

# Water

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## Overview

The Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel (OCC) continued its advocacy on behalf of residential water customers in 2013.

Aqua Ohio (Aqua) requested authority from the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio (PUCO) to increase the rates paid by most of its customers for water. Aqua maintains that the rate increase is needed mainly to pay for plant investments made over the past several years.

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## Aqua Ohio customers asked to pay more for water service

The utility's December filing seeks to increase the rates of its customers by \$6.65 million or approximately 11.75 percent overall.

If the request is approved, residential customers would pay an additional \$4.34 million for water service. The remaining portion of the increase would be assessed to commercial and industrial customers, as well as other entities, including public authorities.

Aqua claims that the increase is needed to pay for water plant investments it made during the past several years. Additionally, Aqua's proposal moves toward its goal for

all residential customers to pay the same rates for water service in its Lake Erie, Masury and Aqua Ohio Water (former Ohio American Water) Divisions.

Aqua also proposed to increase several fees that customers pay, including account activation charges, reconnection fees and the monthly customer charge. Customers in two areas, the Lake Erie and Masury Divisions, will see decreases in the monthly customer charge from the current rates.

OCC was reviewing Aqua's proposed increases, at the end of 2013.

*Aqua, Case No. 13-2124-WW-AIR*

# Consumer Education

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## Overview

A key component of the mission of the Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel (OCC) is "education in a variety of forums" for consumers. OCC's public affairs department provided education for Ohioans in 2013. This consumer education included OCC's website, fact sheets, newsletter, outreach presentations to consumers, media relations, and responding to consumers' informational inquiries.

In 2014, OCC will begin using social media as a tool to communicate with consumers.

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## OCC continues its focus on educating consumers about energy choices

Ohio continued its transition toward competitive energy utility services in 2013. Retail electricity and natural

gas suppliers offered a variety of choices for consumers who had the option of purchasing energy through their local utility, selecting a marketer or joining a municipal aggregation program if available in their community.

OCC continued to provide weekly price information updates about electricity and natural gas offers. In this regard, OCC encouraged consumers to choose options that could help save money on their energy bills. At the same time, OCC's outreach and education specialists appeared at events throughout the state, explaining energy choice. And they advised customers about taking careful approaches to answering marketing calls and door-to-door solicitations.

In its spring newsletter, OCC alerted Dominion customers to be aware of a "monthly variable rate" that could increase their natural gas bills. If Dominion customers do not take timely action after their supplier contract ends, they will be assigned to a supplier at its "monthly variable rate." That rate may be significantly higher than the Standard Choice Offer. Customers wanting to buy natural gas at the standard offer instead of the monthly variable rate would need to call Dominion within two months after the end of their previous contract.

Educating customers about energy contracts and how to choose an energy supplier were focuses of OCC's outreach in 2013. With wholesale natural gas prices remaining relatively stable, OCC informed Columbia, Dominion and Vectren customers that their natural gas choices include the Standard Choice Offers of the utilities. The natural gas standard offer often was the lowest-priced offer.

Customers could find more information about the "price to compare" by reviewing OCC's fact sheet, *Comparing Your Electric Choices*. This effort was to help customers determine if they could find a lower generation price from a supplier or were better off remaining with their local utility.

## Low Income Dialogue Group

The Low Income Dialogue Group, facilitated by OCC, continued in 2013. The group is a coalition of stakeholders representing Ohio's at-risk populations. The group's meetings allowed for discussions of current utility issues and strategies for helping Ohioans struggling to pay their utility bills.

Several members of the group wrote letters to the Ohio General Assembly expressing concerns about the potential impacts of Senate Bill 58 on Ohioans' electric bills. Members of the group also analyzed and provided input on various PUCO cases, such as the PUCO's five-year review of rules related to creditworthiness and disconnection of utility services. A major part of this review included an analysis of the rules for the Percentage of Income Payment Plan program (PIPP Plus). PIPP Plus helps low-income customers by allowing them to enter into an extended program making monthly payments based on a percentage of their household income. During the PUCO's review of Ohio's electric and natural gas utility retail markets, members of the Low Income Dialogue Group submitted comments.

Also, as in previous years, the Low Income Dialogue Group reviewed data provided by the Ohio Development Services Agency. The data relate to the effectiveness of low-income programs such as PIPP Plus, the Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP), Emergency Home Energy Assistance Program (E-HEAP) and the Summer Crisis Program. OCC looks forward to continuing the work of the Low Income Dialogue Group in 2014.