



Annual Report 2018-2019



utilitiesconsumer
advocate

Alberta 

Honourable Nate Glubish
Minister of Service Alberta
423 Legislature Building
Edmonton, AB T5K 2B6

Dear Minister Glubish:

The Power & Natural Gas Consumers' Panel last met on June 10th, 2019, to review the Office of the Utilities Consumer Advocate's (UCA) Annual Report for Fiscal Year 2018-19, in accordance with our mandate. The Panel includes representation from key municipal, business, and agricultural associations, as well as a cross-section of public members with diverse expertise related to utility issues.

The Panel finds the UCA provides tremendous value to small business, farm, and residential utility consumers through its advocacy, consumer education, and mediation services. Increasing distribution and transmission fees on utility bills are a significant concern for consumers. The UCA's interventions in Alberta Utilities Commission rates proceedings contributed to over \$267M in savings for consumers last year. This was money put back in the pockets of businesses and households that could then be reinvested back into the economy, helping put Albertans back to work and making their lives better. UCA mediation services help consumers navigate complicated utility terms and conditions and address their concerns when disputes arise with their utility providers. UCA consumer education encourages competition in a free market system for retail energy services by promoting consumer awareness of choice, and providing them with tools and knowledge to have the confidence to make decisions in that marketplace.

The UCA is ultimately funded by ratepayers through their utility bills, typically less than 20 cents a month for most ratepayers. The UCA is a cost effective investment for ratepayers given the results it achieves. The fact the UCA has consistently achieved operational surpluses against its budget allocations over the past few years, and that ratepayers only pay for the UCA's actual expenditures, mean that the UCA is cost efficient as well. The Panel recommends you accept this Annual Report, and request the Minister of Energy recover the UCA's 2018-19 expenditures from the Balancing Pool and Natural Gas Distributors through the usual Ministerial Orders issued annually.

The Panel looks forward to working with you to ensure the concerns of small business, farm, and residential energy utility consumers are understood and addressed.

Sincerely,

Rhiannon Mesler
Power & Natural Gas Consumers' Panel Chair



Honourable Nate Glubish
Minister of Service Alberta
423 Legislature Building
Edmonton, AB T5K 2B6

Dear Minister Glubish:

RE: ANNUAL REPORT FOR 2018-19

The Office of the Utilities Consumer Advocate's (UCA) works with small businesses, farmers, and residential customers to help reduce their energy costs through representing their interests at regulatory (rate) proceedings, mediating disputes with their utility providers, and advising them on their options for energy utility services. These efforts support the Government's priorities of getting Albertans back to work and making life better for Albertans.

The UCA Regulatory Affairs section provided evidence cited in Alberta Utilities Commission (AUC) decisions last fiscal year that resulted in over \$267 million in cost disallowances, which translate into real savings for Alberta's electricity and natural gas consumers. This figure also represents a return on investment of almost \$67 for every \$1 spent on the UCA's Regulatory Affairs program.

UCA staff also received over 24,000 calls from Albertans looking for assistance during the last fiscal year through the 310-4UCA line. Most calls are from consumers looking for advice and information about their utility situation; however, over 3,800 of the total calls included mediation services. The majority of mediation calls dealt with customer service, billing, or disconnection issues.

The UCA's consumer education program promotes consumer awareness of retail choices, providing independent and impartial information tools to assist them in making informed choices based on their individual circumstances.

Alberta's small business, farm, and residential consumers still have many concerns with their utilities bills and services, but UCA advocacy, mediation, and consumer education services provide them with confidence their interests are protected. I trust you will find this work of value and highly supportive of your agenda of getting Albertans back to work and making life better for Albertans.

Sincerely,

Chris Hunt
Advocate



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1. Introduction

The UCA empowers residential, small business and farm electricity, natural gas, and water utility consumers in Alberta through its three core functions:

- Advocacy** ► The UCA acts as the voice of electricity and natural gas consumers in dozens of regulatory proceedings every year to ensure the lowest-possible rates for Alberta utility consumers, consistent with reasonable service.

