April 7, 2020

The Honorable Kate Brown  
Governor, State of Oregon  
254 State Capitol  
Salem, Oregon 97301-4047

SENT VIA E-MAIL

Dear Governor Brown:

On behalf of the Oregon Municipal Electric Utilities Association, the Oregon People’s Utility District Association and the Oregon Rural Electric Cooperative Association, we are writing today to assure you that as impacts of COVID-19 are felt across Oregon, the state’s consumer-owned electric utilities (COUs) are working diligently with our consumers to lend assistance.

There is no doubt that the disruption caused by COVID-19 will make it difficult for many Oregonians to pay for their utility bills. That is why – even before Executive Order 20-12 (Stay Home, Save Lives) – COUs began setting up programs to help consumers in our communities, including deferred payment schedules, finding sources of additional assistance, enhancing existing utility assistance programs and, in some cases, creating new assistance programs. It is important to note that Oregon’s COUs do not have a profit motive; our primary concerns are our consumers and the communities we serve.

Other measures COUs have taken include suspension of disconnections, waiving late fees, and retiring capital credits early to put more money into the pockets of our consumer-owners. After all, these are our neighbors and our friends, and no one knows the circumstances better in our communities than we do. Not only will we do these things in times of a great crisis – we will continue to do them long after this global pandemic has passed. All of our efforts are aimed at avoiding disconnections for our consumers.

There has been discussion about the need for an emergency moratorium on disconnects during the COVID-19 event. While the circumstances of each of Oregon’s 36 COUs are different, there is no evidence of disconnections at this time of crisis. Even in the most normal of times, disconnects are exceedingly rare and only occur after long, persistent efforts to work with the consumer. In all cases, the best way to address these situations is to have the consumer contact their utility. The ultimate objective of COUs at the end of this pandemic is to have our consumers on stable footing with the utility, alleviating the economic stress on both families and the COU.

And while we all share the same goal on disconnections, an Executive Order with a sweeping statewide mandate generates new challenges. An Executive Order suspending disconnections
may create a false impression that one is not obligated to pay for their utility bill, leaving consumers with insurmountable debts when the COVID-19 crisis has abated. This is particularly concerning because the duration of the crisis is unknown. We believe there is a better solution, rooted in local control and concern for our communities. By continuing to work with our consumers on a case-by-case basis, we ensure that needs are met and that customers that can pay – even a diminished amount, continue to do so. As you consider future emergency actions, we urge you to ensure that Oregon’s COUs are not saddled with economic burdens that will hinder our ability to provide vital services, including providing power to hospitals and other first responders. We are committed to doing the right thing and remain focused on the real challenges ahead.

Additionally, we hope the State will consider increases to low income energy assistance to help meet the increased needs of those impacted by COVID-19. The CARES Act appropriation to LIHEAP is a start, but given the magnitude of the needs is likely to be outstripped in short order.

Thank you for your leadership and continued dialogue during this challenging time for Oregon.

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