

**BEFORE THE WASHINGTON  
UTILITIES AND TRANSPORTATION COMMISSION**

In the Matter of the Petition of

AVISTA CORPORATION d/b/a  
AVISTA UTILITIES,

Petitioner,

Seeking an Order Approving Natural  
Gas Potential Conservation Assessment

DOCKET UG-210462

ORDER 01

APPROVING NATURAL GAS  
CONSERVATION POTENTIAL  
ASSESSMENT SUBJECT TO  
CONDITIONS

**BACKGROUND**

- 1 The Clean Buildings Act (Act)<sup>1</sup> sets forth new requirements for natural gas conservation potential assessments. Pursuant to RCW 80.28.380, a utility must identify and acquire all conservation measures that are “available and cost effective.” The utility must establish an acquisition target every two years, with the first target taking effect in 2022. The Washington Utilities and Transportation Commission (Commission) must approve the acquisition target by order. These targets must be based on a conservation potential assessment prepared by an independent third party and approved by the Commission. The analysis used to identify all cost-effective conservation must include the cost of greenhouse gas emissions.
- 2 On June 17, 2021, Avista Corporation d/b/a Avista Utilities (Avista or Company) filed a 2020 Conservation Potential Assessment (Conservation Potential Assessment or CPA) prepared by Applied Energy Group. In the CPA, the Applied Energy Group provides an analysis of the available and cost-effective conservation potential for Avista over a planning horizon from 2021 to 2040. Using the Utility Cost Test (UCT), the Applied Energy Group identified an achievable economic potential in Washington of 173,838 dekatherms in 2022. This increases to a cumulative total of 1,386,479 dekatherms by 2030.
- 3 On September 14, 2021, the Commission issued a Notice of Opportunity to File Written Comments by September 27, 2021. The Commission asked for feedback approving

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<sup>1</sup> See generally Laws of 2019, ch. 285.

Conservation Potential Assessments under RCW 80.28.380. The Commission asked for feedback on the following issues:

1. Does the requirement to incorporate the social cost of greenhouse gases under RCW 80.28.380 require the utility to use a Total Resource Cost (TRC) test in identifying cost-effective conservation measures?
2. What considerations should be included in an analysis of the availability of conservation required under RCW 80.28.380?
3. Must utilities include conservation measures from gas transportation customers in their identification of all conservation measures under RCW 80.28.380?

4 On September 27, 2021, the Commission received written comments from the Alliance of Western Energy Consumers (AWEC), the Public Counsel Unit of the Attorney General’s Office (Public Counsel), and Commission staff (Staff).

5 AWEC submits that RCW 80.28.380 does not require a specific cost-effectiveness test for reflecting the cost of greenhouse gas emissions. AWEC argues that the statute is silent with respect to transportation customers and that requiring utilities to include these customers in their Conservation Potential Assessments would depart from past practice.

6 Public Counsel notes that the UCT includes only the costs and benefits that accrue to the utility or program administrator.<sup>2</sup> Noting the relatively broad language of RCW 80.28.395, Public Counsel submits that the Act’s provisions rule out the UCT as a method of identifying cost-effective conservation based on the social cost of greenhouse gas.<sup>3</sup> Public Counsel discusses whether transportation customers should be included in Conservation Potential Assessments but does not specifically take a position on the issue.

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<sup>2</sup> See generally *In re the Comm’n Investigation into Nat. Gas Conservation Programs*, Docket UG-121207, Policy Statement ¶¶ 7-17 (October 9, 2013) (Natural Gas Conservation Policy Statement) (defining various tests used to measure the cost of greenhouse gas emissions).

<sup>3</sup> RCW 80.28.395 provides in part: “For the purposes of RCW 80.28.380, the cost of greenhouse gas emissions resulting from the use of natural gas, including the effect of emissions occurring in the gathering, transmission, and distribution of natural gas to the end user is equal to the cost per metric ton of carbon dioxide emissions, using the two and one-half percent discount rate, listed in table 2, Technical Support Document: Technical update of the social cost of carbon for regulatory impact analysis under Executive Order 12866, published by the interagency working group on social cost of greenhouse gases of the United States government, August 2016.”