The UCA works closely with other governmental departments and agencies, as well as utility service providers, to ensure that consumer interests are addressed in policies, regulations, and industry practices.
- Education** ► The UCA provides information and advice to consumers so they understand their water utility services, and how to make informed choices about how to purchase electricity and natural gas based on their individual circumstances.
- Mediation** ► When consumers have exhausted known avenues of issue resolution, the UCA will investigate and attempt to resolve their concerns through mediation with utility companies.

Vision

Alberta's residential, farm, and small business utility consumers are confident the UCA provides them with the information and representation they need to protect their interests.

Mission

The UCA advocates, mediates, and educates for Alberta's residential, farm, and small business utility consumers to represent their interests at regulatory proceedings to ensure they receive reliable services at reasonable prices, mediate disputes with their utility providers and to provide the information they need to make informed decisions.

Mandate

The UCA is established by the Government Organization Act, Schedule 13.1. The Act assigns the following responsibilities to the Office of the UCA:

- (a) to represent the interests of Alberta residential, farm and small business consumers of electricity and natural gas before proceedings of the Alberta Utilities Commission and other bodies whose decisions may affect the



The UCA's mandate is set out in Schedule 13.1 of the Government Organization Act. The UCA also administers the budget of the Transmission Facilities Cost Monitoring Committee, a committee established by the Minister of Energy pursuant to Ministerial Order 64/2010.

- interests of those consumers;
- (b) to disseminate independent and impartial information about the regulatory process relating to electricity and natural gas, including an analysis of the impact of decisions of the Alberta Utilities Commission, other bodies and the courts relating to electricity and natural gas;
 - (c) to inform and educate consumers about electricity, natural gas and water utilities issues;
 - (d) to disseminate independent and impartial information to assist electricity and natural gas consumers in choosing a distributor, provider or retailer, including:
 - (i) complaints made under this Schedule, the Electric Utilities Act or the Alberta Utilities Commission Act and the outcome of any recommendation, hearing or settlement,
 - (ii) investigations, orders, administrative penalties or convictions conducted, awarded or made under the Electric Utilities Act, the Alberta Utilities Commission Act or the Consumer Protection Act,
 - (iii) compliance records of a distributor, provider or retailer in adhering to the standards and codes prescribed under the Electric Utilities Act, the Alberta Utilities Commission Act and the Consumer Protection Act, and
 - (iv) any other matters the Utilities Consumer Advocate considers necessary to carry out the purposes of this clause;
 - (e) to assist in the resolution of any consumer issue, complaint or dispute between a consumer and a distributor, provider or retailer relating to the provision of electricity, natural gas or water as the Utilities Consumer Advocate considers appropriate and, if a resolution is not reached, to refer the complaint to the person, body or authority the Utilities Consumer Advocate considers appropriate;
 - (f) to develop and undertake activities that the Utilities Consumer Advocate considers appropriate for the purposes of

- (i) preventing the disconnection of electricity or natural gas provided by a retailer or provider to a consumer, or
 - (ii) facilitating the reconnection of electricity or natural gas provided by a retailer or provider to a consumer;
- (g) to carry out such other responsibilities relating to electricity, natural gas and water as the responsible Minister determines.

2. UCA Advocates Regulatory



The AUC may accept a “Cost Disallowance” based on evidence from interveners. E.g. An applicant may request \$6M for new computers. The UCA presents evidence to show they only need \$4M. The AUC accepts the evidence and disallows this cost; a cost disallowance of \$2M (6M-4M).

The UCA Regulatory Affairs Section reviews all of the hundreds of applications submitted to the Alberta Utilities Commission (AUC) each year, and typically intervenes in a few dozen proceedings that could have the most impact on consumers. The UCA advocates for safe, reliable, cost-effective utility service that meets the needs of consumers today and tomorrow. Most of the AUC proceedings where the UCA intervenes address service quality, terms and conditions, or rates for consumers.

The UCA intervened in 68 AUC proceedings during the 2018-19 FY; 38 of those proceedings were concluded and a decision issued by the end of the FY on March 31st, 2019. UCA evidence and arguments cited by the AUC in its decisions prevented unjustified expenses from being downloaded to consumers.

