

Menu

Sign up for email updates

Subscribe

Explore



Coronavirus Featured

Caught in patchwork of policies and pledges, some utility customers may still be awaiting electricity restoration or racking up fees

A mosaic of state policies and voluntary pledges has meant that the effects of missing a utility payment are playing out unevenly across the country.

LIKE THIS:

Like

Be the first to like this.

 David Pomerantz • April 14, 2020

Updated April 15, 4:20 pm PT with data on disconnections from Iowa and North Carolina

As unemployment skyrockets due to the coronavirus pandemic, the nation's utility customers face an uneven patchwork of state policies and voluntary pledges that determine what will happen if they struggle to pay their bills.

The most basic question – whether people are at risk of being disconnected for non-payment – is still unclear for many Americans.

Next →

Energy companies in U.S. C...

not disconnect customers for non-payment.

suspend disconnections for non-payment. Most, but not all, utilities have made such a pledge. The trade associations for investor-owned [electric](#) and [gas](#) providers have said that all of their members have suspended disconnections. Still, questions remain: Michigan's largest investor-owned utilities pledged to extend their winter moratoria on disconnections, but those apply only to a specific class of low-income customers.

Many municipal and cooperative utilities have pledged to suspend disconnections. Still, some have not, which has led to a rash of stories about families who are at risk of losing electric service over an unpaid bill in small towns and rural communities in states like [North Carolina](#), [Tennessee](#) and [South Dakota](#). (Investor-owned utilities served 72% of U.S. electricity customers in 2017; municipal utilities and cooperatives serve the rest.)

In a bid to end the patchwork nature of the orders and pledges, over 800 advocacy groups signed a [letter](#) to Congressional leaders yesterday asking for federal relief legislation to suspend utility disconnections for non-payment through the end of the state of emergency, plus an additional six months to allow for families to recover financially. Language along those lines in an earlier House-drafted relief bill was not included in the bill that passed, which originated in the Senate, despite [support](#) from Democratic senators.

The advocates' letter, which also applied to water and broadband utilities, called for the reconnection of customers who were disconnected prior to the onset of coronavirus, for the suspension of late fees, and for policies that would address the underlying issue of utility disconnections due to high energy cost burdens, such as distributed and community solar energy programs.

Customers disconnected before mandates and pledges may still be without power

Most of the state executive orders and voluntary utility pledges took effect in the middle of March, but many customers may have been disconnected for non-payment just prior to that. Based on the 25 state orders and an EPI survey of utilities, it seems likely that some of those customers are still without power.

State orders in **Colorado** and **Wisconsin** direct utilities to "make reasonable efforts" to restore service for customers who are currently disconnected for nonpayment, assuming they can do so safely. Other states like **Minnesota** and **North Carolina** have requested that utilities reconnect any disconnected customers, but are not mandating it.

For the rest of the country, EPI asked 24 large investor-owned utilities whether they were affirmatively

Next →

Energy companies in U.S. C...

customers who were disconnected. Thirteen utilities did not appear to be reconnecting previously

disconnected customers across their companies, or did not respond to questions from EPI. EPI's findings are in [this table](#).

Utility Late Fee and Reconnection Responses during COVID-19 : Selected Investor-Owned Utilities

Utility	Waiving late fees?	Affirmatively reconnecting previously disconnected customers?	Link
AEP	AEP Ohio, Kentucky Power, SWEPCO Texas: Yes. Other subsidiaries appear to be No.	Yes	https://aep.com/
Alliant Energy	Yes	Yes	Email fr
Ameren	Yes	No	https://www.ameren.com/customers
Arizona Public Service	Yes	No	https://www.aps.com/SaveEnergy

Published by [Google Sheets](#) – [Report Abuse](#) – Updated automatically every 5 minutes

Of the companies who are reconnecting previously disconnected customers, only one utility, Alliant, which operates in Iowa and Wisconsin, appeared to be proactively reaching out to customers to reconnect them. According to a company spokesperson:

“In Iowa and Wisconsin, we are reconnecting customers who were disconnected for non-payment at the

Next →

Energy companies in U.S. C...