7 Staff asserts that the social cost of greenhouse gases is not a cost to the utility and that RCW 80.28.380 essentially requires the utility to use either the TRC test or the Societal Cost Test (SCT), which reflect costs beyond the utility's system.

8 With regards to transportation customers, Staff submits that the statute's language is both expansive and mandatory. Gas transportation customers are purchasing a service regulated by the Commission. Staff explains, though, that the utility would still need to evaluate whether there were conservation measures that were both available and cost-effective for these customers.

9 Avista also submitted written comments on September 29, 2021, two days after the deadline provided in the Commission's notice. In its comments, Avista submits that RCW 80.28.380 does not require a specific cost-effectiveness test for reflecting the cost of greenhouse gas emissions. The Company reflects the social cost of greenhouse gas as an avoided cost in its analysis. Although Avista does not directly take a position in its comments on whether the transportation customers are included under the statute, it asserts that there are no cost-effective conservation measures available for this customer class.

10 In its memorandum for this docket, Staff notes that Avista's Conservation Potential Assessment followed Northwest Power and Conservation Council (NWPPCC) methodology and past standard practice to identify conservation potential. Staff notes that a typical CPA does not include large industrial-scale users of natural gas like the gas transportation customers. Staff recommends, therefore, that the Company investigate conservation measures for transportation customers on a case-by-case basis, over the next biennium.

11 Staff does not dispute the Company's CPA and recommends that the Commission approve it subject to conditions. Specifically, Staff recommends that the Company's present CPA, filed on June 17, 2021, be approved subject to the condition that the Commission place the following requirements on the Company's CPA in two years' time:

1. **Increase Transparency of Subsequent CPA Filings.** The Company will file the full CPA model (confidentially where necessary) with the Commission when seeking approval of the CPA. The Company will coordinate one or more structured, technical discussions as the CPA is developed to discuss the CPA model with Commission staff, other interested stakeholders, and the independent third party performing the

CPA. The Company will work with Staff to establish a timeline and additional supporting documentation required for Staff review.

2. **Assessment of Transportation Customer Conservation Potential.** The Company must evaluate the available and cost-effective savings potential for the benefit of all transportation customers using the following provisions.
  - a) Develop an outreach plan to offer voluntary energy audits, that may be conducted by the utility or third-party contractors, as a customer service.
  - b) Consult with the energy efficiency advisory group in developing a plan and reporting mechanism.
3. **Deferral of Costs.** Costs for implementing and administering an Assessment of Transportation Customer Conservation Potential as described above are recoverable from the customer classes benefitting from these services, including through transportation rates, as determined by the Commission. The Company may request deferral of these costs.

12 On October 14, 2021, the Commission heard comments from stakeholders including Avista, Staff, Public Counsel, and AWEC at its regularly scheduled open meeting. The stakeholders provided additional support for their written comments in this proceeding.

## DISCUSSION

13 We approve the Company's Conservation Potential Assessment, taking effect for the 2021 to 2023 biennium. We accept Staff's first recommended condition, which requires the Company to provide the full model and workpapers supporting its next Conservation Potential Assessment filed in two years' time. However, we decline to rule at this time on whether the Clean Buildings Act requires the utilities to evaluate conservation potential for gas transportation customers.

