a special rate contract. The Court recognized that Bucksport Generation might cease being a customer if the rate were too high.

The OPA also had challenged the PUC ruling because it was not based on a proper evidentiary record set by the Hearing Examiner. The PUC argued that it was fair to base its ruling on any filing by anyone in the case file. Although the Court ruled against the OPA because the issue was not first raised in the PUC proceeding and thereby preserved for appellate review, the Court acknowledged the merits of OPA’s argument and suggested the PUC change its practice in the future.

PUC Natural Gas Proceedings

PUC Receives Comments in Renewable Natural Gas Inquiry

On November 15, 2023, the PUC issued a Notice of Inquiry and Request for Information relating to the use of renewably sourced natural gas (Docket No. 2023-00302). The Notice of Inquiry stems from “An Act to Reduce the Cost of Energy in Maine and Reduce Greenhouse Gas Emissions Through the Effective Use of Renewably Sourced Gas,” P.L. 2023, c. 222 (the Act). The PUC has requested comment on:

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- Whether there are any reasonable opportunities to explore and consider engaging in energy cost reduction contracts or physical energy storage contracts
- Existing and near-term replacement energy sources for natural gas in commercial and industrial uses that are in line with the State's greenhouse gas reduction policies
- Other information that commenters believe are relevant or instructive with respect to topics described in the Act

Comments were filed by a number of entities including the Office of the Public Advocate, Northeast Gas Association, Efficiency Maine Trust, Conservation Law Foundation, Maine Natural Gas Corporation, Summit Natural Gas of Maine, Northern Utilities, Inc. d/b/a Unitil, Bangor Natural Gas Company, Enbridge, Inc., the Coalition for Renewable Natural Gas, and Cashman Preload Cryogenics. The next step in this proceeding is for the PUC to submit a report to the Joint Standing Committee on Energy, Utilities and Technology that includes a summary of the responses that the PUC received in response to its Notice of Inquiry, as well as any actions the PUC has taken in response to the comments.

Comments Filed in PUC Examination of New Northern Utilities Precedent Agreements

On October 6, 2023, Northern Utilities, Inc. d/b/a Unitil (Northern) filed a request for PUC approval of precedent agreements entered into by Northern with Portland Natural Gas Transmission System (PNGTS) and TransCanada Pipelines Limited (TCPL) for a firm natural gas pipeline transportation path from Empress, Alberta to Granite State Gas Transmission, Inc. (Docket No. 2023-00254). The procedural schedule in this proceeding allowed for intervenor comments to be filed by December 8, 2023. Intervenor comments were filed by the OPA and Conservation Law Foundation (CLF).

The OPA stated that based on the information provided by Northern, the OPA does not object to Northern's decision to contract for additional gas transportation service on PNGTS. However, the OPA recommended against PUC approval of the TCPL contracts at this time. CLF has taken the position that the PUC should deny Northern's petition on the basis that the case record does not support a finding that Northern's decision to enter into the precedent agreements is prudent, reasonable, consistent with the public interest. Northern may file reply comments by January 2, 2024, to be followed by an Examiners' Report, Exceptions, and Commission deliberations.

[PUC Water Proceedings](#)

Bangor Water District (BWD) Must Issue a Refund to Customers Who Paid the New Rate for Prior Water Use

On April 7, 2023, the PUC's Consumer Assistance and Safety Division (CASD) ordered BWD to refund approximately \$79,000 to customers that had been billed for water at a new higher rate that was not yet in effect when the customers consumed the water (Docket No. 2023-00101). On May

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16, 2023, the Commission opened an investigation to review CASD's decision. Then, on December 12, 2023, the PUC announced it agreed with the CASD and the OPA that BWD must provide the refund, because BWD had violated the law by charging a new higher rate for water consumed before the new rate took effect, and because the effect of the billing varied for different customers according to when their meter had been read and when they were billed. A final order is forthcoming.

The PUC Will Hold a Public Witness Hearing and a Technical Conference on Maine Water Company's (MWC) Request for Another Bill Increase for Its Camden & Rockland (C&R) Customers

As requested by a Camden & Rockland residential customer and the OPA, the PUC will schedule a public witness hearing early in 2024 to provide an opportunity for public participation on MWC's permission to raise its revenues by 2.34% by adding a surcharge to C&R customers' bills to recover the costs (approximately \$1.7 million) of repairs/replacement of water mains and other equipment (Docket No. 2023-00163). A Technical Conference was held on January 2, 2024, to ask questions about these capital projects and why they were not included in the utility's recent rate increase.

