Despite increases, Columbia Basin Electric rates still low

By Steven A. Powell

Despite the recent increase in electrical rates by Columbia Basin Electric Cooperative in Heppner, users of that company's power still are not paying as much as people in some other Oregon counties.

Harney Electric in Burns is the most expensive utility company of seven that were surveyed.

A residential customer using 1,000 kilowatt-hours a month will pay $40 to Harney Electric. The same customer of Columbia Basin pays $27.

Umatilla Electric charges the lowest rates as a 1,000 kilowatt user will be charged $19.40. Wasco Electric is next at $26 with CBEC third at $27, Pacific Power and Light in Portland charging $29.70 is fourth, Monument Electric is next charging $31 and Portland General Electric charges $34.27 in the winter and $31.43 in the summer for 1,000 kilowatt residential customers.

Umatilla Electric and Monument Electric charge $98 each to commercial customers that use 5,000 kilowatts a month. Wasco charges $98.50, CBEC $106, Harney $120.50, Portland General Electric $132.30 and Pacific Power and Light $133.55.

Large industrial users of 29,000 kilowatts every month are charged $385 from Umatilla Electric, $418.80 from Columbia Basin, $458 from Monument, $542.39 from Pacific Power and Light, $567.74 from Portland General Electric, $578.50 from Wasco Electric, and $624.50 from Harney Electric.

Columbia Basin's residential rates are $6 basic fee and .021 cents per kilowatt-hour.

Commercial rates are more difficult to compute. For most of the utility companies, commercial rates include the regular energy charge in addition to a demand charge.

Commercial customers of Columbia Basin are charged a $6 fee for basic service. The energy charge is two cents per kilowatt-hour for the first 10,000 kilowatts and 1.12 cents per kilowatt beyond that. The recent rate change ended the discount for customers using 80,000 kilowatts or more.

The demand charge is added to that amount. It is the load factor on the electrical power supply that is computed by some very complex mathematical figures. A KW is the symbol used to compute the load factor. One KW is 1,000 watts. A commercial customer is not charged for less than 30 KW a month but if a customer uses more than 30 KW, the customer is charged $2.50 per KW.

Columbia Basin does not have too many customers that have to worry about the KW charge because the average customer uses about 2,000 kilowatts a month, with an average of 26,000 a year for commercial customers, according to manager Fred Toombs.

Harney Electric also just changed its rates. That company charges customers in Burns eight cents per kilowatt-hour for more than 300. A minimum of $20 a month is charged, which is good for 500 kilowatt-hours.

Commercial rates have a $60 minimum for Harney Electric. The first 150 kilowatts are eight cents each, the next 350 four cents each and more than 500 is 2.1 cents per kilowatt-hour.

Portland General Electric is a private company that just has had a rate change. The company does buy some Bonneville Power Administration energy from the hydroelectric plants during the day and returns the energy to BPA at night when PGE has less of a demand.

PGE charges a $3 basic monthly fee for residential users with a straight charge of 3.1273 cents per kilowatt-hour in the winter and 2.8430 in the summer.

Commercial rates vary for PGE depending on the amount of energy used. The rate used the most is a $15 flat fee with a demand charge of $1.54 per KW for the first 30 KW and $2.78 per KW beyond that. The energy charge is 2.704 cents per kilowatt-hour for the first 10,000 and 2.049 for more than 10,000.

Monument charges residents $6 basic charge, four cents for the first 400 and 1.5 cents per kilowatt-hour for more than 400.

Commercial customers are charged an $8 basic fee with four cents per kilowatt for the first 600 and 1.5 cents beyond that. A Monument spokesman said the rates have not been increased yet but that rate studies are currently being made and there will be a change this spring because of BPA's wholesale increase.

Pacific Power and Light in Portland has its own generating facilities. It charges residents 2.670 cents per kilowatt-hour and a $3 basic charge.

Commercial customers pay a $5 fee for two-phase electrical connections and $8 for three-phase. The first 3,000 kilowatts receive a 3.041 cent charge and above that, the rate is $.716 per kilowatt.

Wasco Electric has a residential charge of two cents per kilowatt-hour and a $6 basic charge.

