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4/10/2023

Will Seuffert Executive Secretary Minnesota Public Utilities Commission 121 7th Place East, Suite 350 St. Paul, MN 55101

RE: In the Matter of a Commission Investigation into the Potential Role of Third-Party Aggregation of Retail Customers.

DOCKET NO.: E999/CI-22-600

Date: 4/10/2023

Dear Mr. Seuffert,

The Minnesota Rural Electric Association ("MREA") respectfully submits these Reply Comments in the above-entitled docket regarding Aggregators of Retail Customers ("ARCs"). The MREA is the statewide association representing the interests of all 50 non-profit memberowned electric cooperatives in Minnesota, including all 44 distribution cooperatives and six generation and transmission cooperatives.

Sincerely,

/s/ Darrick Moe

Darrick Moe President & CEO Minnesota Rural Electric Association

State of Minnesota before the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission

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Commissioner

In the Matter of a Commission Investigation into the

Potential Role of Third-Party Aggregation of Retail

Customers

DOCKET NO.: E999/CI-22-600

MREA Reply Comments

Introduction

MREA joins other commentors, including the Department of Commerce ("Department"), utilities, labor, and low-income advocates, in opposing any change to or departure from the Commission's prior decision to prohibit Aggregators of Retail Customers ("ARCs") in Minnesota.

Although the outcome of this docket will not directly impact cooperative utilities, it could have an indirect impact as explained in the initial comments of Dakota Electric. Moreover, a decision to allow ARCs in Minnesota would set a troubling precedent that could destabilize the regulatory framework that has provided Minnesota consumers with highly reliable, affordable, and rapidly decarbonizing electricity.

Accordingly, MREA urges the Commission to continue prohibiting ARCs in Minnesota other than possibly allowing them in limited pilot programs proposed by utilities upon demonstration that ARCs will likely improve DR and not cause any ancillary harm to the public interest.

Discussion

A. THERE IS NO BASIS FOR REVERSING OR CHANGING THE CURRENT PROHIBITION ON THIRD-PARTY AGGREGATORS IN MINNESOTA

The Commission's May 18, 2010, Order in Docket CI-09-1449 ("*Prohibition Order*") expressly "prohibits the demand response of the retail customers . . . from being bid into organized markets by non-utility aggregators of retail customers." That Order was never reconsidered and there is no reason to alter or depart from it now.

¹ In the Matter of an Investigation of Whether the Commission Should Take Action on Demand Response Bid Directly into the MISO Markets by Aggregators of Retail Customers Under FERC Orders 719 and 719-A, ORDER PROHIBITING BIDDING OF DEMAND RESPONSE INTO ORGANIZED MARKETS BY AGGREGATORS OF RETAIL

The Commission indicated in its *Prohibition Order* that it was open to "pilot projects designed to explore the potential for ARCs... to increase total levels of demand response." But in recognizing that one potential limited opening to ARCs, the Commission was clear that any such pilot proposal: "[1] must demonstrate a likelihood of increasing demand response..., [2] include protections to ensure no ratepayer harm and no reduction in existing levels of demand response..., [and] [3] demonstrate serious engagement with the concerns raised by the stakeholders..."

None of the comments in this Docket provide a credible basis for concluding that allowing third-party ARCs would likely increase demand response ("DR"). Moreover, those advocating for third-party aggregation have failed to offer any "protections to ensure no ratepayer harm." To the contrary, the comments filed by the Department and others document a record of successful utility demand response in the 13 years since the Commission's Prohibition Order and identify a number of serious ratepayer risks associated with allowing ARCs.

As the Department of Commerce ("Department") comments observed:

Minnesota currently ranks 1st nation-wide in MW of potential DR for the residential class, 3rd for the commercial class, and 17th for the industrial class. Overall, Minnesota has the 4th highest level of potential DR among the states. Thus, Minnesota has substantial qualities of DR already available.

The three investor-owned utilities, along with Dakota Electric, filed initial comments specifically detailing the substantial successes they've had implementing demand response over the past decade since the Commission's *Prohibition Order*. Although the Department was unable to account for cooperative utility DR in its initial comments given limitations in Energy Information Agency ("EIA") data, there is no doubt that Minnesota's cooperative utilities have pursued DR aggressively and successfully.

