



Quarterly Rules

Volume 11 March 2011



GSR 5.10. Levelized Billing Plans for Electric and Gas Utilities

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This Rule has been a long time coming for discussion and not so much for the clarification of how the Rule works, but more for the discussion of how the Rule is explained and presented to your customers.

Our office encounters a huge percentage of calls from customers all over the state who don't seem to have a clue how this program works. Most want to blame the company for a program that appears to be a "no win" situation for them. In reality of course, it is the customer who controls the outcome of this program.

I've often wondered just how many "scripts" each of you have to explain all the different types of programs that you offer, or if you have any at all? It would seem to benefit the company better if each of you were explaining programs like this one on a more consistent basis.

The Rule states that each utility shall explain the plan and give the explanation to the customer in writing. Are you guys sending that explanation in writing or are you falling back on that handbook explanation as compliance? If so, are you asking the customer if they still have that handbook?

The Rule states that all utilities shall file levelized billing plans as a tariff for Commission approval.

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The plan must meet six different standards:

- (1) Applicants must be told about levelized billing plans when they apply for service;
- (2) Qualifying customers may enter the plan at any time;
- (3) A utility may charge a Commission-approved processing fee if a customer withdraws from a plan more than 1 time in 12 months. The amount of the processing fee shall be set forth in the utility's tariff schedule of fees and charges. Do you know what your company charges for this? If you don't, why not look up your tariffs and see.
- (4) When a customer withdraws from a levelized billing plan, the customer shall have the option of paying the account balance in full, or, if qualified, under a delayed payment agreement.
- (5) When a levelized billing customer terminates utility service, the utility shall refund any net credit by check; and,
- (6) When a levelized billing customer withdraws from the plan, the utility shall refund any credit within 30 days. The utility may refund an overpayment by billing credit unless the customer requests otherwise.

I think we all understand the Rule, but feel many times it is not being explained to the customers on a level they understand. Why not start by telling them how you are figuring the levelized amount and that it will be based on their OWN 12 month usage, 12 month billing history or class average, which ever the case may be. Also let them know they are the ones that can control the bill going up or down by the way they use the service from this point on. If they continue to use the

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same number of kWh the levelized bill was figured on (their own 12 month history, their own 12 month bill or the company class average), then it will stay close to the same. Of course a colder winter or hotter summer will affect the bill from the year before, but in the end, it's a rolling average and each new month eliminates the oldest month in that calculation. I'm not sure if representatives are under time constraints with calls from customers, but I can tell you from my experience in customer service that this would not be a beneficial policy to have in place, as each of us are different and what is easy for one to understand may take another person ten minutes to wrap their mind around. I have noticed that when we break it down in the simplest of terms to your customers, they seem to have this "aha" moment of clarity about the plan. They also say it was never explained as clearly to them!

So you see it is well worth your time to insure they understand how the program works because most calls we get here are from customers who feel the company has lied to them. The customer needs to clearly understand that it is "them" who controls if the levelized amount stays in the same ballpark! I think once they understand this, they are less apt to flip that thermostat up or down so freely!

It seems so many are told the amount in the beginning and do not understand that it will change according to how they use the service. So why not get together with your team and come up with one explanation for all to use. Just as customers are different in understanding, I realize employees are different in explaining. You may have to go over that explanation a few times with some folks, but it's very important your customers understand what they are requesting and how it works.

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The Melting Pot

Starting with the September Newsletter we have been giving you tips on how to use our internet. We directed you on how to access dockets in that newsletter and in the last and final segment of training about our website, we will direct you on how to access public comments to the Arkansas Public Service Commission regarding those pending dockets. Of course, in order to voice their opinion the utility must first have an open docket. Your customers always have the right to file comments on any open dockets. Both dockets and public comments coincide with one another.

Now let's get started. We all know that we have to first access the Arkansas Public Service Commission (APSC) website by going to <http://www.arkansas.gov/psc> or just click on the hyperlink. There are three simple steps in accessing public comments.

