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Forecast: Natural gas won't skyrocket

By Scott Fitzgerald, The Southern

Friday, November 14, 2008 11:10 PM CST

A recent Department of Energy forecast is reversing its earlier national outlook about soaring winter heating costs related to oil and natural gas.

Electric customers in Southern and parts of central Illinois will not be as fortunate with recent rate hike requests from Ameren approved in September by the Illinois Commerce Commission.

"The (Ameren) rate hike was on the delivery component of a customer's bill that accounts for approximately a third of the total," said David Kolata, executive director of Citizens Utility Board, a watchdog group for Illinois utility customers that is contesting the commission's approval.

According to the commission, a typical AmerenCIPS electric bill was expected to go up by \$2 to \$7 per month beginning in October.

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For customers whose heat comes from natural gas or oil, the news is a bit warmer.

The Energy Information Agency, a branch of the federal energy department, is projecting a 17 percent decrease in residential heating oil prices and 10 percent reduction in propane prices from the previous winter.

Residential natural gas prices are expected to rise by a modest 2 percent. But that's a blessing compared to the steep price increases announced at summer's end, Kolata said.

"It does appear we've dodged a bullet in general. The bubble has burst a bit," Kolata said about the reversal.

Natural gas for the winter season was being projected at \$1.40 per thermal unit at summer's end. The latest DOE information is projecting that unit cost at approximately 68 cents now, he said, noting customers are benefiting from recent congressional action to restore regulatory safeguards to the energy industry.

Many electric customers in Southern and central Illinois are looking at increases in their electric heating costs this winter.

The Illinois Commerce Commission approved a request in September to allow Ameren's Illinois utilities to charge about \$162 million more.

Energy coordinator Debbie Thies of the Western Egyptian Economic Opportunity Council, which provides money for utility bills to qualified families and individuals, said the nonprofit agency is projecting about 7,000 applications from a four-county region in Southern Illinois this winter. That mirrors the total number of requests in 2007.

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