Alliant’s subsidiary in Iowa, Interstate Power & Light, [reported](#) on April 15 to the Iowa Utilities Board (IUB)

that it disconnected 610 customers during the first part of March before it announced a suspension of disconnections on March 18. It said in the same filing that it reconnected 359 customers in March.

Iowa's other major investor-owned utility, Mid-American, disconnected 441 customers during the first part of March, and reported reconnecting 307 customers that month, according to data it reported to the IUB last week. Mid-American did not respond to a question from EPI about its policies for reconnecting customers who were disconnected prior to its suspension going into place.

Some utilities waive late fees, others don't

EPI also asked the 24 investor-owned utilities whether they had waived late fees to customers who aren't able to pay their bills. Fourteen of the utility companies said that they were suspending late fees. Five did not appear to be suspending late fees. For another five, the answer was unclear, or they were suspending the fees unevenly across different states and subsidiaries.

AEP, for instance, said that it was suspending late fees at its subsidiaries in Ohio, Kentucky and Texas. For other subsidiaries, it appears not to be.

How many people are without power?

Due to a paucity of state data, it's difficult to get a handle on how many people may have lacked power as state policies and utility pledges took effect in mid-March.

National data from the American Housing Survey, which is conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, showed that in 2017, 1.2 million households – about 1% of the U.S. total – had had their utilities disconnected for non-payment in the three months prior to being asked.

More recent and detailed data is hard to come by because only a small handful of states mandate that utilities provide detailed monthly data on disconnections.

The data that does exist indicates that many customers may have been disconnected just before the pandemic hit, and that some are still without power.

In North Carolina, Duke Energy filed reports last week showing that its two electric subsidiaries in the state disconnected 10,000 customers in the 12 days of March before it voluntarily suspended disconnections on March 13. In February, the two subsidiaries disconnected almost 20,000 customers in North Carolina.

Next →

Energy companies in U.S. C...

customers of its gas subsidiary, Piedmont Gas. The NCUC data shows that during the reporting period covered, from April 1 to April 4, the Duke electric subsidiaries and gas subsidiary had not reconnected a

single one of those customers.

Duke Energy Subsidiaries	Disconnections avoided due to moratorium	Reconnections 4/1 – 4/5	Still disconnected as of 3/31
Duke Energy Carolinas	4,545	0	96
Duke Energy Progress	2,587	0	181
Piedmont Gas	4,898	0	210

A Duke Energy spokesperson told EPI prior to that data being released that, as is the case with most other utilities, previously disconnected customers have to contact Duke Energy in order to discuss reconnection. Nissan told EPI that its reconnection policy is case-by-base, but is intended to help those immediately affected by coronavirus, versus customers who had previously been disconnected.

He also stated that the company would not proactively reconnect all customers who had been shut off in part because “a lot of disconnections involve energy fraud,” before adding that the company wants to restore people’s power. “It’s not a very good business model if people don’t use our service,” he said.

The data released by the North Carolina Utilities Commission included reporting from 189 electric, gas and water/wastewater utilities in the state, but noted that that number was only “approximately 20% of the total number of Utility Service Providers in the State.” The other 80% – primarily smaller municipal utilities who are traditionally not regulated by the NCUC – had failed to report data despite being required to do so by Gov. Roy Cooper’s executive order.

The data that the NCUC did collect showed that 472 residential electric customers, 676 residential gas customers, and 1,745 residential water/wastewater customers remained disconnected as of March 31. Only 19 electric customers, 11 gas customers and 209 water/wastewater customers were reconnected during the reporting period from April 1 – April 4.

Next →

Energy companies in U.S. C...

avoided due to moratorium 4/1 – 4/5 disconnected as of 3/31 charges av to moratori

Residential Electric	30,333	19	472	\$623,615
Residential Natural gas	8,735	11	676	\$81,931
Residential Water/wastewater	10,394	2019	1,745	\$240,736
Total	49,462	2,049	2,893	\$

The data reported by the utilities who complied with the reporting obligation shows that they would have disconnected service to 30,333 residential electric customers, 8,735 residential gas customers and 10,394 residential water/wastewater customers absent the state's moratorium policy. North Carolina's executive order also suspended the collection of late fees. Nearly \$1 million in total late fees went uncharged by the reporting utilities that otherwise would have been levied between April 1 and 5.