Commercial rates are $6 basic charge, .005 for the first 500 kilowatts and two cents per kilowatt above that. The first 15 KW for the demand charge is free and more than 15 is $2 per KW. Large commercial users of 100 KW or more are charged $2 for every KW, no basic charge, two cents for the first 50,000 kilowatts and one cent for every kilowatt more thn 50,000.

Umatilla Electric has a residential charge of 1.54 cents per kilowatt-hour and a basic $5 meter charge.

Commercial rates are $5 meter charge, 1.8 cents per kilowatt for the first 5,000, 1.5 cents for the next 10,000, one cent for the next 50,000 and .68 cents for more than 60,000. The first 20 KW are free with a cost of $2 each beyond 20. Three-phase electrical hookups are an extra $3. Umatilla Electric is a cooperataive with BPA as its supplier.

A Bonneville Power Administration press release says that the reason for the increase in rates is because of poor water conditions on the Columbia River with streamflows at a near-record low during 1979. This resulted in a six percent loss in sales and an 11 percent decrease in gross revenue equal to $37.4 million. The total deficit was $69.9 million.

Administrator Sterling Munro said to stop the red ink trend, wholesale rates will rise annually to make sure BPA stays in the black. The increase is the first in five years, the release said.

Another cause of the increase is line losses. Not all generated power reaches the customer, it said. The BPA engineers are currently working on this problem.

With the increase, BPA rates are still the lowest in the nation.

BPA, in an effort to aid consumers, has some energy programs underway including helping to finance 400 to 600 solar units in some areas and giving out interest-free loans to help to insulate 2,500 homes.

Columbia Basin is a consumer-owned cooperative. PGE and PP&L are private utilities owned by stockholders.

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Mel Boyer Photo

Mel Boyer and Dr. Joseph Gifford flew a plane over Mt. St. Helens two hours after the first eruption. This huge crater in the mountain spit out volcanic ash minutes before their arrival.

Committee made to resolve conflict

Columbia Basin Electric Board of Directors met with large and small irrigators last week to discuss the increases in the irrigation rates and a committee was formed to continue to investigate the problem.

Members of the committee are Dexter Miles, Frank Bentoncourt and Marcel Jones for the small irrigators and Marvin Padberg, David Childs and Brok Tucker for the large irrigators.

"That matched three farmers against three engineers," Miles said obviously troubled by the committee selections made by director Van Rietmann.

Rietmann opened the discussion at the fairgrounds annex in Heppner by saying that since Columbia Basin is a cooperative, it is trying to be more responsive than a private business would be to the complaints of the customers.

He said the increase for all Columbia Basin customers is because wholesale rates from Bonneville Power Administration have gone up 97 percent, ice storms near Condon have cost the company money and inflation. A cost of service study was done for five months on all five classes of customers for CBEC.

The Rural Electrification Association recommended Economic Engineering Service Inc. but that study had some "data that we could not rely on so we are refusing to pay all of their fee," Rietmann said.

Upon seeing the mistakes in the first study, large irrigators got together and hired R.W. Beck and Associates to do another rate study.

When the CBEC directors saw the mistakes in the first study, they decided to use the engineers the large irrigators hired because "It was economical not to pay for a third study because their facts were accurate," Rietmann said.

"A compromise (between the small and large irrigators) must be reached," he said.

Large irrigator Marvin Padberg said, "Small pump irrigators are acting the same way we did when we saw the first study. All we saw was red and we did not care about the facts."

Padberg said under 30 horsepower pumps receive the "biggest percentage jump but it is not that much in dollars."

He said small irrigators have not been paying their fair share and the people with more than 30 horsepower are bringing in more money and 70 to 100 horsepower bring in a lot of money to Columbia Basin. He said installation, horsepower and energy create a demand on the system and that is how the new rate is computed.

"Before the large irrigators were on the line, residential customers and Kinzua were paying the slack left by the small irrigators," Padberg said. "The increase is painful to live with. My rates will go up 23 percent or $6,000 and I don't know where I am going to get that either."

Small irrigator Dexter Miles said the 30 horsepower and under irrigators cannot make it pay if the raised rates are enforced. He did a study of 10 small pumps and he said half of them are paying for themselves. There are 157 customers and 374 pumps, with 35 to 40 large irrigators, and the price increase will eliminate many of them (the small pumps) Miles said.

Miles said the price reduction from the first rate study to the second study benefits the large irrigator pumps and so "They are willing for the small (irrigators) to go down the tube."

