

Agenda Date: June 24, 2021
Item Number: A1

Docket: UE-210387
Company: Puget Sound Energy

Staff: Hanna Navarro, Regulatory Analyst

Recommendation

Take No Action, allowing Puget Sound Energy’s (PSE) revision to the WN U-60, Tariff G Schedule 129 to become effective June 27, 2021, by operation of law.

Overview

On May 28, 2021, PSE submitted a tariff filing to revise its electric Schedule 129, Low Income Program. On June 10, PSE submitted a revised cover letter based on feedback from Commission staff (Staff) to add clarifying language. PSE’s proposed revision would update the income eligibility of their Home Energy Lifeline Program (HELP) to comply with the low-income definition established by the Commission in Docket UE-200629.

History

Under Section 12 of CETA, electric utilities must “make programs and funding available for energy assistance to low-income households by July 31, 2021.”¹ On April 21, 2021, the Commission issued a Notice of Programs and Funding Requirements for Electric Utilities Under CETA (Notice) in Docket UE-200629. The Notice clarifies qualification requirements to make programs and funding available to low-income households by July 31, 2021, pursuant RCW 19.405.120(2), Docket UE-200629. Those requirements include that utilities must provide:

1. At least two low-income energy assistance programs.²
2. At least one energy assistance program be readily available to all low-income households.
3. Low-income means household incomes that do not exceed the higher of 80 percent area median income or 200 percent of federal poverty level, adjusted for household size.

In the Notice, Staff found that since the statute requires that all low-income households have *ready* access to the program, utilities must either update bill assistance income eligibility to comply with the statute or file new monetary assistance programs that are available to all low-

¹ codified as RCW 19.405.120

² Energy assistance means a program undertaken by a utility to reduce the household energy burden of its customers, including: weatherization, conservation, and efficiency services; monetary assistance; direct energy resource ownership; and other strategies.

income customers. Currently, weatherization and other programs are not reasonably accessible to all renters and owners of manufactured homes, among others.

Update

PSE's Schedule 129 offers two bill payment assistance programs:

1. Home Energy Lifeline Program (HELP)
2. Crisis-Affected Customer Program (CACAP)

PSE will modify their low-income definition as households with an income not to exceed the higher of 80 percent of area median income or 200 percent of federal poverty level adjusted for household size.³ The definition of very low-income will be adjusted to households with an income not to exceed 80 percent of area median income (AMI), with eligibility capped at 200 percent of federal poverty guidelines (FPL).

These new definitions will go into effect on October 1, 2021, which aligns with the current HELP program year. Beginning that date, if a customer is eligible for HELP, the customer will receive (Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program) LIHEAP funds (up to \$1,000) in addition to funds under this Program or until LIHEAP funds are exhausted.

All other rules and protocols around HELP will remain the same, including the annual funding cap (\$21.558 million for electric and \$5.934 million for natural gas Low Income Programs), the maximum benefit (up to \$1,000 from HELP plus the benefit amount specifically for the applicable Schedule 171 charges), and the role of Community Assistance Program Agencies (qualifying customers and providing information).

Recommendation

This expanded income eligibility threshold for HELP will align this program with the income eligibility section of the Commission's Notice. The expanded income eligibility will also make bill payment assistance accessible to more customers and in a more equitable manner, since AMI is regionally proportional. Staff recommends the Commission take no action, allowing PSE's revision to the WN U-60, Tariff G Schedule 129 to become effective June 27, 2021, by operation of law.

³ defined by RCW 19.405.020(25)