Table 1 on page 8 summarizes the participation and value of UCA regulatory interventions in AUC proceedings since 2013. These cost disallowances are significant, totalling \$1.333 billion since 2013, and over \$267 million during FY 2018-19. Table 1 also demonstrates the strong return on investment consumers have received from the UCA’s Regulatory Affairs program during 2018-19; for every \$1 invested, almost \$67 in cost disallowances were recorded. The UCA has included the performance measure of a rolling three-year average for cost disallowances to adjust for the variance in the number of AUC proceedings and decisions that occur from year to year. For 2018-19, that rolling three-year average was almost \$241 million.

UCA Advocacy in Action:

In June 2018, the Alberta Utilities Commission was persuaded by the UCA Regulatory team's evidence and arguments in a regulatory proceeding dealing with Direct Energy Regulated Services (DERS) 2017-2018 Regulated Rate and Default Rate Tariff application.

The Commission issued a decision to prevent \$20.9 million of proposed service costs from being passed on to approximately 661,000 DERS customers in Alberta, through their utility bills. One other intervener made similar arguments, so this one proceeding was measured as approximately \$10.5 million in cost disallowances out of the UCA's \$267 million over 38 proceedings during Fiscal Year 2018-19.

Table 1 - UCA Participation in AUC Regulatory Proceedings 2013-18

UCA Participation in AUC Regulatory Proceedings						
	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19
# of proceedings	60	44	35	33	33	38
# of issues contained in those proceedings	612	689	429	471	369	308
Intervened in (# of issues)	115	232	127	108	125	90
Filed evidence (% of issues)	21.2%	18.2%	66.4%	73.7%	72%	28%
Filed Argument on (% of issues)	94.6%	96.9%	98.1%	95.83%	86%	69%
AUC agreed with UCA on (% of issues)	58.7%	59.9%	50%	72.5%	42%	59%
UCA was sole intervener on (% of issues)	48.3%	35%	47.3%	33.27%	52%	43%
UCA Regulatory Affairs Program costs (millions)	\$4.99M	\$5.02M	\$4.64M	\$3.92M	\$4.42M	\$4.00M
UCA evidence/argument cited in AUC decision as cost disallowances (value in millions)*	\$48M	\$522M	\$30M	\$204M	\$251M	\$267M
Cost disallowances per \$ invested in UCA Regulatory Affairs	\$9.62	\$103.98	\$6.47	\$52.04	\$60.47	\$66.78
Rolling three-year average of cost disallowances	N/A	N/A	\$200M	\$252M	\$161M	\$241M

**The significant variance in annual cost disallowances is largely tied to the value of issues being examined by the AUC in their proceedings and the decisions published each fiscal year. For example, AUC Decision 2941-D01-2015 Generic Cost of Capital included cost disallowances of \$239.6 million and was published on March 23, 2015; had it been published nine days later, it would have counted against 2015-16 statistics.*



24,688 calls from Albertans
and mediation services for
3,835 customers



3. UCA Mediates

Mediation

The UCA received 24,688 calls from Albertans through the 310-4UCA (310-4822) line during FY (fiscal year) 2018-19. The majority of calls to the UCA are customers looking for advice and information about their utility situation. Mediation Officers provide consumers with a list of retailers and product offers, education about the energy market, and information that will help a customer to make an informed choice about their service. Of the total calls, 3,835 customers were provided with mediation services.

This included investigating concerns raised by consumers and attempts to resolve their concerns through mediation with utility companies. The most common reasons for mediation are billing issues; early exit fees; concerns about billing and customer service; and disconnections for non-payment or non-application. Each year, the UCA participates in the AUC's Winter Utility Reconnection Program. The UCA is supplied with the names and contact information for Albertan consumers whose electricity and/or natural gas services are being disconnected at the beginning of the winter season.

Multiple attempts are made to reach those individuals through phone calls and letters in an effort to assist in the reconnection process. This includes providing information and advice, mediating payment arrangements, and connecting consumers with support programs, if required. As part of the AUC Winter Utility Reconnection Program, the UCA helped reconnect 81 disconnected households during the 2018-19 winter season.



Help with Outstanding Balance Mistake:

After 6 months of dealing with an outstanding utility bill that he had already paid, Greg called the UCA for help. A Mediation Officer reviewed the documents he provided and contacted the utility company on his behalf. The Officer worked with the company until they located the missing payment and applied it to his account.