None of the three large investor-owned utilities in California – PG&E, SoCal Edison, or San Diego Gas and Electric – responded directly to questions from EPI about whether they were reconnecting customers.

Data submitted to the California [Public Utilities Commission](#) indicate that the three utilities disconnected over 50,000 customers in the last calendar month preceding the pandemic. (The most recent utility submissions on the linked page are from January. EPI separately obtained the more recent public data that the utilities submitted in March, which covers February.)

Utility	Feb. 2020 Disconnections	Customers Reconnected in Feb. 2020	Customers Not Reconnected in Feb. 2020	Average arrearages per disconnected customer, Feb. 2020	Total customers served by utility (Feb. 2020)
---------	-----------------------------	--	---	--	--

Next →

Energy companies in U.S. C...

SoCal Edison	32,819	29,202	3,617	\$234	4,563,008
--------------	--------	--------	-------	-------	-----------

SDG&E	3,704	3,403	301	\$299	1,461,394
-------	-------	-------	-----	-------	-----------

Based on a [2018 report by the CA Public Utilities Commission](#), over 80% of the customers disconnected by the three utilities were reconnected within three days of disconnection.

Still, for the February 2020 data, reconnections still did not equal the total number of disconnections in the February data for any of the companies, leaving a gap of nearly 6,000 un-reconnected customers between the three utilities.

Other states offer more indications of the widespread nature of the problem even before the coronavirus paralyzed the economy.

Electric utilities in Pennsylvania [disconnected power to residential customers 217,697 times](#) in 2018. As in other annual data, it's hard to come up with a precise number for how many individual customers were disconnected, since the same customer could be represented by multiple "disconnections" in the course of a year. But the Pennsylvania data shows that the disconnection rate for "low-income" customers was 14.3% in 2018, meaning there was 1 disconnection for every 7 low-income customers that year. The low-income level in the data is set at 150% of the federal poverty level, or \$37,650 for a family of four.

In Iowa, there were 61,019 involuntary disconnections of electricity and gas customers in the first 11 months of 2019.

In Ohio, [AEP](#) disconnected power to customers 137,025 times in the 12 months from June 2018 to May 2019. FirstEnergy disconnected power 74,708 times in Ohio. [Duke](#) disconnected power 42,914 times in the state.

Outside of those and a few other states, little data exists, a problem that has been gone back decades. A [2004 report](#) from the National Consumer Law Center decried the lack of data:

"How many low-income households have recently had service terminated by their natural gas or electric company, or are on the verge of service termination? The sad fact is that we cannot begin to comprehensively, or even adequately, answer this question."

Last year, the trade associations for state consumer advocates and state utility regulators issued a [joint resolution](#) calling on state utility commissions to institute more detailed, monthly data collection.

Next →

Energy companies in U.S. C...

Credit for photo of smart meter: Lynn Friedman / [Flickr](#)

LIKE THIS:

Loading...

Posted in: Coronavirus, Featured

Tagged in: AEP, Alliant Energy, Ameren, American Electric Power, APS, Arizona Public Service, ConEd, Consumers Energy, coronavirus, COVID-19, disconnection, Dominion Energy, DTE Energy, Duke Energy, Entergy, Eversource, Exelon, FirstEnergy, Florida Power & Light, Michigan Gas Utilities, North Shore Gas, PG&E, PPL, PSEG, San Diego Gas & Electric, Sempra Energy, Southern California Edison, Southern Company, TECO, WEC Energy, WEC Energy Group, Wisconsin Public Service, Xcel Energy

Posted by David Pomerantz

David Pomerantz is the Executive Director of the Energy and Policy Institute.

 All Posts



Search here...



Next →

Energy companies in U.S. C...