14 For some time, the Commission has required utilities to develop Integrated Resource Plans, which describe the mix of natural gas supply and conservation to meet customer demand at the lowest reasonable cost.<sup>4</sup> Utilities have also been permitted to recover the

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<sup>4</sup> E.g., WAC 480-90-238(2).

costs of these conservation programs in rates.<sup>5</sup> Avista has set forth its gas conservation acquisition target in its Integrated Resource Plans filed with the Commission.<sup>6</sup>

15 The Clean Buildings Act expands the Commission’s role in evaluating natural gas conservation programs. Pursuant to RCW 80.28.380, a utility must identify and acquire all conservation measures that are “available and cost effective.” The utility must establish an acquisition target every two years, reflecting all “available and cost effective” conservation, with the first target taking effect in 2022. The Commission must now approve the acquisition target by order.<sup>7</sup>

16 We agree that Avista’s CPA for the 2022 - 2023 biennium, subject to the conditions recommended by Staff, meets the requirements of the statute and should be approved. The CPA was prepared by an independent third party and reasonably reflects all available and cost-effective conservation measures typically considered.

17 Nevertheless, the first round of Conservation Potential Assessments under the Clean Buildings Act raises significant policy issues that require further evaluation. We address each of these issues in turn.

*Cost-effectiveness analysis and methodology*

18 The passage of RCW 80.28.380 raises questions as to how utilities should perform cost-effectiveness analyses for their conservation programs. This issue deserves further consideration over the next biennium.

19 Avista’s Conservation Potential Assessment followed NWPCC methodology and past standard practice to identify conservation potential. With regards to the specific cost-effectiveness tests, Avista’s Conservation Potential Assessment primarily relies on the UCT, but it also incorporates the results of the TRC. The Company includes the social cost of greenhouse gas as an avoided cost. We find this approach adequate and approve the CPA but recognize that this is a complicated issue that deserves further consideration in the coming years.

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<sup>5</sup> See RCW 80.28.303.

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., WAC 480-100-620 (setting forth required contents for Integrated Resource Plans).

<sup>7</sup> See *id.*

20 For example, both Staff and Public Counsel have raised concerns as to whether the UCT is able to properly account for the social cost of greenhouse gas emissions.<sup>8</sup> These are valid concerns. We therefore adopt Staff's proposed conditions. Staff's proposed condition 1, noted in paragraph 11 of this Order, provides greater transparency into the next Conservation Potential Assessment filed by the Company and the workpapers supporting this filing. This will allow the Commission to further consider this issue when Avista files its next CPA for the 2024 - 2025 biennium.

21 There are also concerns that using the UCT to perform certain cost-effectiveness calculations may affect decision-making around conservation programs. As we observed in our Natural Gas Conservation Policy Statement, Avista's advisory group plays an important role in evaluating these programs and addressing the potential shortcomings of the UCT methodology. We encourage Avista's advisory group to continue to scrutinize and vet conservation programs.<sup>9</sup>

#### *Transportation Customers*

22 The Commission has also sought feedback as to whether RCW 80.28.380 requires utilities to include conservation measures from gas transportation customers in their identification of conservation measures.

23 The Washington State Supreme Court has held, "Our starting point must always be the statute's plain language and ordinary meaning."<sup>10</sup> We follow the same principle here, but we recognize the ambiguity in the statute at issue.

24 The Clean Buildings Act does not directly address gas transportation customers and whether they should be included or excluded from utility conservation potential assessments. The statutory provision in question, RCW 80.28.380, provides in relevant part that "[e]ach gas company must identify and acquire *all* conservation measures that are available and cost-effective." (Emphasis added). Staff argues that the term "all"

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<sup>8</sup> See WAC 194-40-100 (setting forth the social cost of greenhouse gas emissions to be included by utilities in resource planning, evaluation, and selection).

<sup>9</sup> Natural Gas Conservation Policy Statement ¶ 38 ("To guard against the implementation of unreasonable programs, and to address concerns with the UCT, we continue to rely on the natural gas utilities' conservation advisory groups to scrutinize program designs.").

<sup>10</sup> *State v. J.P.*, 149 Wn.2d 444, 450 (Wash. 2003).

indicates a legislative intent that utilities identify and acquire conservation potential from gas transportation customers.