Great River Energy's 27 distribution cooperative members have a robust and highly successful array of DR programs that total 12.7% of summer peak demand and 18.1% of winter peak. One of those 27 members, Dakota Electric, noted in its initial comments that 40% of its residential members participate in at least one of its multiple DR programs. In total, Dakota Electric's DR programs account for nearly 20% of its summertime peak, which would rank 3rd among the NERC-region utilities listed in Table 2 of the Department's comments. Another GRE member cooperative, Wright-Hennepin, has a total load-control capability of 62 MW, which is 27% of its system peak. Wright-Hennepin's average load control reduction is 24 MW or 11% of its system peak. Similarly, Connexus Energy has five different demand response programs with 30% residential subscribership. Connexus Energy's DR programs overall are capable of reducing summer peak by 12%. Dairyland Cooperative has 100 MW of DR, which represents approximately 14% of its winter peak and nearly 10% of its summertime peak.

This record of successful DR among cooperatives is not surprising. As nonprofits directly accountable to their member-owners, cooperatives utilities have a strong incentive to pursue DR

CUSTOMERS AND REQUIRING FURTHER FILINGS BY UTILITIES, Docket No. E-999/CI-09-1449 (May 18, 2010) ("Prohibition Order"), p. 6

and other strategies to avoid or defer the cost of adding more capacity. It is obvious from the data presented in the Department's comments that Minnesota's investor-owned utilities have also been highly motivated and successful implementing DR under the current regulatory framework without ARCs. There is *no reason* to believe Minnesota's utilities will not continue to be successful going forward and certainly *no credible basis* for concluding that Minnesota would likely have more DR if ARCs were allowed.

Minnesota's utilities have produced nation-leading demand response, energy efficiency, renewable deployment and decarbonization. These policy advances have been achieved through Minnesota's utilities without compromising affordability or reliability as Minnesota residential electric bills have remained below the national average and reliability metrics have remained among the highest in the nation. The lynchpin of these achievements is a regulatory framework built around exclusive service areas and a structure of accountability for the planning and delivery of electric service within those areas. Investor-owned utilities are accountable directly to the Commission. Similarly, cooperative utilities are accountable to their member-owners through elected boards while also being subject to regulatory oversight with respect to various aspects of their operations, including resource planning, conservation improvement programs, and compliance with renewable energy standards.

The Commission should zealously protect this highly successful framework and reject proposed encroachments absent compelling evidence of the need for any such encroachments. Far from providing a compelling case for allowing ARCs, the record in this case details substantial DR success by Minnesota's utilities and profound public interest risks associated with ARCs, including: (1) interference with critical utility planning; (2) cost increases resulting from the need to add more utility capacity to compensate for the loss of utility DR capacity; and (3) shifting DR costs to small or more energy-dependent customers who would not be attractive to unregulated ARCs seeking to maximize profits through high-margin sales. Allowing unregulated for-profit ARC businesses to provide or control critical energy resources for private gain could undermine efforts to ensure that utility service is provided fairly and reliably as well as efforts to advance racial and economic equity.

B. THE COMMISSION HAS AUTHORITY TO PROHIBIT THIRD-PARTY AGGREGATORS

The 2010 Commission's decision to prohibit third-party aggregation was made after considering arguments challenging the Commission's authority over ARCs. Although the Commission did not make an explicit finding on its authority in that case, such a finding is obviously implicit in the Commission's decision to prohibit third-party aggregation. Importantly, the regulatory framework and related statutory definitions have not changed since that decision and the arguments challenging Commission jurisdiction to prohibit ARCs are no more persuasive now than they were then.

The issue isn't whether ARCs are public utilities. The issue is whether ARCs provide electric service in violation of Minnesota's service area exclusivity and the answer to that question is they do. Electric "service" is defined in Minnesota Statutes, section 216B.02, subdivision 6 as "natural, manufactured, or mixed gas and electricity; the installation, removal, or repair of equipment or facilities for delivering or measuring such gas and electricity." (Emphasis added).

Even assuming ARCs are not "providing electricity" they are certainly providing equipment for "measuring" electricity since measuring is central to determining the amount of electric consumption an ARC is shifting or deferring and then selling into the MISO market.

