

Understanding Utilities in Alberta - Session #1 Summary

Overview of foundational knowledge to help Albertans better understand electricity and natural gas services, make informed decisions, and avoid common pitfalls in the utility market

1. Role of the Utilities Consumer Advocate (UCA)

- The UCA is a government organization (Ministry of Affordability & Utilities) that supports residential, small business, and farm consumers.
- Its mission is to empower consumers through clear, neutral, and unbiased information.
- Core functions:
 - Advocate: Represents consumers in regulatory proceedings.
 - Educate: Provides tools, webinars, and resources.
 - Mediate: Helps resolve disputes between consumers and utility providers.

2. Alberta's Utility Market Structure

- Alberta has a competitive energy market, allowing consumers to choose their electricity and natural gas retailer.
- Utility system includes:
 - Generation/Production (energy created)
 - Transmission (long-distance transport)
 - Distribution (local delivery – regulated monopolies)
 - Retailers (sell energy and set plans)
- The Alberta Utilities Commission (AUC) regulates parts of the system to balance consumer and company interests.

3. Rate of Last Resort (RoLR)

- The default electricity option for consumers without a competitive contract
- Applies automatically to:
 - Former Regulated Rate Option (RRO) customers
 - New consumers who don't choose a plan
- Key features:
 - Fixed period: Jan 1, 2025 – Dec 31, 2026
 - Designed for stability and predictability
 - Rate changes capped at $\pm 10\%$
- Consumers can switch to competitive plans anytime without penalty.
- For natural gas, the equivalent default is the Default Rate Tariff.

4. Shopping for Utilities

- Consumers can choose from competitive retailers offering various plans and incentives.
- UCA provides tools to support decision-making:
 - Retailers & Distributors directory
 - Cost Comparison Tool (CCT) for comparing total bill estimates based on usage
- Important considerations:
 - Compare rates, fees, and contract terms
 - Watch for additional costs (admin or membership fees)
 - Review exit fees and usage limits

For more information, visit ucahelps.alberta.ca or call 310-4822.

- Competitive retailers are not price-regulated but must follow the Consumer Protection Act.

5. Geographic and Rural Considerations

- Options may vary by location:
 - Default retailers differ by region.
 - Rural Electrification Associations (REAs) and gas co-ops may provide service in rural areas.
- REAs and co-ops:
 - May set their own rates
 - Offer alternative or limited choices compared to urban areas

6. Saving Money on Utilities

- Consumers influence costs through energy usage and plan selection.
- Recommended actions:
 - Conduct a DIY energy audit
 - Improve efficiency (seal leaks, maintain appliances, manage standby power)
- Combining efficient usage with the right plan leads to greater savings over time.

7. Utility Industry Scams

- Common scam methods: phone calls, emails, texts, fake websites, and door-to-door sales.
- Key tips:
 - Be cautious of unsolicited contact
 - Do not share personal information unexpectedly
 - Verify directly with your retailer
 - Report suspicious activity

8. Key Takeaway

- **“Consumer knowledge = consumer power.”**
- Understanding how utilities work, comparing options, and using available tools enables consumers to:
 - Make informed decisions
 - Avoid unnecessary costs
 - Protect themselves from scams

Utilities for Small Businesses - Session #2 Summary

Overview of key information to help small business owners understand utility bills, manage costs, and make informed decisions about electricity and natural gas in Alberta.

1. Understanding Your Utility Bill

- Your utility bill includes more than just energy use:
 - Energy charges based on consumption
 - Delivery charges (transmission + distribution)
 - Demand charges (for electricity peak usage)
 - Additional charges (administration fees, local access/municipal fees, rate riders)
- Each charge reflects a different part of the energy system and your usage patterns

2. Alberta's Utility System

- Energy delivery involves:
 - Generation/Production (energy is created)
 - Transmission (moved long distance)
 - Distribution (delivered locally to your business)
 - Retailers (sell energy and manage billing)
- The Alberta Utilities Commission (AUC) regulates transmission and distribution rates
- You cannot choose your distributor, but you can choose your retailer

