

## **For Immediate Release**

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November 15, 2017

## **PSC Chairman Brad Johnson Recognizes National Utility Scam Awareness Day**

**Helena, Mont.** - In recognition of National Utility Scam Awareness Day, PSC Chairman Brad Johnson joins NortWestern Energy and Utilities United Against Scams (UUAS) in reminding utility customers to keep a watchful eye out for imposter utility scams. UUAS is a consortium of more than 100 U.S. and Canadian utilities dedicated to exposing the tactics that scammers use to defraud utility customers and to educating consumers on how to protect themselves.

Scammers typically use phone, in-person, and online tactics to target utility customers. These criminals pose as utility employees, and they threaten customers with disconnection or shut off of service if they fail to make an immediate payment -typically using a prepaid card or other non-traceable form of payment.

“Every year utility customers across the country lose millions to predatory scammers,” said Brad Johnson, R-East Helena. These crooks target our most vulnerable populations, including senior citizens and low income communities, and their tactics are growing more sophisticated each day.”

Some of these tactics include spoofing technology to display the utility company's name on the customer's caller identification and recordings of the utility company's telephone menu messages, or interactive voice response.

Chairman Johnson warns that instances of utility scams tend to increase during the holiday season.

“The holidays are an opportune time for these criminals to strike,” he said. “Not only are most of us distracted by friends and family, but small businesses also experience a higher volume of foot traffic. All of this contributes to customers becoming more susceptible to scam attempts.”

Johnson highlights three warning signs of potential scam activity:

- **Threat to disconnect:** Scammers may aggressively tell the customer his or her utility bill is past due and service will be disconnected if a payment is not made—usually within less than an hour.
- **Request for immediate payment:** Scammers may instruct the customer to purchase a prepaid card – widely available at retail stores – then call them back supposedly to make a bill payment to his or her utility company.
- **Request for prepaid card:** When the customer calls back, the caller asks the customer for the prepaid card’s number, which grants the scammer instant access to the card’s funds, and the victim’s money is gone.

Johnson also recommends that customers take the following steps to protect themselves:

- Customers should never purchase a prepaid card to avoid service disconnection or shutoff. Legitimate utility companies do not specify how customers should make a bill payment and always offer a variety of ways to pay a bill, including accepting payments online, by phone, automatic bank draft, mail, or in person.
- If someone threatens immediate disconnection or shutoff of service, customers should hang up the phone, delete the email, or shut the door. Customers with delinquent accounts receive an advance disconnection notification, typically by mail and included with their regular monthly bill. Companies never send a single notification one hour or less before disconnection.
- If customers suspect someone is trying to scam them, they should hang up, delete the email, or shut the door. They should then call their utility company at the number on their monthly bill or the company’s website, not the phone number the scammer provides. If customers ever feel that they are in physical danger, they should call 911.

Utility customers, who suspect that they have been victims of fraud, or who feel threatened during contact with a scammer, should contact local law enforcement authorities. In addition, victims of utility scams may also wish to report the matter to the Office of Consumer Protection within the Montana Department of Justice 1800-481-6896, as well as the Better Business Bureau <https://www.bbb.org/scamtracker/us>.

Consumers are also encouraged to report instances of scam activity to their utility to enable company officials to work with the appropriate parties to shut down the scam.

Visit [www.utilitiesunited.org](http://www.utilitiesunited.org) for more information and tips about how customers can protect themselves from scams or follow along on social media: Twitter @U\_U\_A\_S and Facebook @UtilitiesUnited.

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*Made up of five elected commissioners, the PSC works to ensure that Montanans receive safe and reliable service from regulated public utilities while paying reasonable rates. Utilities regulated by the PSC generally include private investor-owned natural gas, electric, telephone, water, and sewer companies. In addition, the PSC regulates certain motor carriers, and oversees natural gas pipeline safety and intrastate railroad safety.*