

BEFORE THE PUBLIC UTILITIES COMMISSION OF THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA

Order Instituting Rulemaking on the Commission's )  
Proposed Policies and Programs Governing Post- ) Rulemaking 04-01-006  
2003 Low-Income Assistance Programs ) (Filed January 8, 2004)  
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**SOUTHWEST GAS CORPORATION  
(U 905 G)  
2005/2006 WINTER INITIATIVE  
FINAL REPORT  
PURSUANT TO DECISION 05-10-044**

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**I.  
INTRODUCTION**

Southwest Gas Corporation (Southwest) respectfully submits its Final Report on the cost impact of the expansion of the California Alternate Rates for Energy (CARE) program provided in this decision along with the cost impacts caused by higher natural gas prices as directed in Decision (D.) 05-10-044 (October 27, 2005). Decision 05-10-044 implemented the *Winter Initiative* in response to high natural gas prices and the impact of those rising prices on consumers, especially low-income customers. Southwest was the only Small and Multi-Jurisdictional Utility (SMJU) to be included in the *Winter Initiative*. Pursuant to Ordering Paragraph 20 in this Decision 05-10-044, by June 30, 2006, each utility shall file a final report on the cost impact of the expansion of the CARE program provided in this decision along with the cost impacts caused by higher natural gas prices. The following sections describe the impacts to Southwest and its customers.

## **II. BACKGROUND**

The Winter Initiative began November 1, 2005, and continued through April 30, 2006. During this period, D.05-10-044 required the utilities to: 1) increase the CARE income guidelines from 175 percent to 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Income (FPI) levels; 2) suspend shut-off for all residential customers who pay at least 50 percent of their current bill during the winter months (November through April) and set up nine-month repayment plans; 3) suspend the collection of reconnection fees and deposits for low-income customers during the winter; 4) waive reconnection and deposit fees for CARE customers; 5) increase outreach efforts for CARE and LIEE; 6) conduct CARE enrollment and re-enrollment by telephone; 7) suspend recertification of existing CARE customers; 8) allow LIEE furnace replacements on a “go back” basis for dwellings that have previously been weatherized, and also allow furnace replacements for renters, where feasible; and 9) add the replacement of leaky or broken water heaters as an approved measure.

## **III. WINTER INITIATIVE IMPACT**

### **A. Cost and Rate Impacts on Customers Due to the Expansion of the CARE Program**

#### **1. CARE Participation**

CARE is an income-qualified rate program that provides eligible customers with a discount from their otherwise applicable sales rates for natural gas service. Specifically, for Southwest, this program provides a 20 percent monthly bill discount to eligible California customers whose qualifying household income does not exceed 200 percent of the FPI.

Prior to the Winter Initiative, income qualifications were set at 175 percent of the FPI level.<sup>1</sup> Previously, Southwest's income guidelines matched the SMJU's at the 175 percent level; however, the Company's CARE guidelines now mirror the major utilities and are no longer the same as the other SMJUs.

Southwest was successful in increasing CARE program participation in response to the Winter Initiative by approximately 42 percent in its Northern California Division, including South Lake Tahoe, and 33 percent in its Southern California Division. Participating CARE customers, on average, received benefits of approximately \$37.00 per month in Southwest's Northern California Division, approximately \$29.00 per month in the Southern California Division and approximately \$22.00 in South Lake Tahoe. Southwest believes that the effort to provide as many CARE eligible customers as possible with substantial relief from high winter bills is laudable; however, providing such relief has resulted in significant cost to Southwest's Southern California Division Non-Care customers. Southwest's estimated cost of the Winter Initiative and the impact to its non-CARE customers is discussed in Section 3.

## **2. Public Purpose Program (PPP) Surcharge Rate**

Pursuant to D.04-08-010, Southwest is required to file an advice letter with its proposed PPP surcharges by October 31 of each year, with a requested effective date of January 1 the following year. Southwest has re-calculated its January 1, 2006 effective PPP surcharges filed in Advice Letter No. 748-A to recover its newly estimated CARE program benefits using the actual CARE customer count as of April 30, 2006. When Southwest calculated the 2006 PPP surcharges for the October 31, 2005 filing, it was

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<sup>1</sup> As communicated by the Energy Division annually per Resolution E-3524, adopted on February 19, 1998.

estimated that approximately 29,000 customers would be participating in the CARE program in 2006, with the vast majority of CARE customers residing in southern California. Southwest had a little more than 39,000 customers on CARE as of April 30, 2006. The tables below outline the filed versus the updated data for the CARE benefits, the number of participating CARE customers, the PPP surcharge rate and average cost per Non-CARE customer.

<b>Northern California</b>	<b>2006 Filed</b>	<b>2006 If Adjusted</b>	<b>Difference</b>	<b>Percent Change From Filed</b>
CARE Benefits	\$412,045	\$587,734	\$175,689	43%
Number of CARE Customers	1,653	2,347	694	42%
PPP Surcharge Rate	\$0.01819	\$0.02286	\$0.00467	26%
Cost/Non-CARE Residential Customer (780 therms)	\$14.19	\$17.83	\$3.64	26%

<b>Southern California</b>	<b>2006 Filed</b>	<b>2006 If Adjusted</b>	<b>Difference</b>	<b>Percent Change From Filed</b>
CARE Benefits	\$6,117,632	\$8,106,010	\$1,988,378	33%
Number of CARE Customers	27,674	36,713	9,039	33%
PPP Surcharge Rate	\$0.09534	\$0.13011	\$0.03477	36%
Cost/Non-CARE Residential Customer (565 therms)	\$53.87	\$73.51	\$19.65	36%

### **3. Impact on Non-CARE Customers**

While Southwest was clearly successful in increasing CARE participation -- the primary goal of the Winter Initiative -- the resulting cost to fund the CARE program in Southwest's Southern California Division is becoming increasingly burdensome for its Non-CARE customers. The disproportionate impact to Southwest's Non-CARE customers is evidenced by comparing Southwest's Non-CARE PPP Surcharge and the average annual

cost to its Non-CARE residential customers versus the Non-CARE residential surcharges and resulting annual cost to Non-CARE customers for Southern California Gas Company (SoCalGas) and Pacific Gas and Electric (PG&E). This comparison is reflected in the table below.