ARCs provide equipment to measure electricity and then, in effect, use that equipment for a transaction that involves the provision of electricity to utility customers. The Sierra Club/Union of Concerned Scientist ("Sierra Club/UCS") comments wrongly assert that what they provide simply reduces usage. That assertion doesn't tell the whole story. ARCs provide DR, which rather than reducing overall consumption, typically *shifts* consumption from peak to non-peak periods. Therefore, in addition to providing equipment that measures electricity as part of their service, ARCs are clearly involved in the delivery of electricity. DR is a tariffed, regulated electric service when provided by a utility and it is still electric service when provided by a non-utility. As a result, a non-utility ARC cannot provide aggregated DR in a utility's exclusive service area without the utility's consent.

Minnesota law, Minn. Stat. §216B.40, expressly grants utilities the "exclusive right to provide electric service at retail to each and every present and future customer in its assigned service area...." This specific right of exclusivity is grounded in express legislative policy declared in Minn. Stat. §216B.37, which provides the following in relevant part:

It is hereby declared to be <u>in the public interest</u> that, in order to encourage the development of coordinated statewide electric service at retail, to eliminate or avoid unnecessary duplication of electric utility facilities, and to promote economical, efficient, and adequate electric service to the public, the state of *Minnesota shall be divided into geographic service areas within which a specified utility shall provide electric service to customers on an exclusive basis*. (Emphasis added).

Minnesota law is clear that ARCs cannot provide their DR services in a utility's service area in Minnesota without the written consent of the utility. Hence, the Commission has both the authority and responsibility to prohibit ARCs unless their services are provided through a utility or with the utility's consent.

It is indisputable that the provision of electricity is an essential service on which all households and businesses rely for their lives and livelihoods. Accordingly, as the Commission observed in its *Prohibition Order*, "[t]he Minnesota Public Utilities Act [Minn. Stat. Ch. 216B] creates a comprehensive regulatory structure to ensure that all state providers of electrical service have just and reasonable rates and just and reasonable terms and conditions of service." That framework involves resource plan proceedings, tariff filings and other regulatory oversight intended to protect the public interest with respect to essential electric service.

The Commission's further observation in its *Prohibition Order* that "it is unclear how ARCs would fit into that regulatory structure..." did <u>not</u> suggest the Commission had any doubt about

² Minn. Stat. §216B.40.

³ *Prohibition Order*, p. 5.

⁴ Id.

its authority over ARCs as suggested in the Sierra Club/UCS comments. To the contrary, the Commission was expressing serious doubt about the ability to protect the public interest if ARCs were allowed to provide what is otherwise provided exclusively by regulated utilities. The Commission understood then, as it should now, that ARCs provide electric service. And the Commission's stated concern about the risk ARCs could pose to the public interest reflected the Commission's understanding that what ARCs provide is clearly "clothed in the public interest." Nothing has changed since the *Prohibition Order* to suggest that what ARCs provide now is any less intertwined with the public interest.

Accordingly, MREA urges the Commission to reject the authorization of third-party retail demand response aggregation except pursuant to a utility-proposed pilot approved by the Commission under the criteria established in the *Prohibition Order*.

/s/Darrick Moe

Darrick Moe President & CEO Minnesota Rural Electric Association

BEFORE THE MINNESOTA PUBLIC UTILITIES COMMISSION

121 Seventh Place East, Suite 350 St. Paul, Minnesota 55101-2147

In the Matter of a Commission Investigation into the Potential Role of Third-Party Aggregation of Retail Customers

AFFIDAVIT OF SERVICE

MPUC Docket No.: E999/CI-22-600

STATE OF MINNESOTA) ss. COUNTY OF WASHINGTON)

Mary G. Holly, of the City of Lake Elmo, County of Washington, the State of Minnesota, being first duly sworn, deposes and says that on the 10th day of April, 2023, she served the attached **MREA Reply Comments** to all said persons on the attached Service List, true and correct copies thereof, by eFiling and/or by depositing the same enclosed in an envelope, postage prepaid in the United States Mail at the post office in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

/s/ Mary G. Holly MARY G. HOLLY

Subscribed and sworn to before me this 10th day of April, 2023.

/s/ Rachel M. Tillemans
Notary Public

My Commission Expires: January 31, 2027

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