4. UCA Educates

Consumer Education and Awareness Program

The UCA Consumer Education and Awareness Program includes three complementary components:

- (1) The www.ucahelps.alberta.ca website;
- (2) UCA social media channels; and
- (3) UCA Consumer Outreach Program.

Website

The www.ucahelps.alberta.ca website is the foundation of the UCA Consumer Education and Awareness Program. The UCA website provides an important objective source of information for consumers about retail choice, their monthly bills, helpful tips and hints, and where to go for help. The site also includes detailed information about the energy markets, and utility regulatory processes and decisions. The website even includes a cost-comparison tool so that consumers can easily review the products available in their area. In 2018-19, website visits increased over 20% from last previous fiscal year, increasing annual site visits from 195,893 in FY 2017-18 to 235,979 in FY 2018-19. This substantial increase in web traffic was attributed to the promotion of the website through social media, and the UCA Consumer outreach program.

Social Media Engagement

Late in FY 2016-17, the UCA hired a Digital Content and Engagement Specialist, who not only updated website content continually, but established and administered the UCA social media accounts on Facebook and Instagram. FY 2017-18 marked the first year of UCA social media activity. The UCA had 4,201 Facebook engagements in FY 2017-18, increasing 120% to 9,237 in 2018-19. In 2017-18, the UCA had 1,441 Instagram followers, increasing 42% to 2,051 in FY 2018-19. UCA staff also provided posts to Service Alberta Communications for updates on Service Alberta and Government of Alberta social media accounts, and the UCA is working with Communications and Public Engagement on ways to enhance use of social media to educate more utility consumers.

ucahelps.alberta.ca
visits up *over 20%*



Engagements
up **120%**



Followers
up **42%**



Consumer Outreach Program

The Consumer Outreach Team conducted many education sessions at community events, trade shows, and conferences, as well as other one-on-one meetings with stakeholders and attended other events. The direct engagement of consumers enabled the Consumer Outreach Team to share feedback that facilitated improvements to the UCA website and social media posts, as well as referrals to the UCA Mediation Team and the identification of regulatory and policy issues to the Regulatory Affairs section. In fiscal year 2018-19, the Consumer Outreach Team's efforts expanded as they conducted 106 activities, directly engaging with nearly 10,500 people.

Table 2 - UCA Consumer Outreach Activity Summary

Event Type	2017-18 FISCAL YTD TOTALS April 1, 2017 - March 31, 2018		2018-19 FISCAL YTD TOTALS April 1, 2018 - March 31, 2019	
	# of Events	# of People	# of Events	# of People
Presentation	18	356	20	533
Trade Show	42	7,480	33	9,647
Meeting/ Networking	17	36	47	242
Event Attendee	1	12	6	52
TOTAL	78	7,884	106	10,474



5. Power & Natural Gas Consumers' Panel

Panel Mandate

Created under s. 7 of the Government Organization Act, the Power and Natural Gas Consumer's Panel ("the Committee") is an advisory agency accountable to the Minister of Service Alberta ("Minister") and responsible for providing advice and guidance regarding current and emerging energy consumer issues.

Panel Members FY 2018-2019

Chair, Public Member

Rhiannon Mesler



▶ Born and raised near Strathmore, AB, Dr. Rhiannon M. Mesler is an Assistant Professor in Marketing at University of Lethbridge (Calgary Campus). She holds a PhD and MSc from the University of Calgary, and a BA from the University of Waterloo. Dr. Mesler's research focuses on technology, teamwork, and socially positive behaviours like recycling, ethical consumption, and charitable giving. Dr. Mesler completed a Postdoctoral Fellowship at the University of Alberta and an internship at the United Nations Department of Management in New York City. Rhiannon was a founding member of the Classroom Champions Board of Directors, served on the Board of Directors of United Way of Calgary and Area and the City Centre for Charity Effectiveness Trust Board of Trustees. She has also been named to Calgary's Top 40 Under 40 and Marketing Magazine's 30 Under 30.