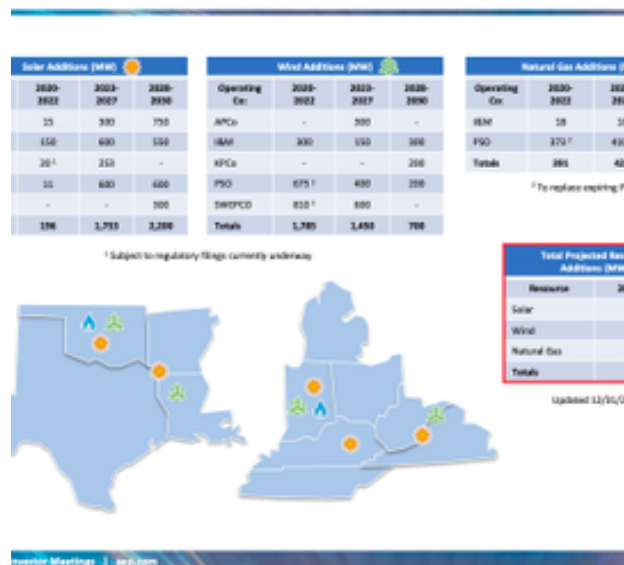


Energy & Policy Inst
@EnergyandPolicy

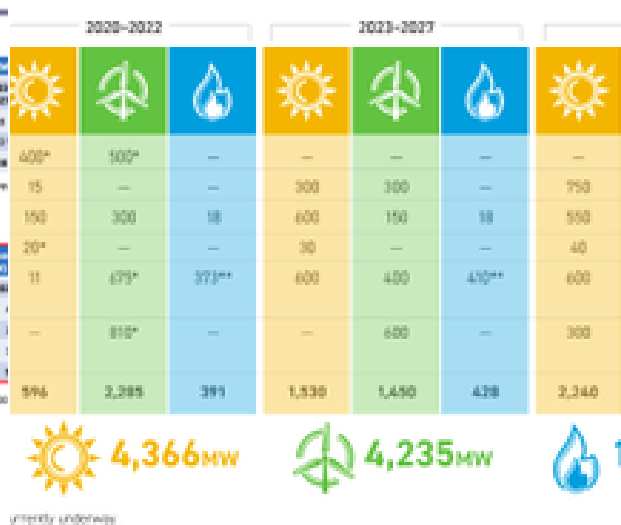
Replying to @EnergyandPolicy

Other charts show how AEP recently downsized its 2020-2030 plans for new solar and wind energy in more detail

