

## WATER COMPLAINTS RESOLUTION –CHANGES

A new government department is now responsible for receiving and resolving consumers water complaints. In the first instance, consumers should approach their water provider (AqWest, the Water Corporation etc) to resolve the issue, however if they are not satisfied with the response then the Department of Environment is the relevant Government department to submit a complaint to.

They can receive complaints regarding most consumer issues, including billing, water quality, and sewerage, not just environmental issues.

Customers can lodge a complaint with the **Department of Environment** by:

Telephone 9278 0406

Email [wspbcomplaints@environment.wa.gov.au](mailto:wspbcomplaints@environment.wa.gov.au)

Website [www.environment.wa.gov.au](http://www.environment.wa.gov.au)

Post PO Box 6740, Hay Street  
East Perth WA 6892

You can also download a copy of the Department of Environment complaint form from the WACOSS CUP website.

### CONCESSIONS THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE UGLY

In September, WACOSS coordinated a forum entitled "Changing Concessions". The event provided a great deal of constructive contributions on the current problems people face with concessions and ideas for possible concessions for the future. Some of the key comments raised during the forum included:

- Offering a concession on bottled gas,
- Extending the senior air conditioning rebate to disability support pensioners,
- Expanding the Water-wise rebate scheme
- to specifically provide assistance to low-income earners,
- Making concessions easier to access,
- Ensuring greater information is provided to concession card holders when they receive
- Their concessions card regarding their entitlements, and
- Promotional material and other information to be made clearer and available in other Languages.

It was clear from the comments made during the forum that action needs to be taken by the Government to resolve the problems people are facing when trying to access concessions. WACOSS has written to the Premier to encourage the Government to undertake the review of State Government concessions they committed to undertake at the last election.

### HOW YOU CAN HELP EVALUATE UTILITIES

Western Australian consumer representative organisations have historically had very little access to information or statistical data relating to the way that utility providers handle customer complaints or financial hardship. The Consumer Utilities Project has designed a brief one page tally sheet style survey aiming to collect some of this information. The data will be used to inform policy development and contribute to the review of consumer protection regulation, such as the Code of Conduct for electricity consumers.

CUP is anticipating that participating organisations will fill in the tally sheet survey each week over a six week period from the 24<sup>th</sup> October 2005 to the 9<sup>th</sup> December 2005.

The survey will be launched by Kate Mills at the Financial Counsellors Association WA Conference on the 18<sup>th</sup> of October. Following that, the survey will be distributed by email and be available online at the WACOSS CUP website. The survey is very brief and simple to fill in. It should be completed and returned by fax to the WACOSS office each Friday afternoon or Monday morning for the survey period.

Please look out for further information and assistance on how to use the survey in the WACOSS E-news and by email.

We look forward to your involvement and support.

# POWER UP NEWS

Issue 2  
September 2005

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[wacoss.org.au/utilities/index.htm](http://wacoss.org.au/utilities/index.htm)

## HELPING WEST AUSTRALIANS STAY CONNECTED

The WACOSS Consumer Utilities Project (CUP) has been busy the last few months, organising training events, seminars and public forums on some of the big changes in utilities. In the last month CUP held the following three events;

### ***Electricity Regulation and Consumer Protection Training Seminar***

This event included presentations by the Office of Energy's Energy Reform Implementation Unit on the *Code of Conduct* and from Western Power on its *Hardship Policy*.

### ***Utilities Consumer Protection – Energy Ombudsman and Economic Regulation Authority***

CUP also hosted a seminar with the Economic Regulation Authority and Energy Ombudsman. The seminar provided a great opportunity to learn about the new Energy Ombudsman project and the role the Economic Regulation Authority plays in consumer protection.

### ***Changing Concessions Forum***

The state government at the last election committed to review the concessions provide by the state government. With this in mind CUP recently hosted a forum of sector representatives who provided constructive contributions on the current problems and possible concessions for the future.

Thank you to everyone who attended and made these events a success. The information sheets that were distributed at all the events are available on the website. Please contact CUP Project Support Officer Anthony Stewart on 94207217 or email [anthony@wacoss.org.au](mailto:anthony@wacoss.org.au) for further information on any of these events.

## NEW LOOK CUP WEBSITE

The WACOSS CUP website has been revamped with a new and easier format. You can find information about the latest news on the project, download documents including policy, regulations, training materials and information sheets.

We welcome your feedback about the site and any comments or suggestions for improvements so please check it out at [www.wacoss.org.au/utilities/index.htm](http://www.wacoss.org.au/utilities/index.htm) and keep in touch.



Department of Consumer  
and Employment Protection  
Government of Western Australia

*Ways to make a difference*

WACOSS Consumer Utilities Project is funded by the  
WA Department of Consumer & Employment Protection



## WESTERN POWER'S NEW HARDSHIP POLICY

The WACOSS Consumer Utilities Project, together with other agencies in the sector, worked together with Western Power to develop their Hardship Policy, which was adopted in June 2005. The Western Power Hardship Policy outlines the minimum standards Western Power will adopt in relation to dealing with residential customers who lack the capacity to pay a bill due to financial hardship or payment difficulties.

