

# SPOTLIGHT: SCDCA's Utility Role

The **South Carolina Department of Consumer Affairs (SCDCA)** is the state consumer protection agency. People often reach out to our office to file a complaint, scam report or identity theft report. Others file for business licenses or request a presentation or one of our publications. A lot of South Carolinians, though, are not aware of our work in the utility arena. SCDCA is the state agency with the duty to represent the interests of **residential customers** when an **investor-owned utility** wants to change its rates. Keep reading to learn what that means for you.

## Filing

When investor-owned water, gas, sewer or electric companies want to change what they charge customers, they file with the **Public Service Commission (PSC)**. The PSC is the state agency that sets prices (rates) for these utilities. It has seven Commissioners who are chosen by the South Carolina General Assembly.

## Key Terms

**A residential customer** is a consumer purchasing utility services for a personal, family or household purpose. **An investor-owned utility** is a private company owned by shareholders. They provide a public service while also working to create profit.

## Review

SCDCA gets a copy of what the utility files and reviews it to see if the law allows us to take part in the process and if it does, see how the utility's request affects residential customers. Our goal is to let the PSC know how the proposed change in rates will impact consumers.

**We often hire experts who explain:**

- 1 What is a fair return on investment or profit for the utility to collect from its customers.
- 2 How much a residential customer should pay compared to other customers, like large businesses.

## Participation

Other people who decide to participate in the rate-making process also hire experts to present what they think is fair. The **Office of Regulatory Staff (ORS)** is the state agency with the job of doing a deep dive into the utility's request. They are involved in every rate request at the PSC. ORS looks at how the change in rates will affect all of the utility's customers (industry, commercial, small business, residential) and if the utility is offering reliable services.

In addition to SCDCA and ORS, environmental groups, large companies, industrial companies, small businesses and federal agencies often decide to participate in the rate process. Residential customers can also participate. Visit ORS' website to see how you can get involved - <https://ors.sc.gov/consumers/how-rate-case-process-works/how-participate-utility-cases>.

## Want information on a utility's request?

After it files for a rate change, the utility sends notice to its customers and publishes information about it in a local newspaper. ORS also creates a summary for customers. Visit [ors.sc.gov](https://ors.sc.gov), click "News," pick the appropriate year and look for the consumer information on the utility's request.

# Have a Utility Complaint?

- 1 Talk to the Company.**  
Try to solve the problem with your utility company first.
- 2 Contact ORS.**  
If your issue doesn't get fixed, contact ORS Consumer Services at 1-800-922-1531 or 803-737-5230 or visit [ors.sc.gov](https://ors.sc.gov) for help.
- 3 File with the PSC.**  
Still not resolved? You can file a complaint with the PSC and ask for a hearing. Go to: <https://www.psc.sc.gov/consumer-info/file-complaint> or call 803-896-5100.
  - You can hire a lawyer or represent yourself.
  - Learn more at <https://psc.sc.gov/publications/pro-se-litigant-guide>.



**\*\*The Department of Consumer Affairs Consumer Services Division may be able to assist with billing issues for electric cooperatives, municipal entities, and Santee Cooper through its voluntary complaint mediation process. Consumers should attempt to resolve the issue with the provider first.\*\*** To file a complaint, visit [consumer.sc.gov](https://consumer.sc.gov) and click the "How Do I..." button, then "FILE A COMPLAINT" or contact SCDCA for a complaint form at 800-922-1594.

## Red Flags of a Utility Imposter Scam



### Asking for unusual forms of payment.

No real utility company will ever ask a consumer to pay with anything other than direct forms of payment like a bank account or credit card. **Never pay someone demanding an uncommon form of payment like cryptocurrency, gift cards or prepaid debit cards, it's a scam.**



### Use scare tactics or threaten you into paying ASAP.

Often a scammer will warn the consumer they are late with payment and if they don't pay immediately, their services will be shut off. **Real utilities provide consumers with at least 10 days written notice before their service is shut off and a second notice a few days prior.**



### Cold-call and ask for you to verify personal information.

A cold-call is when you receive an unsolicited contact, including a visit or telephone call made by someone trying to obtain payment or information from you. **If you receive a cold-call from anyone asking for payment or to verify private information like your account numbers/balances, Social Security number, date of birth, etc, hang up.** Call your utility company using the number on your bill or the utility company's website.

Report scams to SCDCA by calling (800) 922-1594 or visiting [consumer.sc.gov](https://consumer.sc.gov) and click the "How Do I..." button, then "REPORT A SCAM."