

Get ready for high heating bills

By JOAN BARRON
Star-Tribune capital bureau with wire reports

CHEYENNE -- People need to get girded for some sharp hikes in their natural gas heating bills this winter, the secretary and chief counsel of the Wyoming Public Service Commission said Wednesday.

Driven by wholesale gas prices, consumer gas bills will go up anywhere from 30 percent to 78 percent, depending on where they live, Chris Petrie told reporters during a news conference.

Customers of Cheyenne Light Fuel and Power Co. in Cheyenne and Bluffs will see the steepest rise: from \$142 to \$255 for the average bill in January 2008 versus the estimated bill for January 2009. The cost is based on 20 decatherms of use in January.

The higher increase for Cheyenne Light Fuel and Power customers stems from a credit customers received last January.

SourceGas customers are expected to see increases of about 47 percent in Casper and 39 percent in Gillette. Those projections don't include customers who participate in SourceGas' "choice gas program."

Questar Gas Co. customers in southwest Wyoming are expected to see an increase of about 48 percent.

The cheapest gas is from Frannie-Deaver Utilities, a reduction of nearly 9 percent in costs. Frannie-Deaver is the only utility expected to decrease its price this winter.

Petrie emphasized that the wholesale gas picture is volatile and can change overnight, as it did when Katrina struck New Orleans.

This is the time to increase energy efficiency, such as through weatherization, Petrie said.

"That's why we want to bring out the information now," he said. "There are some things you can do now to reduce your energy use."

He encouraged people to log onto the Public Service Commission web site at <http://psc.state.wy.us/> for ideas.

There also are financial assistance programs available.

"We want to sure people are not missing the information that might help them cope with these heating bills that will be quite a lot more than last year," Petrie said.

Even with the predicted price increases, Wyoming residents likely will pay less than people in most other states, state officials said.

"We're still cheaper than the national average," said Darrell Zlomke, assistant administrator and technical supervisor with the PSC. "We're a little bit cheaper even than the regional average, which is the Rocky Mountain region from Montana down to Arizona and New Mexico."