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July 27, 2020

VIA ELECTRONIC FILING

Mark L. Johnson, Executive Director and Secretary
Washington Utilities and Transportation Commission
621 Woodland Square Loop S.E.
Lacey, Washington 98503

Re: U-200281—NW Natural’s COVID-19 Response

Dear Mr. Johnson:

Northwest Natural Gas Company, dba NW Natural (NW Natural or Company), provides this update to the Washington Utilities and Transportation Commission (Commission) in response to workshop discussions in the U-200281 COVID-19 Response docket.

In response to the growing concerns of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, on March 12, 2020, NW Natural voluntarily suspended all disconnections of service for non-payment. As soon as our billing systems could be updated, we suspended the charging of late payment fees and sending disconnect notices on March 16, 2020. To support the continued constructive engagement in this docket with the Commission, interested stakeholders, and other utilities, NW Natural is extending the suspension of these processes through September 30, 2020.

As we work towards a path forward in this docket, NW Natural remains concerned about the economic impact on our customers with past-due balances if those balances continue to grow through a prolonged suspension of our routine billing practices. We have been actively engaging our customers through diverse channels to inform them of bill payment arrangements, energy assistance availability and other resources regarding their gas service since the COVID-19 public health emergency began. Since March 2020 we have provided this information through online communications on our website with call-outs in four languages for bill payment options, detailed bill payment assistance and COVID-19 information; as well as through digital banner and social media advertising and ongoing social media posts on Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn. In addition, NW Natural has provided this information through its Comfort Zone customer newsletter sent with bills and the electronic newsletter sent to paperless billing customers. This summer we will also issue public service announcements to the main English and Spanish radio and television stations in our service territory.

In June we began proactively reaching out to our customers with past due balances through our customer call center and through targeted mailings and emails. We are providing flexible payment arrangements, providing our customers with information about energy assistance options that are currently available to them, and applying customer deposits to arrearage balances when applicable. Our focus has been on helping our customers get their accounts into a stable status before the next winter heating season starts. However, even with these efforts, the arrearage balances have continued to grow.

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NW Natural is committed to continuing to support our customers during this difficult and unprecedented time. Our goal is to do what we can to help our customers and keep them connected to our system. We look forward to continuing our active participation in the U-200281 workgroup and collaborating with the Commission, stakeholders, and other utilities to determine how to move forward in the most transparent, efficient and least disruptive manner for our customers.

Please contact me at (503) 610-7617 if you have questions.

Sincerely,

/s/ Zachary Kravitz
Zachary Kravitz
Director, Rates and Regulatory Affairs
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