Bill Given



▶ *Member representing Alberta Urban Municipalities Association*

In October 2017, Bill Given began his third term as Mayor of Grande Prairie. The lifetime city resident was first elected to Council as an alderman in 2001 and served three terms. Prior to becoming Mayor, Bill's career included marketing and communications consulting, and sales in the information technology sector. He attained his Master of Arts in Leadership at Royal Roads University and a Certificate in Local Authority Administration from the University of Alberta. Bill's wide-ranging experience includes serving on the Alberta Urban Municipalities Association's Governance Committee the last two years. It is also a key year for Intermunicipal Collaboration

Tom Burton



► **Member representing Rural Municipalities of Alberta**

Tom Burton has lived in the DeBolt area of the Municipal District of Greenview since 1976. Tom has had several different occupations, including surveyor, owner/operator of a trucking company, owner/operator of a service station and restaurant, and general manager for the DeBolt and District Agricultural Society (Golf Course, Curling Rink & Community Hall). Tom became a member of the DeBolt Fire & Rescue in 1993, and in 1995 was selected as the Chief, a position he still retains today. Tom continues to be a councillor for the Municipal District of Greenview #16, after being elected in the 2001 municipal election. At the RMA (formerly AAMDC) Fall 2008 conference, Tom was elected as Director of District 4. Since then, Tom has been active on many committees as a representative of the RMA: AAMDC Standing Issues Committee on Social Services, Forest Protection Advisory Committee, Fire Services Advisory Committee, FireSmart: Partners in Protection; and Endangered Species Conservation, just to name a few. Tom became a registered Emergency Medical Responder (EMR) in 2001, and continues to be registered yearly. Tom became and continues to be a Director on the Grande Prairie & District Rural Crime Watch Association, since 1993. Tom currently is on the board of directors for the Safety Codes Council and participates on the Audit & Risk Committee. Tom is also on the RMA Insurance board of directors.

Don Oszli



► **Member representing Alberta Chambers of Commerce**

Don Oszli is a former Managing Partner in the public accounting firm, Pivotal LLP. He holds a Bachelor of Commerce from the University of Alberta and is a Chartered Accountant, Certified Management Accountant and Certified Internal Auditor. Throughout his career, Don has chaired a number of industry association committees, including the Audit & Finance Committee for Travel Alberta, Red Deer Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors, Institute of Chartered Accountants Audit Committee, Alberta Chamber

of Commerce Executive, Red Deer Regional Airport Authority and The Leadership Centre. Since 2017, Don has served as the Chair of Parkland Class, a not-for-profit corporation and registered charity employing 900 people and providing disability support for adults and children in need. He became a Fellow of the Institute of Chartered Accountants in 2004 and was awarded the Gus Bakke Memorial Award by the Canadian Home Builders Association, as well as the Queen's Golden Jubilee Award. For the past 25 years, Don has taught at the Institute of Chartered Professional Accountants of Alberta and created new professional development course material. He has authored numerous publications, including Orientation to Public Practice (Level I and Level II) and Public Accounting Registration Criteria (PARC) Modules 3, 4 and 5, published by the Institute of Chartered Accountants.

Humphrey Banack



► **Member representing Alberta Federation of Agriculture**

Mr. Humphrey Banack and his family operate a 7000-acre third generation grains and oilseeds farm in the Round Hill area, 50 miles southeast of Edmonton. His farm has grown from a small mixed operation into a larger, more complex operation requiring considerable management time. Humphrey has been involved with the Alberta Federation of Agriculture since 2003, serving as president for four years. He served as Vice-president of the Canadian Federation of Agriculture from 2011 to 2017, meeting agricultural producers from across Canada and around the world. Mr. Banack was born and raised in the Round Hill area and has been deeply involved in the community his entire life. He understands the growing challenges that rural communities face today such as decreasing population, increasing costs, and providing the necessary programs that enliven rural communities.

Barbara Baker



► **Public Member**

Barbara Baker is a power industry professional with over 27 years experience working in a variety of disciplines, including trading, enterprise risk management, generation development, retail regulatory advocacy, and energy efficiency. She has earned her BSc (Physics) and MA (Economics) from the University of Alberta. Barbara has authored books on energy efficiency and emissions reductions options for power and gas utilities. Her community outreach endeavours include mentorship of

Sandra Moore



► **Public Member**

Sandra Moore is the Dean of Business, Environment and Technology with Norquest College in Edmonton, Alberta. She is also a Ph.D. Candidate in the School of Environment and Sustainability at the University of Saskatchewan where her research focuses on understanding the socio-economic impacts of the oil and gas industry on rural communities. As a research consultant she has worked with municipalities, post-secondary institutions, non-profit organizations, and economic development associations to help them better understand the impacts of renewable energy. Additionally, Sandra is a board member with Energy Efficiency Alberta and active community volunteer.

