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## RISING ELECTRIC BILLS: A NEW ENERGY REALITY

Central Florida customers are seeing rates go up as much as 19% as utilities pass on higher fuel costs.

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Consumers opening their January electric bills are getting a shock. The huge number on the payment page isn't a glitch, and it isn't a cruel joke from a sadistic someone in the accounting department.

The cost of electricity is taking an enormous jump this year as Florida's utilities pass along the sharp increases in fuel costs that took hold in 2005. The January bill is just the first taste of a new energy reality, one that will certainly grow more glum as hot weather returns a few months from now.

Central Florida households face increases of 11 percent to 19 percent in the cost of the first 1,000 kilowatt-hours of power consumed each month.

Increases are even steeper for additional usage.

"I just feel helpless," said Gerri-Lynn Becker, a Longwood marketing consultant with two young children. "I feel there is nowhere to go. I can't change the power company. I'm stuck."

Becker said that her January bill from Progress Energy Florida was \$334.17, up from \$174.97 in December.

"We're not eating out, and we're spending less at the grocery store," Becker said. "It's affecting a lot of decisions."

Despite the increases, the utilities — electric companies Progress Energy Florida, Florida Power & Light Co. and Orlando Utilities Commission, and

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natural-gas provider TECO Peoples Gas — say they have received relatively few complaints.

"We've had very mild winter weather so far," FPL spokesman Bill Swank said. "We haven't heard a lot of customers complaining

about their bills. Unless we get a really strong cold snap, it will be until the hot, humid weather returns before people begin noticing a change in their bills."

### Fuel prices boost bills

FPL, Progress Energy and OUC all raised rates early this month to offset the higher fuel costs. Damage to natural-gas pipelines from Hurricane Katrina pushed up prices, and fuel-oil prices soared and have remained high. The cost of coal, another key fuel, has also increased.

FPL raised rates 18.5 percent, increasing the bill for the first 1,000 kilowatt-hours of power by \$16.99 to \$108.61. Progress Energy, Central Florida's largest electricity provider, raised rates for the same amount of power 12 percent, or \$11.78, to \$109.56.

OUC customers began paying 11.5 percent, or \$10.34, more this month for 1,000 kilowatt-hours, bringing the cost to \$99.95 before taxes.

### Many customers silent

Despite the increases, many consumers understand why the power companies need to recoup their fuel costs.

"I know that they probably have to pass their costs through," said January Parker-Leclair, who lives in Orange County. "Nobody likes to see their bills go up. But it's tough. We are just barely

getting by, paying the minimum on credit cards. A \$100-a-month increase is hard to handle."

Parker-Leclair and her husband, Joshua, both 28, have a combined income of about \$40,000 a year. She said that means a tight budget, and she said a jump in her Progress Energy electric bill from \$275 to \$375 from December to January will affect many aspects of her life.

"If you don't have the money to do things, they get put on the back burner," Parker-Leclair said.

Yet many customers remain silent.

OUC spokesman Grant Heston attributed the lack of customer calls to an information blitz before the rate increase, as well as consumer awareness that fuel costs have jumped.

Progress Energy said it hasn't been overwhelmed with calls but received more this month than when rates were adjusted a year ago.

"When customers call in, we advise them on energy-saving tips," Progress Energy spokesman C.J. Drake said. "We try to be very proactive in telling customers how they can control energy usage."

TECO Peoples Gas has raised residential rates in the past year to cover higher fuel costs. Spokesman Lance Horton said the typical monthly bill rose from about \$35 a year ago to \$42 this month.

"We get calls daily from people because they are con-

cerned about their bills," Horton said. "They wonder why their bills have gone that high because they aren't using any more gas than they did last year."

TECO and Progress Energy offer customers alternative billing plans that allow them to average monthly costs over a year. High energy-use months in the winter and summer are averaged with months of lower consumption in the spring and fall.

"The budget-billing program helps customers by evening out the peaks and valleys over the course of a year," Horton said.

### **Costs may be unavoidable**

University of Central Florida economist David Scott said there is little consumers can do to combat rising energy costs.

"You have to drive your car because that is the way this country is wired, and you're going to have to pay your electric bill," Scott said. "You just have to adjust."

Scott said low-income workers are hit the hardest. Families that don't make enough to save will have to cut back on other expenditures to make ends meet.

"It's an uneven distribution of pain," Scott said. "The most pain will be felt by the low-income worker."

Lois Aksell, a Central Florida retiree, said her income is fixed, and she will need to make cuts.

"I'm 76 years old, and I don't have another income beside my Social Security and pension," she said. "I ask what I can cut down on. I eat soup, and now I even have to make my own soup from scratch. It's scary."