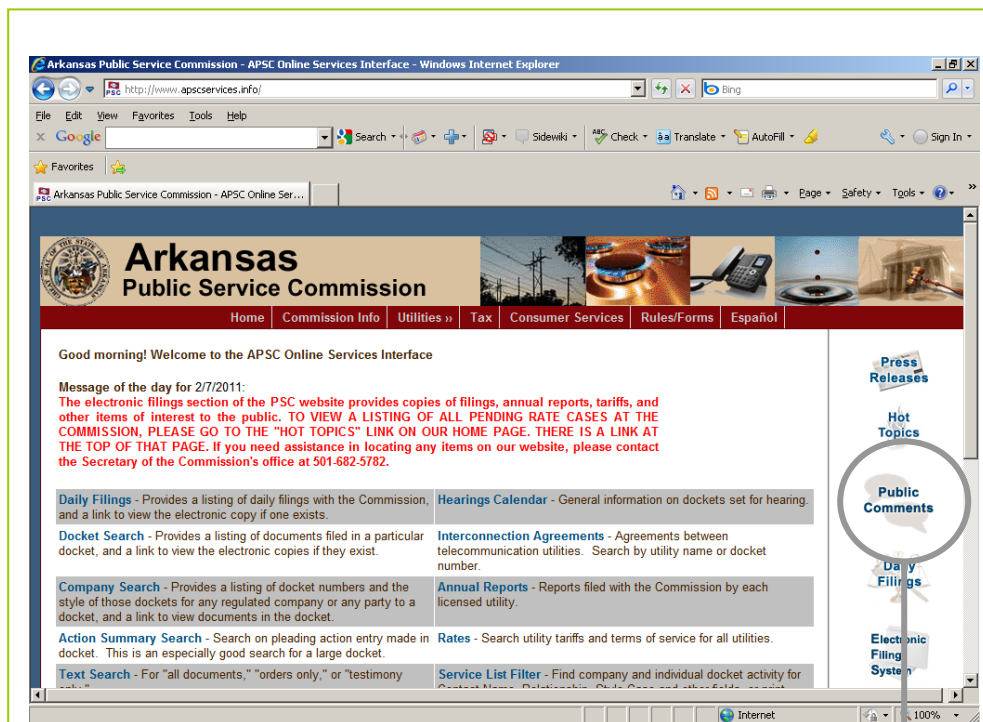
Once you have entered the home page of the APSC, you will notice that over to the right-hand side are topics to click on. You will want to click on "Public Comments".

Visual aid shown below.

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Public Comments

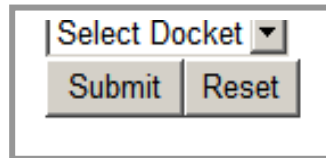
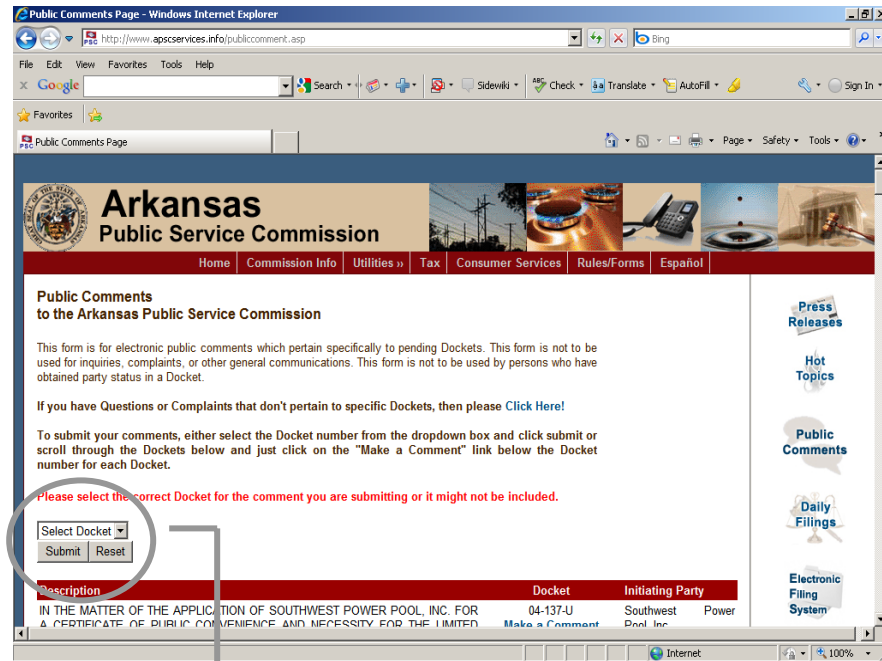
Once you click on “Public Comments” a new page appears. Scroll down until you see a window that says “Select Docket”. At this point you can either type in a docket number if known or scroll through the open ones and select a docket. Then of course you just press submit.

