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## Natural gas costs falling like oil rates; area customers should see savings

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Like crude oil, the price of natural gas is falling, and that could benefit consumers.

Wholesale prices are 40 percent to 55 percent less than they were last fall, said Ameren Illinois Utilities spokesman Leigh Morris. Those savings will be passed on to customers, he said.

"Our goal is to minimize the volatility of the gas market and its effect on the customer and keep the prices down," Morris said.

AmerenIP said rates were \$1.44 per therm in October and \$0.93 in November. Projected rates for March are 64 cents per therm.

That means a gas bill of \$150 in October could be around \$70 in March with the same amount of usage.

Illinois Citizens Utility Board spokesman Jim Chilsen looks beyond the immediate savings. CUB is a nonpartisan organization set up in 1984 to represent consumers.

"We're not exactly doing back flips," Chilsen said. "While it is good news prices have been plummeting, it is also a reflection of how the natural gas market resembles a roller coaster."

Chilsen urged consumers to take an active role in regulating their energy costs by being more energy efficient.

The current rate drop does not reflect yearly rate increases over the past 10 years, according to figures compiled by CUB. A comparison of rates from 2000 to 2009 among the metro-east subsidiaries showed a steady increase.

Ameren CIPS averaged an annual increase of a 6.5 cents per therm, while AmerenIP customers saw an average of 7.5 cents per therm per year.

Ameren encourages customers to help deflect the fluctuation of market prices by enrolling in budget billing.

Ameren officials announced last week that they would seek a "smallish" rate increase next year, citing slumping corporate profits. The announcement came five months after state regulators approved a \$162 million increase for the corporation's delivery costs.

The utility giant did not specify when Ameren will file a rate increase request or how much money it wants.

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