

Customer complaints to PUC up in 2003

AUSTIN (AP) — Customer complaints about their retail electric providers increased 34 percent in 2003 as a result of billing confusion and aggressive competition among providers, according to a utility consulting firm.

Texas customers lodged nearly 17,000 complaints with the state Public Utility Commission in 2003, up from about 12,700 complaints in 2002, according to a records analysis by the consulting firm Regulatory Compliance Services.

“It’s not uncommon to find these kinds of problems early in the process in a market as it begins to deregulate,” said Patricia Dolese, owner of the firm.

Texas’ electric deregulation law took effect at the beginning of 2002, allowing customers to begin choosing their providers and prompting a flurry of competition among providers.

Dolese’s analysis of PUC records shows the agency investigated nearly 13,000 of the complaints and found violations in 10 percent of those cases.

PUC spokesman Terry Hadley said the commission has not conducted the same analysis as the consultants, but he said the numbers appear to be accurate.

“I think everyone from lawmakers to the PUC staff to customer representatives expected more complaints as we moved into competition,” Hadley said.

The PUC is investigating nine retail electric providers for possible violations, Hadley said.

The commission fined Houston-based Direct Energy \$750,000 in January for not providing new customers with required information, such as the complete terms of provider-customer agreements.