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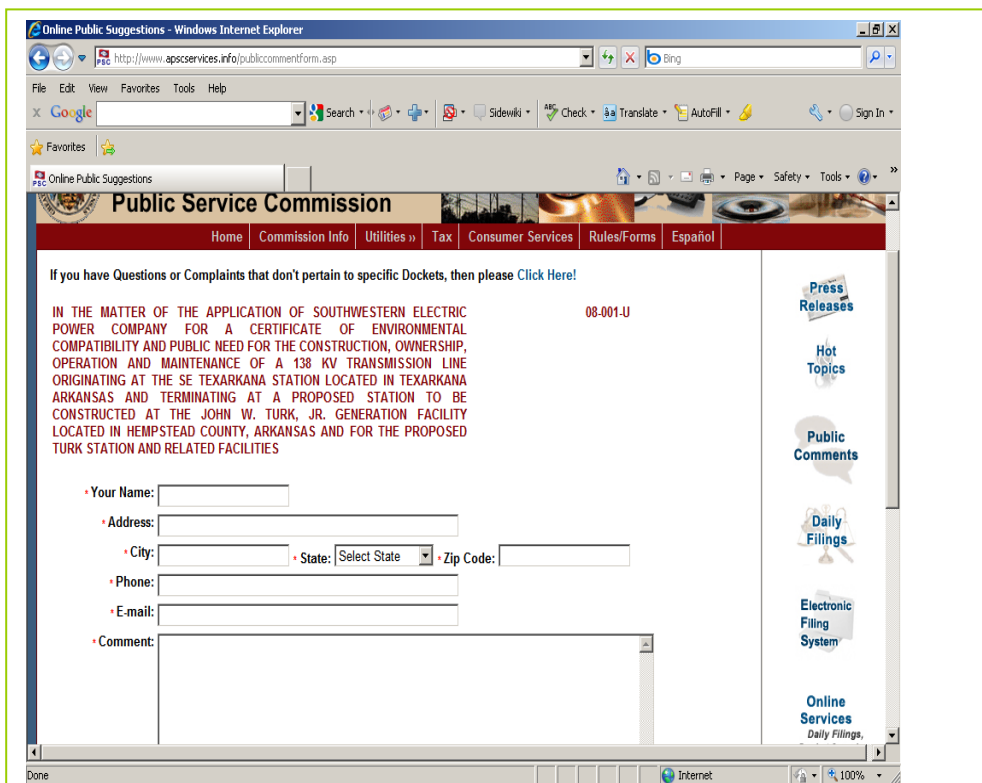
After you have selected the docket you wanted and submitted it, a new page appears with a brief description of what this docket pertains to. Underneath this description is the area where customers can enter their information and opinions. A security code (encrypted) is provided so that no one is allowed to delete the comment.