	<b>Southwest</b>	<b>SoCalGas</b>	<b>PG&amp;E</b>
Residential Non-CARE PPP Surcharge <sup>1</sup>	\$0.13011	\$0.05322	\$0.04968
Residential Non-CARE Annual Cost (565 therms)	\$73.51	\$30.07	\$28.07
Southwest Percent Over Other IOUs		244%	262%

<sup>1</sup> The PPP Surcharge for Southwest includes the estimated effect of the Winter Initiative, while the PPP surcharge for SoCalGas and PG&E excludes the effect of any increases that may have resulted from the Winter Initiative.

The disparity in surcharge rates and the annual cost to Non-CARE customers is largely a result of differences in demography between Southwest’s and the other utilities’ service territories. Southwest’s Southern California service area has a very high percentage of low-income residential customers relative to the other utilities. Also, Southwest’s customer base is primarily residential with very few large commercial and industrial customers from which to recover CARE program costs. In fact, excluding volumes that are exempt from the PPP surcharge, approximately, 65 percent of Southwest’s annual throughput is residential and approximately 30 percent of Southwest’s residential volume is already served under CARE rates.

Southwest is concerned about the growing PPP cost burden that is being placed on its Non-CARE customers. Southwest has actively promoted and increased CARE participation in the Southern California service area, and it has led to higher CARE program benefits to be recovered from increasingly fewer Non-CARE customers. Southwest believes there are several options within the Commission’s purview to provide relief to its Non-CARE customers in Southern California. For example, the Commission could return a

greater amount from the State's surcharge fund than Southwest's customers actually contribute, or the Commission could levelize the cost of California's Public Purpose Programs across all customers by developing a state-wide PPP surcharge. Southwest believes assistance from the Commission would be necessary to resolve the disproportionately higher cost to Southwest's Non-CARE customers. Southwest's Southern California PPP surcharge will continue to be higher than the state-wide average, and may become even more disparate from the average as more customers are added to Southwest's CARE program.

## **B. Cost and Customer Bill Impact Caused by Higher Natural Gas Prices**

### **1. Winter 2005/2006 Natural Gas Costs**

During the late summer and fall of 2005, there were expectations of record high natural gas prices for the upcoming winter. For example, NYMEX futures contracts for the five-month strip reached \$14.67/dekatherm in October 2005. A significant factor in the price run-up was the extensive damage to natural gas production facilities caused by hurricanes Katrina and Rita in August 2005. Reduction of supply was expected to exacerbate an already tight supply and demand market. Post-Katrina and -Rita, several industry analysts were concerned that adequate gas storage levels could not be reached before the winter, which placed even greater upward pressure on natural gas prices. To protect customers against extreme price spikes during the winter, two major California utilities requested Commission approval to implement emergency hedging programs. Southwest, however, did not need to modify its existing gas procurement program as it had already hedged a portion of its gas portfolio through storage and fixed-price supply contracts as it had done for the last several years.

Despite reduced supply, storage levels reached 3.2 trillion cubic feet (Tcf) by October 31, 2005, which was at the high end of the normal range. November arrived with mild weather, and prices began to decrease. Across the country, mild weather continued throughout the winter. As a result, storage levels remained at the high end of the five-year historic range and by February were exceeding the historic range. High storage levels, mild weather, and restoration of some of the production in the Gulf of Mexico all served to moderate prices throughout the winter and spring. For example, the March 2006 contract closed at \$7.11/dekatherm, down from a high in December 2005 of \$15.29/dekatherm.

## **2. Impact on Residential Customer Bills**

Nevertheless, these higher commodity prices caused Southwest's residential rates, on average, to be approximately 14 percent higher in Northern California, including South Lake Tahoe, and approximately 8 percent higher in Southern California last winter in comparison to the prior winter season. Specifically, the average winter bill for residential customers in Southwest's Northern California Division rose from approximately \$162.94 in 2004/2005 to \$185.46 in 2005/2006. For South Lake Tahoe, the average residential winter bill rose from \$94.64 to \$107.56. Southern California's average residential winter bill rose from \$108.52 to \$116.95. As such, the increase in California customers' bills was considerably lower than initially expected.

## **IV.** **CONCLUSION**

Southwest will continue to monitor the impact of increased CARE participation and the resulting cost to Southwest's Non-CARE customer. In addition, Southwest will continue to follow today's increasingly volatile energy prices and the impact that these energy prices



may have on our customers in the future. Southwest looks forward to working with the Commission, other California utilities and community agencies to assist both its CARE and Non-CARE customers in continuing to minimize the potential impact of today's energy price levels on their natural gas bills.

Dated at Las Vegas, Nevada this 29<sup>th</sup> day of June, 2006.

Respectfully submitted,

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## CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE

I hereby certify that I have served a copy of **Southwest Gas Corporation's (U 905 G) 2005/2006 Winter Initiative Final Report Pursuant to Decision 05-10-044** on each party named on the official service list in proceeding R.04-01-006 by electronic mail or regular first-class mail.

Dated at Las Vegas, Nevada, this 29<sup>th</sup> day of June 2006.

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An employee of Southwest Gas Corporation