Proposed Stipulation Filed to Settle the Maine Water Company's (MWC) Request for a Rate Increase for Its Biddeford & Saco (B&S) Division

On July 28, 2023, the MWC asked the PUC to raise the annual revenue it collects from customers by approximately \$3.61 million (originally on March 31, 2023 the Company had asked for an increase of approximately \$2.95 million; Docket No. 2023-00065). Part of the rate increase is to pay for MWC's new Saco River Drinking Water Resource Center which began operating in 2022. This is also the first time that the B&S Division is seeking recovery for management costs from its new parent company, the San Jose Water Group. After a settlement conference on November 27, 2023, the parties filed a proposed stipulation on December 22, 2023, agreeing that the case could be settled if MWC would reduce the revenue increase to \$2,602,747. Although the new rates would become effective on January 1, 2024, customers would not see a bill increase above the temporary rate increase that is already in place until July 1, 2024. Also, MWC would not ask for another rate increase for B&S for three years, although it could still ask for infrastructure surcharges to be added to customer bills.

PUC Denies Customers' Request to Investigate a Proposed Rate Increase for the Boothbay Region Water District (BRWD)

On September 14, 2023, the BRWD requested permission to raise the revenue collected from residential customers by 19.70%, effective January 1, 2024 (Docket No. 2023-00240). After a public hearing on October 23, 2023, approximately 450 customers signed a petition asking the Commission to suspend the case and investigate the rate increase. This fell short of the 516 signatures statutorily required to trigger a Commission investigation, but the customers argued that they were unable to

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reach many Boothbay seasonal customers that leave the area in the Fall. On December 11, 2023, BRWD sent a letter to the PUC to say that some of the signatures were invalid and that the PUC should deny the request for an investigation. On December 12, 2023, the OPA supported the customers' request to investigate. But, on December 13, 2023, the PUC denied the customers' request, and on December 21, 2023 the PUC approved the rate increase.

New Sharon Water District (NSWD) Is Investigated

On September 26, 2023, the Commission began an investigation of the financial footing of NSWD (Docket No. 2023-00244). In addition, NSWD has a significant leak in its system, but does not know the exact cause or location. At a meeting on December 5, 2023, two of the four trustees of NSWD, one of whom was the Chair, resigned their positions such that NSWD is now short of a three-trustee quorum needed to conduct business. At a case/technical conference on December 8, 2023, the PUC reviewed the possible appointment of the Maine Rural Water Association (MRWA) to serve as a receiver to oversee the operations of NSWD, including the authority to track down and address the leak. MRWA has filed information about the services it would provide as well as the cost.

PUC To Determine Whether The Midcoast Regional Redevelopment Authority Is Acting as a Water Utility

On August 30, 2023, the PUC issued a Notice of Formal Investigation (Notice), through which the Commission opened a formal investigation pursuant Title 35-A M.R.S. § 1303(2) into whether the Midcoast Regional Redevelopment Authority (MRRA) is operating as a public utility that should be subject to the Commission's regulatory oversight (Docket No. 2023-00209). MRRA has a statutory mandate is to manage the transition of the former Brunswick Naval Air Station property ("Brunswick Landing") from military to civilian use. In doing so, MRRA is providing water service to approximately 104 tenant customers and 137 non-tenant customers. The issue for decision in this case is whether the provision of that water service is either public or private in nature. On December 18, 2023, the OPA and MRRA each filed an initial brief in this matter, with the OPA arguing that the water service is public in nature and should be subject to PUC regulation and MRRA arguing that the water service is private in nature and should not be subject to PUC regulation. Reply briefs by the OPA and MRRA may be filed by January 8, 2024.

[PUC Telecommunications Proceedings](#)

Consolidated Communications of Maine (Consolidated-Maine) and Other Broadband Companies Ask PUC to Approve Transfer of Ownership and Control to Condor Holdings, LLC

On December 27, 2023, the PUC was informed that Consolidated Communications Holdings, Inc., Consolidated Communications of Northern New England Company, LLC, and Consolidated-

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Maine, want to transfer their indirect ownership and control of Consolidated-Maine to Condor Holdings LLC (Docket No. 2023-00327). Section 708 of Title 35-A requires that for this reorganization to be approved, it must be consistent with the interests of the utilities' ratepayers and investors, and the reorganization must provide net benefits to the utilities' ratepayers. Also, the PUC is required to impose terms on the transfer that are necessary to protect the interests of ratepayers, and serve the interest of the utilities' ratepayers, such as assuring that the Commission has reasonable access to books, records, documents, and other information relating to the utilities or any of their affiliates. Consolidated-Maine and the other parties state that there will be no new debt, it will not adversely impact the day-to-day operations of the companies or their customers, and the transfer will strengthen the companies' ability to deliver more advanced communications services. The companies have asked for the transfer to be approved as soon as possible. The next step is for the PUC to create a procedural schedule to conduct the review.