25 We must, however, still give effect to the remaining terms of RCW 80.28.380, and we do not have sufficient information at this point to determine whether there are “available” and “cost-effective” conservation measures for gas transportation customers. Because the statute requires an inquiry into these very issues, this is not a purely legal question. Rather, it requires applying the law to the facts at hand.

26 Nor do other provisions of the Clean Buildings Act provide clarity. “Where we are called upon to interpret an ambiguous statute or conflicting provisions, we may arrive at the legislature's intent by applying recognized principles of statutory construction.”<sup>11</sup> We have no evidence that the legislature intended to either include or exclude transportation customers when passing the Clean Buildings Act, but we nevertheless observe that it broadly encouraged conservation measures. The legislature declared “that efficiency is the region’s largest, cheapest, lowest risk energy resource” and that the region could potentially meet its needs for electricity load growth with “an aggressive new energy efficiency policy.”<sup>12</sup> Again, the legislative intent appears to broadly encourage conservation without addressing the issue of gas transportation customers specifically.

27 Ultimately, we find that the statute is ambiguous and that more information is needed. We find it appropriate to approve the Conservation Potential Assessment at hand, subject to Staff’s proposed condition 1, which provides greater transparency into the Company’s next Conservation Potential Assessment. The Commission may revisit the issue of gas transportation customers in a future proceeding.

### FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

28 (1) The Commission is an agency of the State of Washington vested by statute with the authority to regulate the rates, rules, regulations, practices, accounts, securities, transfers of property and affiliated interests of public service companies, including gas companies.

29 (2) Avista is a gas company and a public service company subject to Commission jurisdiction.

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<sup>11</sup> *J.P.*, 149 Wn.2d at 450.

<sup>12</sup> Laws of 2019, ch. 285 § 1.

- 30 (3) Avista is subject to RCW 80.28.380, which requires the Company to determine a conservation acquisition target every two years, effective 2022.
- 31 (4) Avista's Conservation Potential Assessment was prepared by an independent third party and followed NWPCC methodology.
- 32 (5) Avista identifies an achievable economic potential in Washington of 173,838 dekatherms in 2022, increasing to a cumulative total of 1,386,479 dekatherms by 2030.
- 33 (6) The Commission received written comments from the Company, Public Counsel, Staff, and AWEC. The stakeholders disagreed as to whether RCW 80.28.380 requires a specific method of cost-effectiveness analysis and whether transportation customers are included under the statute.
- 34 (7) Avista should provide the full Conservation Potential Assessment model and supporting workpapers in advance of its next Conservation Potential Assessment filing in 2023.
- 35 (8) The Commission requires more information to determine whether RCW 80.28.380 should be interpreted as including natural gas transportation customers.
- 36 (9) This matter came before the Commission at its regularly scheduled meeting on October 14, 2021. The Commission heard additional feedback from stakeholders in support of their written comments.
- 37 (10) After reviewing Avista's Conservation Potential Assessment filed on June 17, 2021, and giving due consideration to all relevant matters, the Commission finds that Avista's Conservation Potential Assessment should be approved subject to the Staff's proposed condition 1, set forth in paragraph 11 of this Order.



**ORDER**

**THE COMMISSION ORDERS:**

- 38 (1) Avista Corporation d/b/a Avista Utilities' Conservation Potential Assessment filed on June 17, 2021, meets the requirements of RCW 80.28.380, and should be approved subject to the Staff's proposed condition 1, set forth in paragraph 11 of this Order.
- 39 (2) The Commission retains jurisdiction over the subject matter and Avista Corporation d/b/a Avista Utilities to effectuate the provisions of this Order.

Dated at Lacey, Washington, and effective October 14, 2021.

WASHINGTON UTILITIES AND TRANSPORTATION COMMISSION

DAVID W. DANNER, Chair

ANN E. RENDAHL, Commissioner

JAY M. BALASBAS, Commissioner