"It is their (the large irrigators) contention that they are subsidizing the small pumps," Miles continued. "The sub stations have been put in because of the overload on the system caused by the large irrigators. The small pumps were paying for themselves 10 years ago but they aren't now (because the system is bigger)."

Padberg said the cost per acre for the large irrigator is just as much as the small irrigator with Eric Anderson costing $36 per acre, Dexter Miles $28 per acre and Dana Heidamann $43 an acre.

Miles said he did not know where Padberg got his information because he will pay $43 an acre with the rate increase.

Dave Childs said, "Whether we can afford it or not, it affects all of us. This will force all of us to make our pumps more efficient."

Dana Heidamann compared the irrigation rates to the residential rates.

Residential customers are on the same rate schedule, he said. If a person lives out in the country and heats his house with a wood stove, he is not paying for the system because his electric bill is small. But he still gets the same rate increase for all residential users. Irrigators pay the same for energy and the same for hosepower but not the same for demand on the system. They use less electricity with the small pumps but pay at a higher rate on the demand charge, Heidamann said.

"There are a dozen ways to fix a rate to come out with the right amount of money in the end but you have to look at it close to see if it's fair and equitable," Padberg said. "You can't just make it so it will be easy to live with by juggling the numbers around and asking another class to subsidize."

Rietmann concluded the meeting saying, "The (Columbia Basin) board of directors is going to have to bite the bullet. We realize the rates are too high and a compromise must be made."

Dexter Miles　　Marvin Padberg

Ullmann confirms visit

Oregon Congressman Al Ullman will conduct a public meeting in Heppner April 10 and has invited all residents of the Heppner area to attend.

The 9:30 a.m. meeting will be at Heppner High School.

Ullman, who is chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, will make brief remarks about recent Congressional activity, then answer questions from the audience.

Ullman has stops scheduled in a number of Oregon communities in this week-long tour of the 2nd Congressional District.

There will also be a breakfast at the West of Willow at 8 a.m.

Controlled substances topic of Pendleton meeting

The Controlled Substances Committee will have an informational hearing April 25 at 9 a.m. in Pendleton at Blue Mountain Community College according to Morrow County District Attorney Dennis Doherty.

The committee published a reclassification of the drug schedule for Oregon in November of 1979. The changes in the drug schedule were opposed by Doherty and other members of the Oregon District Attorneys Association (ODAA).

At the ODAA Winter Conference in Salishan, the association appointed Doherty to officially monitor the committee's actions.

The Controlled Substances Committee down-classified and therefore eased the penalties for the transportation, manufacturing and possession of such drugs as cocaine, LSD, peyote, mescaline, heroin and marijuana.

Governor Victor Atiyeh agrees with the ODAA and is against the reclassifications as proposed by the committee, Doherty states in a letter he recently sent to the ODAA members.

In his letter, Doherty states that the Attorney General has said in an opinion that the Controlled Substances Committee must reclassify all substances currently controlled under federal law—which it has not. The Attorney General also has said that the committee is not a rule-making body because it must answer to the Oregon Board of Pharmacy. If the Board of Pharmacy does not approve the committee's findings, the committee will have to continue with the reclassification process.

In another opinion, the Attorney General said approving the use of marijuana for medical treatment is preempted by federal law. Whenever there is direct conflict between federal and state law and they cannot stand together—the Federal Controlled Substances Act will preempt state regulation on the same matter. Therefore, the committee and the Board of Pharmacy cannot adopt a schedule in conflict with the federal standards and the down-classification made by the committee is in direct conflict.

The proposed changes by the Controlled Substances Committee were less strict than the federal act.

Doherty questions the constitutionality of the committee allowing a non-rule-making body to classify controlled substances which can change criminal penalties.

In his letter to the ODAA, Doherty says attorneys are not the only ones against the changes which would result "in an erosion of the criminal drug laws." He said executive and legislative branches, professional and public interest groups, news media, parents, schools, law enforcement, civic groups and others are against the proposed changes.

Continuing in his letter, Doherty recommends special legislation for the ODAA to consider.

He said he leans toward legislation that would adopt the federal standards permanently.

Since the Attorney General's opinions say that the federal law will prevail over any state law anyway—that seems like the best way to go, he says.