While Western Power's Hardship Policy does not meet best practice models around Australia, it certainly goes a long way towards providing better assistance to people in need.

The Hardship Policy includes information about:

- *Factors For Consideration in Negotiating Payment Plans:* such as what a customer can afford to pay, whether they have faulted on payment plans in the past, and advice given by a customer representative or financial counsellor,
- *Rights of Customers Experiencing Financial Hardship:* such as information about eligible concessions and rebates, how to conserve energy,
- *Western Power's Credit Collection Approach:* a ten (10) day moratorium on disconnection or debt collection which is given to customers to provide them with an opportunity to get assistance or see a customer representative, and
- *Bankrupt Customers:* who will have the same rights as other customers and are not liable for any debt prior to their bankruptcy. However, customers with repeated bankruptcy may be placed on a shorter billing cycle.

Western Power were required to develop a Hardship Policy by the Code of Conduct for the Supply of Electricity to Small Use Customers (the Code of Conduct). It requires Western Power staff to be aware of the conditions of the Hardship Policy, and trained in issues relating to customer financial hardship. The credit management staff, have been trained specifically to apply the hardship policy, to all eligible customers. It is likely that customers who call the customer service line, 13 13 53, will need to be transferred through to the trained staff in the Credit Management Centre.

A complete copy of the Hardship Policy and other documents relating to the rights of Western Power customers are available on the WACOSS CUP website. The Hardship Policy should be considered along with other customer rights and obligations. These rights are explained in the Western Power Customer Charter and the Code of Conduct which are also available on the website.

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## QUESTIONS ABOUT WESTERN POWER'S PRACTICES

Following a recent CUP Training Seminar on the Western Power Hardship Policy, the participants from the sector compiled a series of questions in a submission to Western Power. The submission identified a range of issues and challenges being experienced by customer representatives and corresponding suggestions and questions, including interpretation and application of the Hardship Policy. CUP is awaiting a response from Western Power and will inform participants when it has been received.

Western Power have also informed us that some of the figures they presented at the event were inaccurate and have asked us to correct them. The corrected numbers are, since January 2005, Western Power have assessed:

- 13,168 customers as experiencing 'payment difficulty,'
- and 605 customers as being in 'financial hardship.'

## MORE FUNDING FOR WESTERN POWER ASSIST

WACOSS is pleased to announce that we have secured extra funding for the Western Power Assist Scheme for the 2005/2006 financial year of the scheme.

Western Power's increased funding of \$75,000 for the program will enable WACOSS and the Emergency Relief Forum, through the administering agency Anglicare, to run the program for another year. The program is designed to assist low-income and disadvantaged individuals and families, in particular, to help prevent them from facing disconnection.

The dates for the next round three rounds of Western Power Assist have been set:

- **19 and 20 October 2005**
- **7 and 8 December 2005**
- **15 and 16 February 2006**

Electricity disconnections cause numerous social and health costs for families throughout Western Australia. Through Western Power's sponsorship of this financial assistance scheme, the corporation is helping to protect many more disadvantaged people in our community.

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## NEW UMPIRE FOR WA ENERGY CONSUMERS

WACOSS has welcomed the government's launch of the Energy Ombudsman (EO) this month, as an important scheme, providing a free dispute resolution service to investigate consumer complaints of unfair conduct by their electricity or gas provider. The establishment of the EO is a major step towards greater protection for electricity consumers in Western Australia, combining the existing Gas Industry Ombudsman with the electricity industry.

WACOSS has been instrumental in the development of consumer protection policy and mechanisms, including advocating the principles of independence, fairness, equity, and effectiveness for the Energy Ombudsman. It is important to point out that the scheme is intended to provide a dispute resolution for consumers, and does not serve to advocate on their behalf. Thus, the critically important need for consumer representative groups continues.

"In the current climate of change in Western Australia, with the disaggregation of Western Power approved, and greater competition in the energy sector, it is vital that the consumer voice is heard. Unless we take care of the people using these essential services at the end of the day, changes to markets and regulations will not deliver successful outcomes," said WACOSS Executive Director, Ms Lisa Baker.

WACOSS hosted the Energy Ombudsman, Ms Deirdre O'Donnell, at a Consumer Regulation Seminar earlier this month, to raise awareness about the role of an Ombudsman in a broader framework of consumer protection. The Energy Ombudsman is likely to receive complaints concerning: power outages; incorrect billing and overcharging; disconnection; debt recovery; service standard compensation payments.

The Consumer Utilities Project will continue to work with government to extend the benefits of an ombudsman scheme to water and gas bottle consumers, similarly to the way the Energy and Water Ombudsman scheme operates in Victoria.

The Energy Ombudsman can be contacted for further information or complaints on Gas or Electricity issues on:

Phone: Freecall 1800 754 004 or (08) 9220 7588

Email: [energy@ombudsman.wa.gov.au](mailto:energy@ombudsman.wa.gov.au)

Website: [www.ombudsman.wa.gov.au/energy](http://www.ombudsman.wa.gov.au/energy)

If you would like any further information on the Energy Ombudsman training seminar hosted by WACOSS, the training materials from the day are available. Please contact [anthony@wacoss.org.au](mailto:anthony@wacoss.org.au) or phone the Utilities Hotline on 9420 7217.