ected Resource Additions



REDUCED RESOURCE ADDITIONS



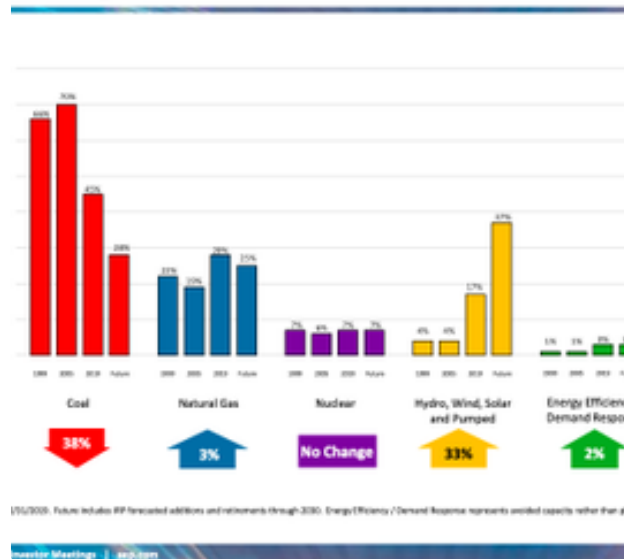
Apr 17, 2020



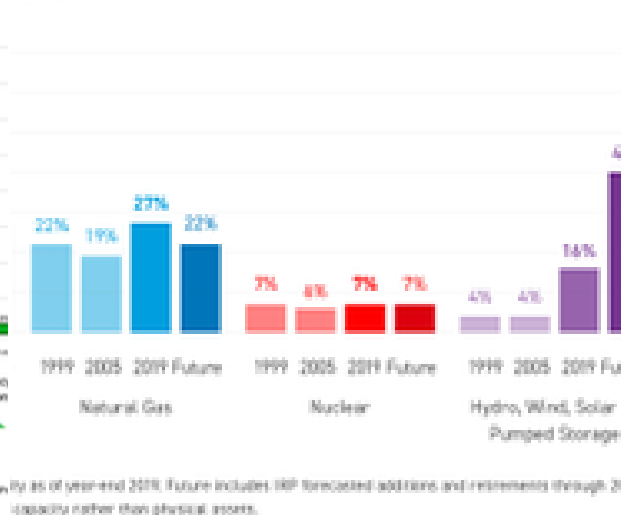
Replying to @EnergyandPolicy

AEP recently increased its future projections for coal as a portion of its generating capacity through 2030 by 1%, and for natural gas by 3%. It also decreased its projections for hydro, wind, solar, and pumped storage by 3 percent.

forming Our Generation Fleet



REDUCED GENERATION FLEET — AEP'S GENERATING FLEET



Next →

Energy companies in U.S. C...



Executives at AEP are making noise about 100% renewable energy, but this major electric utility remains reliant on

American Electric Power's goal: 100% renewable energy? - Energy and Policy Institute

Executives at American Electric Power say the major electric utility has "aspirational" goals of ach...
[energyandpolicy.org](#)

Apr 17, 2020



Energy & Policy Inst

@EnergyandPolicy

NEW: Southern Company CEO Tom Fanning floated a misleading potential update to the company's greenhouse gas reduction goal that would allow Southern to continue burning coal and gas.

ALSO: Fanning's updated GHG bonus omits key details to investors.[energyandpolicy.org/tom-fanning-fl...](#)

Tom Fanning Floats Misleading Updated Greenhouse Gas Goal in Podcast Interview - Ener...

Southern CEO Tom Fanning floated a misleading update to the company's maligned "low- to-no c...
[energyandpolicy.org](#)

Apr 16, 2020



Energy & Policy Inst

@EnergyandPolicy

FYI: We've updated this piece with fresh data on disconnections and reconnections from North Carolina, as well as some from Iowa. <https://twitter.com/EnergyandPolicy/status/1250200058617708544>

Apr 15, 2020



Energy & Policy Inst

@EnergyandPolicy

NEW: With unemployment skyrocketing, millions of customers struggling with monthly utility bills are caught up in a patchwork of policies and pledges.

The effects of missing a utility payment are playing out unevenly across the country.[energyandpolicy.org/utility-corona...](#)

Caught in patchwork of policies and pledges, some utility customers may still be awaiting ...

A mosaic of state policies and voluntary pledges has meant that the effects of missing a utility pa...
[energyandpolicy.org](#)

[Embed](#)

[View on Twitter](#)

Next →

Energy companies in U.S. C...



Energy & Policy Institute

1,162 likes



1,102 likes

Like Page

Send Message

Be the first of your friends to like this



Energy & Policy Institute

on Thursday

NEW: Southern Company CEO Tom Fanning floated a misleading potential update to the company's greenhouse gas reduction goal that would allow Southern to continue burning coal and gas.

ALSO: Fanning's updated GHG bonus omits key details to investors.



ENERGYANDPOLICY.ORG

Tom Fanning Floats Misleading Upd...

Southern CEO Tom Fanning floated a mislea...

Like

Comment

1



Energy & Policy Institute

about 3 weeks ago

Doctors and nurses supporting using the Defense Production Act to ramp up production of medical supplies urgently needed in the fight against [#coronavirus](#). The U.S. Chamber opposes it, but leading members want to use the same law to bail out the failing coal industry <https://www.energyandpolicy.org/defense-production-act/>

Next →

Energy companies in U.S. C...





ENERGYANDPOLICY.ORG

Energy companies in U.S. Chamber ...

Energy companies in the Chamber of Comm...

2

Comment

1

**Energy & Policy Institute**

about 3 weeks ago

Next

Energy companies in U.S. Chamber silent as Chamber opposed use of Defen...

March 27, 2020

[Home](#) [About](#) [Press](#) [Contact Us](#)

Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 License by Energy and Policy Institute.