

PUBLIC UTILITY COMMISSION OF OREGON  
STAFF REPORT  
PUBLIC MEETING DATE: February 26, 2019

REGULAR  CONSENT  EFFECTIVE DATE January 20, 2019

DATE: February 19, 2019

TO: Public Utility Commission

FROM: Mitchell Moore *mm*

THROUGH: Jason Eisdorfer *JE* and John Crider *JC*

SUBJECT: NORTHWEST NATURAL: (Docket No. UM 1714(4)) Requests  
Reauthorization to Defer Revenues and Expenses Associated With  
Projects Developed Under SB 844.

**STAFF RECOMMENDATION:**

Staff recommends that the Commission approve Northwest Natural Gas Company's (NW Natural or Company) request to reauthorize the deferral of costs associated with the development of projects to be submitted under Senate Bill 844 (ORS 757.539) for the 12-month period beginning January 20, 2019.

**DISCUSSION:**

Issue

Whether the Commission should approve NW Natural's request for reauthorization to defer costs associated with the development of projects to be submitted under Senate Bill 844.

Applicable Law

NW Natural makes this filing in accordance with 757.259 and OAR 860-027-0300<sup>1</sup> seeking authority to defer costs related to the development of voluntary Emission Reduction Programs under SB 844 (codified at ORS 757.539). ORS 757.259 authorizes the Commission to allow a utility to defer, for later recovery in rates, expenses or revenues in order to minimize frequency of rate changes or to match

<sup>1</sup> NW Natural also cites ORS 757.210, but that statute concerns rate changes and is not pertinent to this request for deferral reauthorization.

appropriately the costs borne by and benefits received by customers. OAR 860-027-0300 sets forth several requirements for applications to defer. ORS 757.539(5) authorizes the Commission to allow the utility to recover incremental costs of Emission Reduction Programs from ratepayers that may receive a benefit from the emissions reduction.

### Analysis

#### *Background:*

Senate Bill 844, which is codified at ORS 757.539, established a voluntary emission reduction program (Emission Reduction Program) for natural gas utilities to invest in projects that reduce greenhouse gas emissions that the utilities would not otherwise undertake in the normal course of business.

NW Natural developed a project intended to incentivize customers to install Combined Heat and Power (CHP) systems. NW Natural presented that project to the Commission for approval in Docket UM 1744. The Commission denied NW Natural's application to proceed with the project in Order No. 16-132 primarily on the basis of high-cost impact to rate payers.<sup>2</sup>

NW Natural states that it is currently developing several other carbon emission reduction projects in response to the passage of Senate Bill 844. NW Natural believes that the Emission Reduction Program, provided in ORS 757.539 and OAR 860-085-0500 through OAR 860-085-0750, has enabled the Company to pursue greenhouse gas reduction projects that were historically uneconomical, by allowing the utility an opportunity for cost recovery and financial incentives to undertake such projects. However, a specific timetable for filing other applications has not been set.

#### *Proposed Accounting:*

NW Natural proposes to account for the costs associated with the Emission Reduction Program by recording the deferrals in Account 186. In absence of approval of deferred accounting, the Company would record the amounts in several accounts affecting the Company's income statement and balance statement.

#### *Estimated Deferrals in Authorization Period:*

NW Natural does not have sufficient information at this time to accurately estimate the amount subject to deferral. The Company anticipates that it will need to make a demonstration of the incremental nature of these costs at the time it seeks any cost recovery.

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<sup>2</sup> See Order No. 16-132 at 5.

Pursuant to OAR 860-027-300(4)(b), NW Natural states that it has not accrued any deferred expenses in the previous 12 months; however, NW Natural has deferred a total of \$79,195 since it began deferring expenses for SB 844 programs.

*Information Related to Future Amortization:*

- Earnings review – An earnings review is required prior to amortization, pursuant to ORS 757.259(5).
- Prudence Review – A prudence review is required prior to amortization and should include the verification of the accounting methodology used to determine the final amortization balance.
- Sharing – Under ORS 757.539(8)(b), the Commission determines the method a utility should use to recover costs of programs approved under that statute at the time it approves the program.
- Rate Spread/Design – Under ORS 757.539(8)(a), the Commission determines which ratepayers should be charged for a program approved under that statute at the time it approves the program.
- 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.

Conclusion

NW Natural's application meets the requirements of ORS 757.259 and the Company should be allowed to defer project costs associated with Senate Bill 844. The Commission has found that "encourage[ing] utility or customer behavior consistent with regulatory policy" is appropriate for deferred accounting. (See Docket No. UM 1147, Order No. 05-1070 at 2). Although NW Natural does not have a project pending at this time for which it is incurring costs, Staff supports the deferral to enable the Company to record costs as it pursues projects in the future. It should be noted that at the time of amortization, each project that the Company would like to amortize must be completed (used and useful) and approved by the Commission.

NWN UM 1714(4) Def Costs for SB 844  
February 19, 2019  
Page 4

**PROPOSED COMMISSION MOTION:**

Approve Northwest Natural's request to defer costs associated with Emission Reduction Program costs for the 12-month period beginning January 20, 2019.

NWN UM 1714(4)