

Media Release

Consumers' Association of Canada, Alberta

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Bill 46 - Tramples on Landowners - Stomps on Consumers

Landowners in central Alberta believe Bill 46 tramples on their right to question and oppose Electric Transmission lines. Consumer groups see Bill 46 as stomping on their right to oppose ever-increasing electric and natural gas utility rates and question the new costs and complexities of Alberta's deregulated utilities regime.

Wendy Armstrong, past president of the Consumers' Association of Canada (Alberta) says, "*For decades, the Consumers' Association of Canada, either on its own or through a coalition, has intervened in provincial utility hearings on behalf of residential consumers.* This long history as an unfettered and independent voice in utility board decisions will come to an untimely end if Bill 46 is passed in the fall session of the Alberta Legislature. Bill 46 virtually eliminates the right and ability of groups such as the CAC to effectively challenge rate increases and ensure fairness among different customer classes."

Bill 46 stomps on the rights of consumer groups while bolstering the power and role of the Minister of Energy and the government-controlled Utility Consumer Advocate's Office (UCA). The UCA was created in 2003 to take the heat off government MLAs for the disastrous debacles arising from deregulation of the utility business by dealing with customer complaints. Under Bill 46, the UCA will be relocated to a new Alberta Utilities Commission and given additional duties, The UCA will be appointed by the Government, be controlled by a board appointed by the Government, and become the only intervenor on behalf of diverse consumer interests in decisions of a Government appointed Commission.

"This elimination of independent consumer voices couldn't come at a worse time," said Larry Phillips, president of the Consumers' Association. "Currently, there are many proposed changes to the regulated utilities regime that threaten to significantly increase the monthly utility bills of Alberta families. Not only will Bill 46 take away opportunities for independent consumer groups and the public to effectively question and influence these decisions," Phillips said, "It will also significantly reduce already limited public scrutiny and discussion of intended changes."

Although the government-controlled UCA will be calling all the shots under Bill 46, utility customers through their monthly bills will pay for all the expenses of the running of the UCA. Every Alberta household, farm and business will be negatively affected by the growing costs of the government-directed UCA and higher regulated utility rates. Paying for the work of the UCA but having no independent voice in utility rate decisions amounts to taxation without representation.

Bill 46 not only tramples landowner rights; it stomps out consumer rights and public scrutiny. The Alberta government needs to drop Bill 46 from the current legislative agenda or risk losing all remaining public confidence in the regulation and oversight of the utilities and energy sector.

For comment:

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