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### Ameren Rate Hike Goes Into Effect Today

by [Angela Caputo](#) on October 01, 2008 - 10:06am



It's looking like cash-strapped Illinois residents could be in for a long, cold winter this year. And when the sweltering summer heat returns, they may be left to sweat it out alone.

The Illinois Commerce Commission (ICC) last week [gave a nod](#) to the fourth utility rate hike so far this year, allowing [yet another, already profitable](#) utility company to pass higher rates on to consumers. And it's not likely to stop there. The rate increase goes into effect today. Meanwhile, a fifth, \$140 million rate hike request -- this one [from Nicor](#) -- remains on the table. In all, Illinois consumers are in line to shoulder up to \$672 million in additional utility expenses this year.

The ICC didn't give Ameren executives the full \$208 million [they'd hoped for](#). But the \$162 million rate hike -- coupled with \$100 million worth of increases that the company passed on to customers last year -- was hardly a concession for their 1.2 million customers, consumer advocates say.

Ameren's \$690 million worth of profits in 2007 speaks for itself, said Jim Chilsen with the Citizens Utility Board (CUB). The consumer watchdog group plans to push back by appealing the increase. It's also taking on ComEd, arguing that parent company Exelon's \$2.9 billion profit last year illustrates that the company is hardly hard up for cash.

"Too often customers take a back seat to companies bottom lines, which have been fat for the past decade," Chilsen said.

As rates go up, consumer assistance through the federal Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), which is awarded at a flat grant rate, doesn't go as far. Last year, 788,749 Illinois households -- most of them including elderly, children or disabled people -- [qualified](#) for LIHEAP aid. But only half actually got some of the \$149 million in [federal grants](#).

The National Association of Governors [says](#) that it's going to take \$5.1 billion in federal funding to maintain the kind of energy assistance provided over the last year. President Bush recommended funding less than half of that. But this week House leaders requested an appropriation that matched the governors' recommendation for 2009. Some of the money could come through rolling back tax breaks for big energy companies outlined in a compromise energy bill, which [passed](#) the House earlier this month, despite six Illinois Republicans voting against it. The Senate has yet to consider the measure.

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