

Decision 99-02-072 February 18, 1999

BEFORE THE PUBLIC UTILITIES COMMISSION OF THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA

Clara Douge,

Complainant,

vs.

Southern California Edison Company,

Defendant.

(ECP)

Case 98-10-040

(Filed October 21, 1998)

OPINION

Clara Douge, complainant, in pro per.
Patricia Aldridge, for Southern California Edison
Company, defendant.

Clara Douge has filed this complaint under our rules for expedited complaint proceedings to recover alleged overcharges for electric service at her residence. She claims that ever since 1992, when she moved into her apartment, she has been billed amounts which are as much as four times higher than the amounts her neighbors have paid for electric service in the same condominium complex. She claims that the connected load at her premises is no greater than that of her neighbors.

Defendant Southern California Edison Company (Edison) admits that Douge's bills are the largest in her complex, but claims that her electric use is being properly metered and that her bills are being computed at the correct rate. Edison contends that Douge's connected load is capable of using the amount of electricity for which she has been billed, and that her bills are therefore proper.

Administrative Law Judge (ALJ) Victor D. Ryerson conducted an evidentiary hearing on January 14, 1999. Douge gave testimony that was consistent with the allegations in her complaint. Two Edison service employees testified on behalf of the company about testing they had conducted for faulty metering or sources of unusually high use, and submitted the customer account history and other pertinent documentation for the bills.

Douge occupies a two-bedroom all-electric condominium unit with her husband and three teenage children. No one is employed in the home. Her bills have consistently reflected high electric usage since she moved into the unit. In 1993, she purchased a washing machine and electric clothes dryer, which she uses for an average of two loads per day. These appliances are energy efficient, and she received a rebate under Edison's energy conservation program. Altogether, her present connected load consists principally of a 22-cubic-foot side-by-side refrigerator, the electric dryer, electric space heating, and a two-ton-capacity air conditioning and heating unit. (Her water heater is operated by gas rather than electricity, as averred in Edison's answer.)

She complained about her high bills, and Edison responded by checking the meter for accuracy. On August 6, 1997, Edison determined that the meter tested accurately. Edison also conducted an energy audit at her request on August 11, 1997, and determined that her bills were extraordinarily high for the amount of use she reported. Consequently, diagnostic tests were performed on several of the appliances using individual check meters, revealing that the heating and air conditioning unit was the source of greatest use (about one-fourth of the total), followed by the dryer. Edison determined that average daily use would be about 20 kWh without these two appliances, compared to actual usage, which was in the 36 - 45 kWh range, and that the connected load was capable of registering the reported amount of use.

In late 1997, the condominium homeowners' association sent a licensed electrician to inspect the Douges' condominium unit, because her bills continued to be high despite her claim of normal use. The electrician's letter to the association states in pertinent part,

"Last year in 1997 I inspected the electrical wiring at 8327-5 Vineyard due to a complaint of a high electrical bill from Southern California Edison . I checked all wire connections in the sub panel and at the meter and main panel. I tested the amperage at the sub panel and at the main panel. The readings were the same. I checked to see if the air conditioners had been connected backwards between the two units, but they were not. The only thing I could find is that the electrical meter was turning faster than the other meters using the same amount of current.

"My house is a 2200 square foot home, with two 2 ton air conditioners, eve [sic-eave] lights that run all night and three fish ponds with pumps that run 24 hours a day and my electric bill is about one half of Clara Douge's bill. It is my opinion that the electrical meter needs to be replaced or that Edison need to test the meter." [Ex. 1]

Edison responded by installing a new meter, which was tested on January 29, 1998, and found to be accurate. The Douges' high bills persisted.

Edison continued its efforts to locate the trouble. No evidence of diversion was found on the customer side, nor was there any adverse ground condition. In May and June 1998, Edison conducted load profile tests, which revealed nothing remarkable about the Douges' use pattern at different times of day. On this occasion a test meter was used in addition to the customer meter; both meters recorded exactly the same loads during the load profile tests, indicating that the customer meter was accurately measuring use.

In short, although Edison has confirmed Douge's claim that she pays comparatively high electric bills, no cause has been located for her high level of use, despite the parties' best efforts to find it. The meter is operating properly.

Edison is billing at the domestic low income rate, the lowest rate available, and gives Douge a 680-kWh-baseline allowance for electric heating as specified in the tariff. Based on the facts presented to the Commission, Edison's billings appear to be proper, and Douge has not satisfied her burden of proving otherwise. Accordingly, we must find in favor of Edison and dismiss the complaint.

Notwithstanding the result we reach today, we endorse the ALJ's encouragement to the parties to continue their efforts to locate any problem which may exist. Three possible sources of high meter readings came to light at the hearing. First, actual use of the air conditioning may be higher than reported. For health reasons, Douge sometimes turns the air conditioning unit on at night to humidify the air, and may inadvertently be using the unit a great deal more than she realizes. Edison encouraged her to keep a daily use log to determine whether this is the case. Second, the dryer may be a potential source of higher-than-expected use. Although the retailer allegedly checked it and told Douge that it was functioning properly, the ALJ encouraged her to have it checked again by an independent repair company, because the use seems high for an energy-efficient appliance. Finally, the ALJ encouraged Edison to examine the main on the customer side more closely, as it apparently spans the entire length of the building from the meter to Douge's unit, and is a potential source of current loss which Edison, by its own admission, has not fully investigated.

O R D E R

IT IS ORDERED that Complaint 98-10-040 is dismissed.

This order is effective today.

Dated February 18, 1999, at San Francisco, California.

RICHARD A. BILAS
President
HENRY M. DUQUE
JOSIAH L. NEPPER
Commissioners