3. Rate Class Matters

- Businesses are assigned a rate class (e.g., small, medium, large commercial)
- Your rate class determines how charges—especially delivery and demand—are calculated
- Important:
 - It is your responsibility to know your rate class
 - Your rate class may change as your business grows or energy use increases

4. Demand vs. Consumption

- Consumption: total energy used over time (kWh or GJ)
- Demand: highest level of energy used at one time (kW or kVA)
- Demand charges are based on peak usage in short intervals (e.g., 15–30 minutes)
- Even one spike (running multiple equipment at once) can increase your bill significantly

5. Additional Charges to Watch

- Municipal / Local Access Fees: set by your municipality
- Administration Fees: billing and account services
- Rate Riders: temporary adjustments (can increase or decrease your bill)
- These costs can fluctuate and impact your overall utility expenses

6. Managing and Reducing Costs

- Focus on three key areas:
 - Rate: compare plans using the Cost Comparison Tool
 - Consumption: reduce usage through audits and efficiency improvements
 - Demand: avoid peak spikes by staggering equipment use
- Additional strategies:
 - Upgrade to energy-efficient equipment
 - Participate in incentive or rebate programs
 - Explore alternative energy options (e.g., solar)

7. Moving or Setting Up Your Business

- **Before moving in:**
 - Confirm rate class, meter type, and distribution area
 - Review previous usage and site infrastructure (e.g., panel size)
 - Understand who is responsible for utilities in your lease
- **When moving out:**
 - Provide notice to your retailer (timelines vary)
 - Check for cancellation or exit fees
 - Plan for overlapping utility costs if leases overlap
 - Ensure all final bills are paid

8. Key Takeaways

- Your bill tells a story—learn to read it
 - Rate class and demand are major cost drivers
 - You can shop around for better rates and plans
 - Small changes in usage can lead to meaningful savings
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Understanding Solar Micro-Generation in Alberta - Session#3 Summary

Overview of key information to help small business owners understand solar energy, evaluate costs and benefits, and make informed decisions about installing and using solar systems in Alberta.

1. What is Solar Micro-Generation?

- Solar photovoltaic (PV) systems convert sunlight into electricity for your own use
- Most systems in Alberta are grid-tied, meaning:
 - You use solar power first
 - Extra energy is sent to the grid for a credit
- Micro-generation is designed for self-consumption, not for selling power

2. How Solar Fits in Alberta's Utility System

- Solar integrates into the existing system:
 - Generation (your solar panels produce electricity)
 - Transmission & Distribution (deliver backup power)
 - Retailers (bill you and apply credits)
- Solar users become “prosumers”—both energy users and producers

3. Rules and Requirements (AUC Rule 024)

- Solar systems must follow AUC Rule 024:
 - Systems must be under 5 MW and sized for your own use
 - Must connect safely to the grid through your wire provider
 - Provides a process for resolving disputes
- System size is typically based on your past 12 months of energy use
- Oversizing may result in application delays or rejection

4. Costs, Incentives, and Payback

- Typical installation cost: \$10,000 – \$25,000
- Typical payback period: 7–12 years
- Financial support may include:
 - Municipal rebates, grants or incentive programs (availability varies)
- A cost-benefit analysis is recommended before investing

5. How You Get Paid (Net Billing)

- Solar systems operate on net billing:
 - You pay for electricity you use from the grid
 - You receive credits for electricity sent back to the grid
- Your bill shows:
 - Imported energy (from grid) and Exported energy (your solar contribution)

6. Impact on Your Utility Bill

- Solar reduces the energy portion of your bill
- You may earn credits for excess production

- However:
 - Fixed charges (delivery, admin, fees) still apply
 - Your bill is not eliminated entirely
- Savings depend on:
 - System size, energy usage patterns, seasonal production differences

7. Installation Process (What to Expect)

- Key steps include:
 - Site assessment (roof, sunlight, electrical capacity)
 - Getting quotes from reputable installers
 - Applications and permits
 - Installation and inspections
 - Final approval and system activation
- Most steps are handled by the installer, but understanding the process to make informed choices

