

OPINIONS OF OTHER
NEWSPAPERS

Protect the little
guy in energy talks

DALLAS MORNING NEWS

Most Texas power customers aren't consumed with the intricacies of electric deregulation. Stranded costs, monopolistic practices and nodal markets aren't high on their list of worries.

Budget-busting electric bills are.

In North Texas, many of TXU's customers are paying rates nearly 45 percent higher than the national average — an expensive reality that will be amplified as summer approaches. For consumers, deregulation has been a burdensome drag on their pocketbooks.

Now, lawmakers have a chance to make needed changes. Re-regulation is not the answer, but deregulation could use some fine-tuning.

The House and Senate have passed legislation aimed at assuring a more competitive market; it now will go to conference committee. As lawmakers begin debating compromises, we hope their decisions will be guided by the goal of protecting power customers. Here's how:

Facilitate consumer choice. Start by funding real education efforts.

Don't trust utilities to tell their customers about the competition. Consumers aren't willfully rejecting money-saving options; many simply don't know where to find reliable information or understand how to change providers. The onus should be on the state to tell them.

If education campaigns don't spur competition, allow the Public Utilities Commission to redistribute customers who are still paying the highest rates.

Provide an explanation of their electricity options and ask these consumers to make an affirmative choice for the new provider.

Cut standard rates by 15 percent. A one-time adjustment to the highest rates would help address the unintended consequences of the price-to-beat provision. Although a more competitive market eventually should push prices down, consumers need relief now.

The price to beat allowed for artificially inflated rates. The provision now has expired, but the costly effects linger. The state need not cap rates, but this one-time-only relief would show a good-faith effort to protect consumers.

Limit power generation companies' market share. This change is needed to effectively prohibit utilities from manipulating wholesale market prices. TXU has been fined \$210 million for withholding power and driving up prices. Lawmakers must foreclose the possibility of a repeat occurrence.

Sen. Troy Fraser, who sponsored three bills (SB 482, 483 and 896) aimed at making deregulation work, has proposed limiting power companies to serving 25 percent of the market in each region. But he concedes that 25 is not a magic number, and he's willing to work with House leaders to reach a compromise.

Require PUC approval for the sale of public utilities. This is one more way to assure due diligence for any transaction that affects consumers. The TXU buyers have wrongly characterized this requirement as re-regulation and have complained that the state is changing the rules in the middle of the game.

But this falls far short of re-regulating the market. Rather, PUC approval is a needed check and balance for any major utility sale.

This requirement was proposed while TXU was still accepting buyout offers and would be enacted before this transaction is completed. So investors will know the rules the state is playing by before they sign on the dotted line.

We have praised many elements of the TXU buyout, and the investors appear poised to move the utility in the right direction.

But effective legislation should not focus on helping or hindering a specific company. It simply should do what's best for the state's consumers.

CARTOON



COLUMN

Fanciful fish story comes true

I can still see the look on his face as he walked down the plank from the half-day boat docked in Morro Bay.

We were on a weekend get-away in picturesque central California.

My husband wanted to try his hand at ocean fishing. Since I get seasick even before the boat pulls out of the harbor, I chose to stay behind to do some reading.

Jack went out at dawn and returned just before noon.

One by one I watched the passengers disembark with big smiles on their faces and bulging burlap bags slung over their shoulders.

"They must have caught the big ones," I thought to myself as I anticipated the huge catch my novice fisherman would be bringing back.

Just as I was beginning to wonder if he had fallen overboard, I spied Jack at the end of the returning ocean farers.

His head was down, his hands were in his pockets and there was no gunnysack in sight. I called out his name and waved to him from the shoreline.

"Where's your fish?" I asked as he approached me.

Jack pulled his right hand out of his pocket and held open a sandwich-sized plastic bag containing four small pieces of fish.

"The captain cleaned and filleted it for me" he explained sheepishly. "I guess the fish didn't like the scent I put on the bait and only one small ocean perch took it."

While the marine expedition did little toward providing a meal, it was abundant food for laughter for many years to come.

Decades later, we sat around the kitchen table at my cousin Marietta and her husband Bob's winter home in Brooksville, Fla.

Bob had spent his career in the boat business and was a skilled fisherman. The guys were going to get up very early and go fishing in the Gulf of Mexico on Bob's Bayliner.

"Have you done much salt water fishing, Jack?" he asked. I could tell from the glimmer in my husband's eye what he was thinking.

We all bust out laughing as Jack ended the familiar story. Bob promised him that wouldn't happen this time.



ANTOINETTE JACKSON

Mangia!
Mangia!



From left are: Jack Jackson, dead 24 inch grouper and Bob Ogarek, ace fisherman.

While they were out at sea, my cousin and I spent the next day at Silver Springs Park enjoying our mutual hobby of photography.

We returned home to a message on the answering machine that our husbands were on their way home.

"Could you tell from the sound of Bob's voice if they caught anything, Mar?"

"It was a little windy out there. There's no telling what the fishing was like."

We would both have to wait to see if there was a catch of the day for the next night's dinner.

At almost 6 p.m., Bob and Jack pulled up in the driveway, towing the seaworthy craft behind them.

Our husbands looked wind burned, tired and thirsty for a cold drink.

"Well, did you catch anything?" I asked anxiously.

Playing it cool, Bob put the ice chest down on the driveway and pulled opened the top. "Just 40 brown snapper and a 24 inch grouper!"

Jack grinned ear-to-ear as he said, "That baby is two inches bigger than the

limit. I guess the curse of Morro Bay is over."

They put their catch on ice, cleaned up the boat and then themselves. During dinner, Marietta and I got a blow-by-blow account of their 26-mile offshore fishing trip.

The next day Bob taught his willing student how to clean, fillet and freeze the catch.

That evening, Marietta gave me a lesson in the proper cooking of fresh snapper.

I eagerly wrote down her ingredients and photographed each step.

Then we all sat down to the tastiest meal of fresh fried fish Jack and I have ever eaten.

Two days later, aware that fish and houseguests start smelling bad after a few days, we were preparing to leave.

As we stood in the driveway saying our good byes, Mar and I looked at our husbands lingering in their farewell.

Both are normally men of few words but throughout our stay they had talked non-stop about the many things they had in common.

"They get along so well together," said Marietta.

"I wish we still lived on opposite ends of the block instead of on opposite ends of the Gulf," I added as I hugged her.

"So do I, Anto." She hugged back, "so do I."

Marietta's Fried Ocean Catch

- 1 pound fish fillets
- 1 egg
- 1/2 teaspoon garlic powder
- 1/2 teaspoon onion powder
- 1/4 teaspoon pepper
- 1/2 cup flour
- 1/4 cup light olive oil
- Wash and pat dry fish fillets. In a separate bowl, mix together egg with seasonings (seasonings can be measured "to taste" as well).
- Roll fillets into flour then dip into the seasoned beaten egg. Fry in heated oil until golden brown or until fish flakes with a fork.

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