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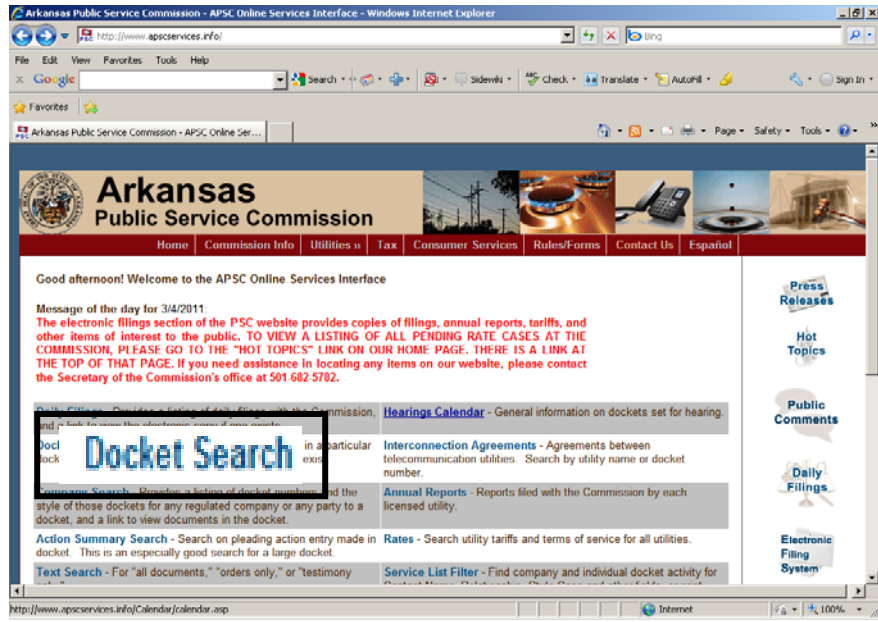
Now for the most exciting, useful piece of information the company will want to know. It's how to view your customers' comments about open dockets and after all, we all know what they say about opinions. Everybody has one!

In order to access comments/opinions made by customers you will need to go back to our homepage. Comments can be accessed in one of two ways; you can either scroll down until you see Docket Search or you can click on Public Comments. Docket search will show all the filings that have gone on within that docket, as well as customers' comments. Public comments will only allow you to view the comments for that docket.

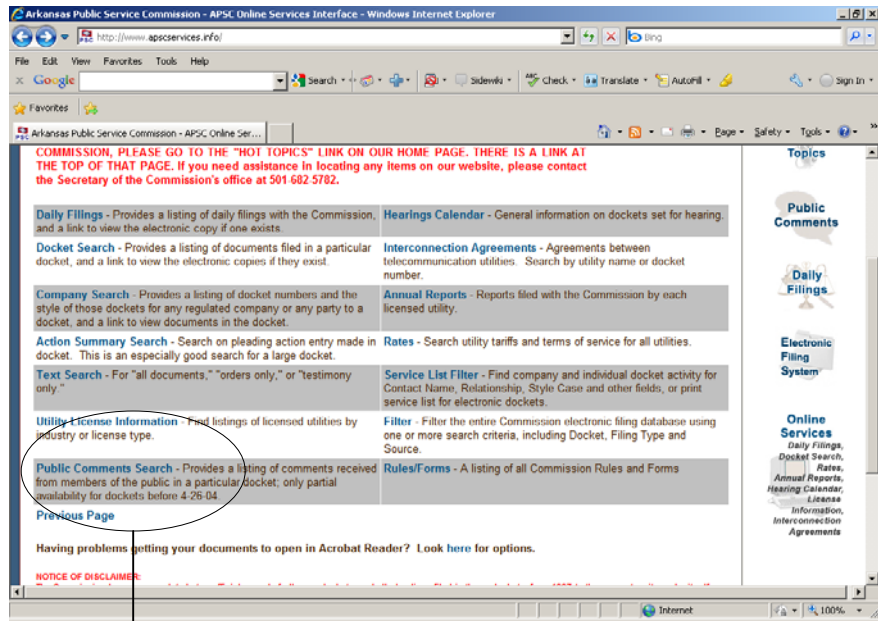
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Public Comments Search - Provides a listing of comments received from members of the public in a particular docket; only partial availability for dockets before 4-26-04.

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So there you have it and with spring just around the corner and the farmers almanac saying we have one more winter storm yet to come, I will close this year's first quarterly newsletter and remind myself that this is life in the Natural State!

I hope the info we have provided about our web-site has been helpful to each of you. I will now go back to using the "melting pot" area for tips on other Rules and as always, please feel free to give us a call anytime you have questions.

That's All Folks!