8. Managing and Optimizing Your System

- Get the most value by:
 - Using energy during daylight hours
 - Improving overall energy efficiency
 - Adjusting for seasonal changes
- Good energy habits increase the return on your investment

9. Shopping for Solar & Rates

- Compare:
 - Installers (experience, warranties, reputation)
 - Retailers and micro-generation rates
- Use the UCA Cost Comparison Tool
- Some retailers offer:
 - High-yield rates (summer) for exporting more
 - Low-yield rates (winter) when you import more electricity

10. Consumer Awareness & Scams

- Be cautious of:
 - High-pressure sales tactics
 - “Free solar” claims without clear details
 - Requests for upfront payment or personal information
- Always:
 - Verify companies with utility retailer or UCA
 - Read contracts carefully and take time before committing

11. Key Takeaways

- Solar can reduce costs, but it’s not a one-size-fits-all solution
- You will still have utility charges if connected to the grid
- System sizing and usage habits greatly impact savings
- If a company asks for prepayment, make sure they are a licensed prepaid by verify on the Government of Alberta website under Service Alberta

Utility Tools, Resources & Tips - Session#4 Summary

Overview of key tools, services, and resources available through the Utilities Consumer Advocate (UCA) to help small businesses and consumers understand utilities, compare options, and reduce costs.

1. Role of the Utilities Consumer Advocate (UCA)

- The UCA provides free, unbiased information to Alberta utility consumers
- Supports residential, small business, and farm customers
- Core services include:
 - Education & Engagement (webinars, presentations, resources)
 - Mediation Services (help resolving disputes with utility providers)
 - Interpreter Services (multilingual support available)

2. UCA Website Overview (ucahelps.alberta.ca)

- The website is the central hub for tools and information
- Topics include:
 - Understanding your bill
 - Utility basics and FAQs
 - Account setup guidance

3. Utility Tips & Educational Resources

- The **Learning Hub** provides practical tips on:
 - Reducing electricity, natural gas, and water use
 - Seasonal energy-saving strategies
- Additional resources include:
 - Moving guides for businesses and households
 - Downloadable tip sheets and educational materials
- Content is updated regularly and available for easy download

4. Energy Efficiency Programs

- Information on current programs and incentives, including:
 - Renewable energy grants
 - Water conservation programs
- Programs vary by:
 - Municipality, province and federal initiatives
- Consumers should review eligibility and program details carefully

5. Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

- The UCA FAQ section addresses common topics such as:
 - Setting up utilities
 - Understanding rates and charges
 - Billing and payment concerns
 - Developed from real inquiries to the UCA mediation team
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6. Comparing Utility Options

Retailers & Distributors Tool

- Helps identify:
 - Available retailers in your area
 - Services offered and eligibility
- Provides details such as:
 - Company information, service areas, and affiliations
- Important:
 - Competitive retailers are not price-regulated but must follow consumer protection laws

Cost Comparison Tool (CCT)

- Allows you to:
 - Compare electricity and natural gas plans
 - Filter by location and usage
 - View total estimated costs
- Updated monthly and recommended for regular use
- Can help you switch to better rates with your current or new retailer

Historic Rates Tool

- Shows past electricity and natural gas rate trends
- Helps inform decisions about fixed vs. variable plans

7. Understanding & Using Each Tool Effectively

- Compare:
 - Rates (fixed vs. variable)
 - Administration or membership fees
 - Contract terms and exit conditions
- Look for:
 - No exit fees and flexible contract terms
- Review details carefully before signing any agreement

8. DIY Energy Audit (Reducing Utility Costs)

- UCA provides a Do-It-Yourself Energy Audit guide
- Focus areas include:
 - Identifying air leaks
 - Managing standby power (“energy vampires”)
 - Maintaining appliances
 - Improving lighting efficiency
 - Checking heating and cooling systems
- Helps identify opportunities to reduce usage and lower bills

9. Additional Support & Resources

- Downloadable materials include:
 - Tip sheets
 - Guides and posters
 - Educational videos
- Printed materials may also be ordered
- Ongoing updates are shared via the UCA website and newsletter