

SEP 16 1992

Decision 92-09-069 September 16, 1992

BEFORE THE PUBLIC UTILITIES COMMISSION OF THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA

Mozell Mitchell Lenzy,  
 Complainant,  
 vs.  
 Southern California Edison Company,  
 Defendant.

**ORIGINAL**  
 (ECP)  
 Case 92-03-061  
 (Filed March 16, 1992)

O P I N I O N

Complainant Mozell Mitchell Lenzy requests adjustments to electric bills from Southern California Edison Company (Edison) that she believes were estimated and in error. Ms. Lenzy also argues that since she was not at home for a portion of the September 1991 billing period, she should have received a bill for significantly less usage. She alleges that Edison also estimated that bill and violated its own policy of not estimating bills for more than two consecutive months.

Edison responds that two bills, for service to June 24 and July 23, 1991, respectively, were estimated because it did not have reasonable access to Ms. Lenzy's meter. The access gate to the meter had a sign indicating "bad dog." The next two bills for service to August 21 and September 20, 1991 respectively were based on actual meter readings. Edison also reread the meter and checked the usage pattern, finding no apparent unusual condition. The meter was tested and found to be operating within the allowable limits of accuracy. As a courtesy, and in an attempt to settle the matter before it became a formal complaint, Edison applied a credit adjustment of \$56.89 to Ms. Lenzy's bill on April 30, 1992.

At the hearing held on July 9, 1992, Ms. Lenzy testified for herself. She expected Edison to read the meter in her side

yard despite the bad dog sign on the gate, since she doesn't own a dog. The sign was put up to discourage vandalism. Ms. Lenzy believes Edison violated its procedures in estimating bills, and believes the bill for September 1991 is too high since she was gone from September 5 to 15. Ms. Lenzy has no air conditioning; her other appliances include a refrigerator, electric stove, TV, and a gas dryer.

Edison presented the testimony of customer service representative Jerry McGee, and meter tester Rafael Perez.

Mr. McGee testified that Edison's policy is to not estimate more than two months' bills; it then must read the meter. In doing so at Ms. Lenzy's house, the meter was read and verified. Mr. McGee attempted to review Ms. Lenzy's appliance load and test any appliances that might cause unusually high usage, but Ms. Lenzy would not allow Edison people access to do this.

Mr. Perez testified that he tested Ms. Lenzy's meter and found it to be operating within the allowable limits of accuracy.

This complaint appears to be the result of Ms. Lenzy's misunderstanding of Edison's operations including reading meters, meter functions, and billing. Ms. Lenzy expressed surprise that the meter reader would not enter a gate with a sign warning of a bad dog. Yet the intent of the sign is to discourage people from entering her yard. We believe Edison reasonably elected to not enter a likely hostile and potentially dangerous environment. Thus estimated bills were rendered for two months. Edison then arranged with Ms. Lenzy to read the meter the next month.

Ms. Lenzy apparently did not understand the operation of electric meters, which are continual recording devices that function in a manner similar to an automobile odometer. Electric meters continue to record indefinitely, and never reset or return to zero. Therefore an error or inaccurate estimate in one month automatically corrects with the next meter reading.

For example, if the last meter reading was 1,000, and the meter became inaccessible as was Ms. Lenzy's, and if the recent average usage for a similar month was 600 kilowatt-hours (kWh) per month, an estimated bill would be rendered for 600 kWh. When the meter is read the following month, if instead of the meter reading 2,200 kWh, or 2 x 600 kWh more than the last meter reading, it read 1,900 more, the customer would be billed only for the difference between 900 kWh usage and 600 kWh already billed, or 300 kWh. In this way, the billing automatically corrects for estimating errors. The total usage for the two months would be correct at 900 kWh for two months. Although there is no evidence of meter reading errors here, errors resulting from estimated bills are similarly automatically corrected. This is merely an illustrative example to demonstrate how the inaccuracy caused by the estimated bills is automatically corrected with the subsequent meter reading. In Ms. Lenzy's case, it was done after two estimated bills were rendered. The estimated bills were based on usage of 576 kWh for the June 1991 and 638 kWh for the July 1991 billing periods. The meter reading for the August 1991 billing period indicated a usage of 484 kWh. Thus the estimated bills may have been slightly higher than the actual usage, but the difference was corrected when the meter was read in August, and Ms. Lenzy was billed for 484 kWh usage. The total usage for the three months' billing periods was accurate.

We note that a review of Ms. Lenzy's usage indicates fairly consistent usage varying from 449 kWh to 763 kWh and billed amounts from \$58.39 to \$85.98, with one exception. The exception is the February 25, 1992 bill for 913 kWh and \$125.89. This unusually high bill was in part the reason for Edison offering the \$56.89 adjustment to Ms. Lenzy; the other reason for the adjustment was good will, recognizing that Ms. Lenzy has been a good customer for many years.

Ms. Lenzy also sometimes was billed for amounts much larger than normal bills because several times she paid only the amount she felt was correct, which left unpaid balances that were added to the amounts due in future bills. In addition, Ms. Lenzy did not pay her bill when due several times. As a result, she was billed for the amounts \$300.84, \$380.79, and \$364.36 in the November and December 1991 and January 1992 billing periods. The amounts due for current usage in those months were \$77.79, \$79.95, and \$61.36, respectively. Thus approximately \$300 was due to unpaid balances carried from past bills.

Next we consider Ms. Lenzy's contention that her bill for September 1991 should have been much lower due to being gone ten days in that month. The usage was 526 kWh, and although not unusually low, it is near the low end of her normal range of usage of 449 kWh to 763 kWh. One likely reason for the usage not being unusually low despite her partial absence is that the largest energy use, the refrigerator, remains in operation during absences. In addition, people frequently leave lights on during absences for security reasons. Mr. McGee also suggested that usage sometimes is greater for periods of partial absence since people may do unusually large amounts of laundry both immediately before and after the trip, in effect to catch up on the laundry. The savings in usage due to less cooking, lights, and TV would not necessarily be significant. Considering these reasons, and having no compelling evidence to the contrary, we conclude that the actual usage for the September 1991 billing period is accurate.

We observe that Ms. Lenzy has been a good customer of Edison and has paid all current charges billed as of the hearing date. Her concern is real, and apparently the result of honest misunderstandings.

However, we conclude that there is no evidence of incorrect billing or overcharges. Even the \$56.89 adjustment Edison made was not due to an error in billing; rather it was

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primarily a goodwill gesture. We will not order an adjustment to Ms. Lenzy's bill, and will deny the complaint.

Since this complaint is filed under our expedited complaint procedure, no separate findings of fact or conclusions of law will be made.

ORDER

IT IS ORDERED that the complaint in Case 92-03-061 is denied.

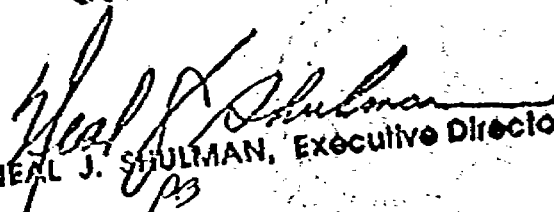
This order becomes effective 30 days from today.

Dated September 16, 1992, at San Francisco, California.

DANIEL Wm. FESSLER  
President

JOHN B. OHANIAN  
PATRICIA M. ECKERT  
NORMAN D. SHUKWAY  
Commissioners

I CERTIFY THAT THIS DECISION  
WAS APPROVED BY THE ABOVE  
COMMISSIONERS TODAY

  
NEAL J. SHULMAN, Executive Director