Michael Ng



► **Public Member**

Michael Ng is a professional engineer (PEng), project manager (PMP), and operational lead with diverse industry experience. Born and raised in Alberta, he started his career as a field engineer in Alberta's oil patch, Michael advanced into design work, working as an electrical engineer on refineries. When an opportunity arose in project management, Michael shifted his career into the utility industry, executing over \$800 million in projects for a transmission facility owner (TFO). His career highlights include the system upgrades associated with the Keephills 3 generator, installing Alberta's first phase-shifting transformer, and successful energization of the Heartland Transmission Line, including Alberta's first 500 kV gas-insulated line. Michael has also focused on AC (alternating current) interference mitigation in his career. He developed a standardized approach for this work within the TFO, completed his MBA Capstone project on this topic, and continues to advance AC mitigation through his roles in the oil and gas industry. Currently, Michael is the VP of Operations for pureHM, a pipeline consulting/field services company and also serves as a public council member for The Alberta Association of Architects (AAA).

Aida Nciri



► **Public Member**

Aida Nciri has spent over seven years working as a policy analyst and a researcher in both industry and academia, gaining experience in energy systems and energy policy and governance of low-carbon transitions. Aida holds a Master of Public Policy (Science-Po, Paris, France) and PhD (University of Calgary). Her research focus is low-carbon policies in Alberta and France, and their impacts on the diffusion of district energy and distributed generation. Involved in her community, Aida is on the Board of Directors for the Norfolk Housing



Association, a non-profit organization providing accommodation to vulnerable Albertans through a mixed-rent housing model. She works for a non-government organization QUEST, which advances Smart Energy Communities across Canada.

Power and Natural Gas Consumers' Panel Activities

The Power and Natural Gas Consumers' Panel met for the first time in September 2018 for a two-day orientation, following their appointments in June 2018. The Panel met again in late November 2018, and provided advice on the following subjects: enhancing consumer education services to better serve farmers and small businesses; support for simplifying the energy retail advertising disclaimer under the Code of Conduct Regulation so it was easier for consumers to understand; and support for increasing partnerships with community organizations to help increase public awareness of UCA mediation services.

6. Financial Information

The UCA's financial results (unaudited) for the 2018-19 FY are presented in Table 3. For FY 2018-19, the UCA had an overall budget surplus of \$2.566 million.

The majority of the surplus came from two programs:

- The Regulatory Affairs program, which had a surplus of \$1,705,096, was the single largest contributor to the overall variance. Of that, that vast majority was a \$1,667,025 surplus in contract services as internal UCA staff were used for the majority of research and project management services on regulatory interventions, instead of external consultants.
- The Consumer Education and Awareness program, with a surplus of \$205,000 was the second largest variance. This variance was due to gaps in staffing and the deferral of several consumer education and outreach projects.

Also of note, the Transmission Facilities Cost Monitoring Committee program had a deficit of \$55,000 due to the appointment of a new Chair, whereas the position had been vacant in the previous fiscal year.



Table 3 - Financial Report, 2018-19 Fiscal Year Ending
March 31, 2019

STATEMENT OF OPERATIONS¹ - 2018-19
(thousands of dollars)

Expense	Budget	Actual	Variance
Advocacy Services	999	910	89
Mediation Services	720	677	43
Regulatory Affairs	6,266	4,001	1,705
Consumer Education & Awareness	861	656	205
Power/Natural Gas Consumers' Panel	32	8	24
Transmission Facilities Cost Monitoring Committee ²	123	178	(55)
Total Expense	9,001	6,635	2,566

¹The UCA is funded 80 per cent by the Balancing Pool and 20 percent by Natural Gas Utilities.

²The Transmission Facilities Cost Monitoring Committee is funded 100 percent by the Balancing Pool.

