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An Act To Clarify the Criteria for Provision of Assistance to Low-income Customers of Natural Gas Companies

Be it enacted by the People of the State of Maine as follows:

Sec. 1. 35-A MRSA §4703, sub-§1, as amended by PL 1997, c. 707, §5, is further amended to read:

1. Cost of gas; related costs. Subject to the approval of the commission, each gas utility shall charge its customers a cost-of-gas adjustment rate that includes reasonable costs for the gas that it supplies to its firm sales customers who receive uninterrupted service on a year-round basis. The cost of gas includes the cost of the gas purchased by the company for use in the State and may include costs directly related to the gas purchased and may include all or a portion of the cost of facilities used to produce and store gas, pursuant to rules adopted by the commission under this section. The cost of gas includes the cost of special rate arrangements and bill payment assistance programs for eligible low-income customers pursuant to section 4706-A.

Sec. 2. 35-A MRSA §4706-A, as enacted by PL 1999, c. 664, §1, is amended to read:

§ 4706-A. Special rate arrangements for eligible low-income customers

The commission may approve rates or bill payment assistance programs for residential customers who ~~have been certified as eligible for state or federal fuel assistance that satisfy eligibility criteria for low-income assistance.~~ The commission shall take into account the difficulty these customers have paying in full for natural gas service or that and shall target assistance to these customers in the most efficient manner. Any such rates or bill payment assistance programs that have been approved by the commission are determined to be just and reasonable. The commission may approve recovery of the costs of such rate changes and programs through base distribution rates or through the cost-of-gas adjustment rate pursuant to section 4703, subsection 1.

SUMMARY

This bill clarifies that there may be other eligibility criteria used, in addition to eligibility for federal or state fuel assistance, for providing low-income assistance to customers of natural gas utilities. This clarification of the law allows, but does not require, the Public Utilities Commission to use criteria other than eligibility for federal or state fuel assistance to qualify low-income customers for assistance. It also allows the commission to approve recovery of the costs of this assistance through base distribution rates or through the cost-of-gas adjustment rate.