OPA Asks PUC to Consider the Costs that are Passed on to Electric Ratepayers When Broadband is Expanded

On October 18, 2023, the PUC held an informal stakeholder meeting that included the three largest owners of joint-use utility poles in Maine, in preparation for a report to the Legislature summarizing current pole attachment laws and rules and the effects of those laws and rules on broadband expansion through public networks, private networks, or public-private partnerships (Docket No. 2023-00300). On November 9, 2023, the PUC opened an Inquiry. On December 26, 2023, the OPA requested that the PUC include in its report the effect of the laws and rules on electric ratepayers, who are, in some cases, expected to cover costs incurred by the utility pole owners during work performed for broadband expansion. The OPA asked to be included in future stakeholder meetings.

[Consumer Assistance](#)

Elizabeth Deprey, OPA Consumer Advisor

The OPA recommends that if you are heating your home this winter with heat pumps, you choose either the [Seasonal Heat Pump Delivery Rate](#) or a community solar subscription, but not both.

With community solar, you are receiving a discounted rate for community solar credits compared with the amount you would currently pay CMP.

In the summer, when most of your solar credits are generated and purchased, your CMP delivery rate under the Seasonal Heat Pump Rate is higher than your winter rate when most of your credits will be used.

Therefore, the rate you will pay for most of your solar credits will be higher than the value of the credits that are applied to offset your CMP bill in the winter. As a result, you will likely end up paying more overall to your community solar provider and CMP than you would if you were only enrolled in one program.

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In addition, the Seasonal Heat Pump Delivery Rate has a larger monthly service fee than a normal electric bill (known as Rate A), so you are paying a higher monthly service fee all year without receiving the benefit of the greatly reduced winter rate. Because solar credits cannot reduce the monthly service fee, you will be able to offset a smaller portion of your overall CMP bill using community solar credits.

Unless the way customers are billed for solar credits changes, our recommendation is to choose either the Seasonal Heat Pump Delivery Rate or a community solar contract to ensure you are paying the lowest possible amount for your electricity.

How to Sign up for the Standard Offer?

With the Standard Offer rates much lower for 2024 compared to 2023, many Mainers reached out to the OPA in December to ask how to take advantage of the lower rates.

- If you are already using the Standard Offer for your supply, you don't need to take any action to take advantage of the lower rate starting Jan. 1, 2024.
- If you are with a different supplier, you can call your supplier and request to cancel or:

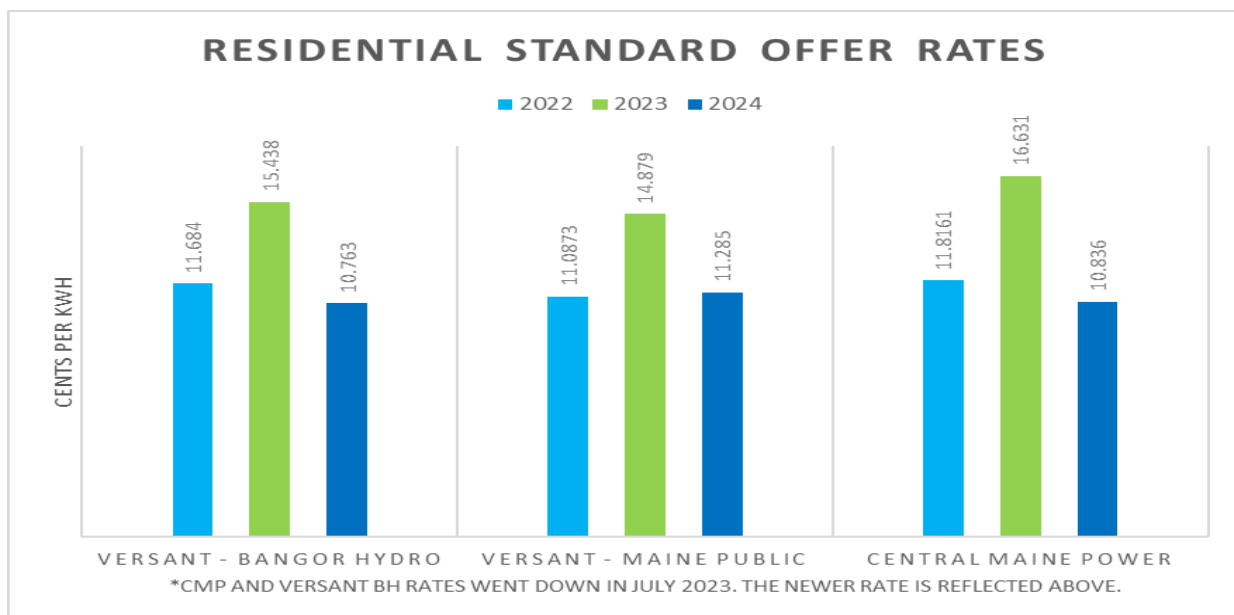
CMP customers:

- Call CMP at 1-800-452-4699
- Fill out the CMP [Standard Offer Request Form](#)

Versant Customers:

- Call Versant at 1-855-363-7211
- Submit your request via Versant's online [Customer Contact Form](#)

Please reach out to the OPA for any assistance or information you need to take advantage of the new, lower Standard Offer. You can email OPA@Maine.gov or call 207-624-3687.



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Consumer Corner – How to Make It Through Winter Heating Season

No matter your income level, winter heating season can take a significant bite out of your budget. Here are some cost-reduction tips:

- One crucial strategy is to make sure you're cutting your energy use where you can. Efficiency Maine has an [Energy Efficiency Tips Guide](#) with several tips to improve your energy use in your home. There are also [insulation rebates](#) up to \$9,200 available through Efficiency Maine – that means savings now and savings in energy use over time.
- If you're using heat pumps to heat your home, [CMP](#) and [Versant](#) both have rates designed to help reduce those winter bills. Call the customer support line to inquire.
- If you have trouble paying your bills this winter, the OPA recently created a new [Low-Income Resources](#) page that outlines financial support for heat, electricity, internet, gas, and even telephone.
- The Governor's Energy Office also recently released a [Winter Heating Guide](#) with lots of information and resources – you can also count on them for [home heating fuel prices](#), updated weekly.

[Energy.gov](#) has a number of DIY projects worth checking out to see if your home may benefit, including water heater and weatherization projects.

State Announces Help for Low-income Broadband Consumers

The Maine Connectivity Authority (MCA) has announced that qualifying low-income broadband customers will receive a discount of up to \$30 per month (up to \$75 per month for qualifying tribal households) and a one-time \$100 discount toward a laptop, desktop computer, or tablet. The Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) is funded by the Federal Infrastructure Investments and Jobs Act (IIJA). MCA's "ACP4ME" campaign is hoping to reach approximately 240,000 eligible Maine households. Eligible households earn 200% of the Federal Poverty Guidelines or less. For a household of 4, that is \$60,000. Also, this benefit may not be available after June 2024, so we encourage people to act quickly to benefit their household for as many months as possible. To learn more, visit maineconnectivity.org/affordability

What to do if you are behind on your utility bills

- Contact your utility. Ask about a payment arrangement to pay down your back balance.
- If you have a payment arrangement with your utility and you can't afford it, contact the PUC's Consumer Assistance Division at (800)452-4699 to see if they can negotiate a more favorable rate for you.
- Call your local CAP (Community Action Partnerships). There are heating, electric, and pandemic assistance funds available to help with your utility bills.
- Contact your town for general assistance fund support.

Office of the Public Advocate

Your Trusted Source for Utility Information

- If you are eligible for heating assistance, call your electric utility and ask about enrolling in arrearage management. This program provides debt forgiveness as you pay your current electricity bill on-time.

[Having trouble paying a utility bill?](#)

The PUC has a webpage to connect you to bill assistance resources. This list covers all utilities and is a great page to review if you are having trouble making ends meet:

<https://www.maine.gov/mpuc/consumer-assistance/programs>

[Find Out More](#)

To learn more about any of the cases mentioned in this issue, please visit the [PUC's Case Management System \(CMS\)](#). Make note of the docket number of the case of interest from this newsletter and enter it in the search feature.

You can visit our website for more information: <https://www.maine.gov/meopa/home>

If you know someone who might be interested in receiving future editions of our monthly highlights, have them contact benjamin.j.frech@maine.gov