

PUBLIC UTILITY COMMISSION OF OREGON
STAFF REPORT
PUBLIC MEETING DATE: November 26, 2013

REGULAR _____ CONSENT X EFFECTIVE DATE November 1, 2013

DATE: November 6, 2013

TO: Public Utility Commission

FROM: Linnea Wittekind *LW*
E *MF for MG* *AK*

THROUGH: Jason Eisdorfer, Maury Galbraith, and Marc Hellman

SUBJECT: NORTHWEST NATURAL: (Docket No. UM 1496(3)) Requests reauthorization to defer certain expenses or revenues.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Staff recommends that Northwest Natural's request for reauthorization to defer certain expenses or revenues be approved for the 12-month period beginning November 1, 2013.

DISCUSSION:

On October 16, 2013, Northwest Natural (NWN or Company) filed a request seeking reauthorization to use deferred accounting for gas commodity costs and demand costs. NWN is requesting a deferral of these expenses or revenues so that they can be recovered or returned to customers through the Company's annual Purchased Gas Adjustment (PGA), pursuant to ORS 757.210(1)(b).

Reason for Deferral

The PGA mechanism was originally established by the Commission in Order No. 89-1046 to minimize the frequency of gas cost-related rate changes and the fluctuation of rate levels pursuant to ORS 757.259(2)(e). Commission Order No. 09-263, Docket No. UM 1286, established the purpose of an annual mechanism which allows the company to accrue the differences between what is forecast into rates and actual costs for annual demand and commodity related gas costs. Reauthorization of deferred accounting for the 2013 – 2014, PGA period, is still warranted for those reasons.

Description of Expense or Revenue

NWN proposes to use deferred accounting for the following:

1. Demand and other fixed gas costs to be recovered or refunded at 100 percent of the difference between the actual cost experienced and the amount collected from rates.
2. Commodity gas cost variations to be recovered or refunded.
3. All previously-authorized account balances related to PGA commodity and capacity cost deferrals not presently authorized for amortization or being proposed for amortization, all as described in NW Natural Advice No. 12-14.

Proposed Accounting

NWN will defer to FERC Account 191 for distribution to, or collection from, customers at a later date consistent with the PGA methodology. Gas cost differences will be segregated between demand-related and commodity-related cost differences. Absent deferred accounting the charges incurred for gas costs pursuant to PGA activity and other incurred gas costs would be recorded as increases/decreases in the appropriate FERC Account 401 gas expense subaccounts.

Estimated Deferrals in Authorization Period

The goal of the PGA mechanism is to match gas costs incurred by the Company with gas costs included in customer rates. According to NWN, any differences are the result of unexpected weather or volatility in gas prices, thereby making an accurate estimation of the deferred amount unlikely.

Information Related to Future Amortization

- Earnings Review – An annual spring earnings review will be conducted pursuant to OAR 860-022-0070.
- Prudence Review – Prior to amortization, a prudence review will be conducted. The review should include verification of the accounting methodology used to determine the final amortization balance.
- Demand and other fixed gas costs to be recovered or refunded at 100 percent of the difference between the actual cost experienced and the amount collected from rates as previously authorized in Commission Order Nos. 89-1046, 99-272, and 99-697.
- Rate Spread/Design – Prudently incurred gas cost differences that have been correctly accounted for should be translated into rate changes consistent with historical practice.

- Three Percent Test (ORS 757.259(6)) –The three percent test measures the annual overall average effect on customer rates resulting from deferral amortizations. The three percent test limits (exceptions at ORS 757.259(7) and (8)) the aggregated deferral amortizations during a 12-month period to no more than three percent of the utility's gross revenues for the preceding year.

This deferral is subject to the exception at ORS 757.259(7) that allows the Commission to consider an overall average rate impact greater than that specified in subsection (6) for natural gas commodity and pipeline transportation costs incurred by a natural gas utility, if the commission finds that allowing a higher amortization rate is reasonable under the circumstances.

Should a deferred balance result in a credit to customers, the balance is exempt from the three percent test, per the advice of Staff's counsel.

Staff Analysis

NWN's application for reauthorization of deferred accounting meets the requirements related to the establishment of the PGA mechanism, as well as the requirements of ORS 757.259 and OARS 860-027-0300, and should be approved.

PROPOSED COMMISSION MOTION:

Northwest Natural's application for reauthorization to defer gas commodity costs and demand costs associated with the PGA mechanism be approved for accounting purposes only for the 12-month period beginning November 1, 2013.