

Consumer Rights, Responsibilities, and Education

NARUC Energy Regulatory Partnership Program

The Public Services Regulatory Commission of Armenia
and The Iowa Utilities Board



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Consumer Rights and Remedies

Iowa law very specifically sets out consumer rights and remedies in Chapter 476.3:

“ A public utility shall furnish reasonably adequate service at rates and charges in accordance with tariffs filed with the Board.”

The statute goes on to outline customer remedies concerning

“rates, charges, schedules, service, regulations or anything done or omitted to be done by a public utility.”



Consumer Rights

- Notice of utility action (rates, disconnection)
- Budget billing/level payment plans
- Bill payment arrangements
- Winter moratorium
- Medical exemption
- 20 degree rule
- Meter reading
- Low-income heating assistance program – average benefit in 2009 - \$600



Consumer Responsibilities

- New customer must be 18 and able to demonstrate good credit
- Customer may be required to pay a deposit
- Customer is responsible to pay bill timely. If past due, may be disconnected for non-payment. Notice given of rights and remedies.



Role of Regulators in Providing Consumer Protections

- Utility regulation is a social contract that began when utilities were given monopoly rights to provide service
- In exchange, utilities accepted the obligation to provide all paying customers safe, adequate, and reliable service and to have their rates set by state commissions
- Regulators must provide protection to “captive” customers



Consumer – Three Avenues for Complaints

1. First, directly with the utility company
2. The Office of Consumer Advocate which was created by law to represent utility customers
3. The IUB Customer Service Section



Consumer Complaints May Be Filed

- On-line
- E-mail
- Telephone toll-free
- Mail or in person
- Fax
- Customers may be referred by the Governor or the Legislature



IUB Complaint Process

1. The complaint is sent to the utility for a response and to the Consumer Advocate
2. When the response is received, the customer service analyst may informally resolve the complaint
3. If utility response is inadequate, a formal proceeding may be initiated and the case is set for hearing
4. After investigation and review, a decision is made – either in favor of the customer, the utility or a combination of the two



Top Ten Complaints

In 2009 the IUB received 3,429 complaints. This number is down considerably from previous years.

The top five complaint issues are:

1. Billing
2. Disconnections
3. Meter reading
4. Payment arrangements
5. Poor customer service



IUB Educates the Public

- IUB Web site is a library of information
 - Electronic filing system
 - Board activities, forms, industry specific information
- Consumer education materials
- Consumer questions and complaints responses
- Media interaction
- Press releases
- Fall customer service meetings
- Consumer comment meetings to receive public input for rate cases
- IUB annual report



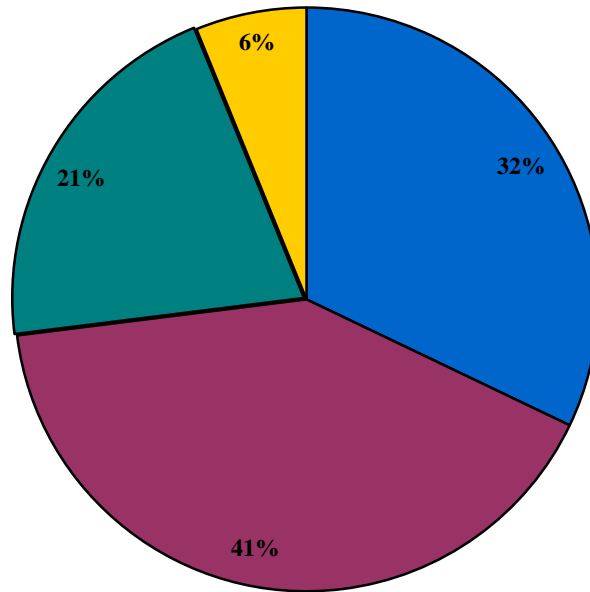
Measuring Impact of Consumer Education

In 2007 the IUB commissioned the University of Northern Iowa to survey residential energy users in Iowa to measure their energy knowledge



Public Survey on Energy Knowledge

Question 1: Global Climate Change

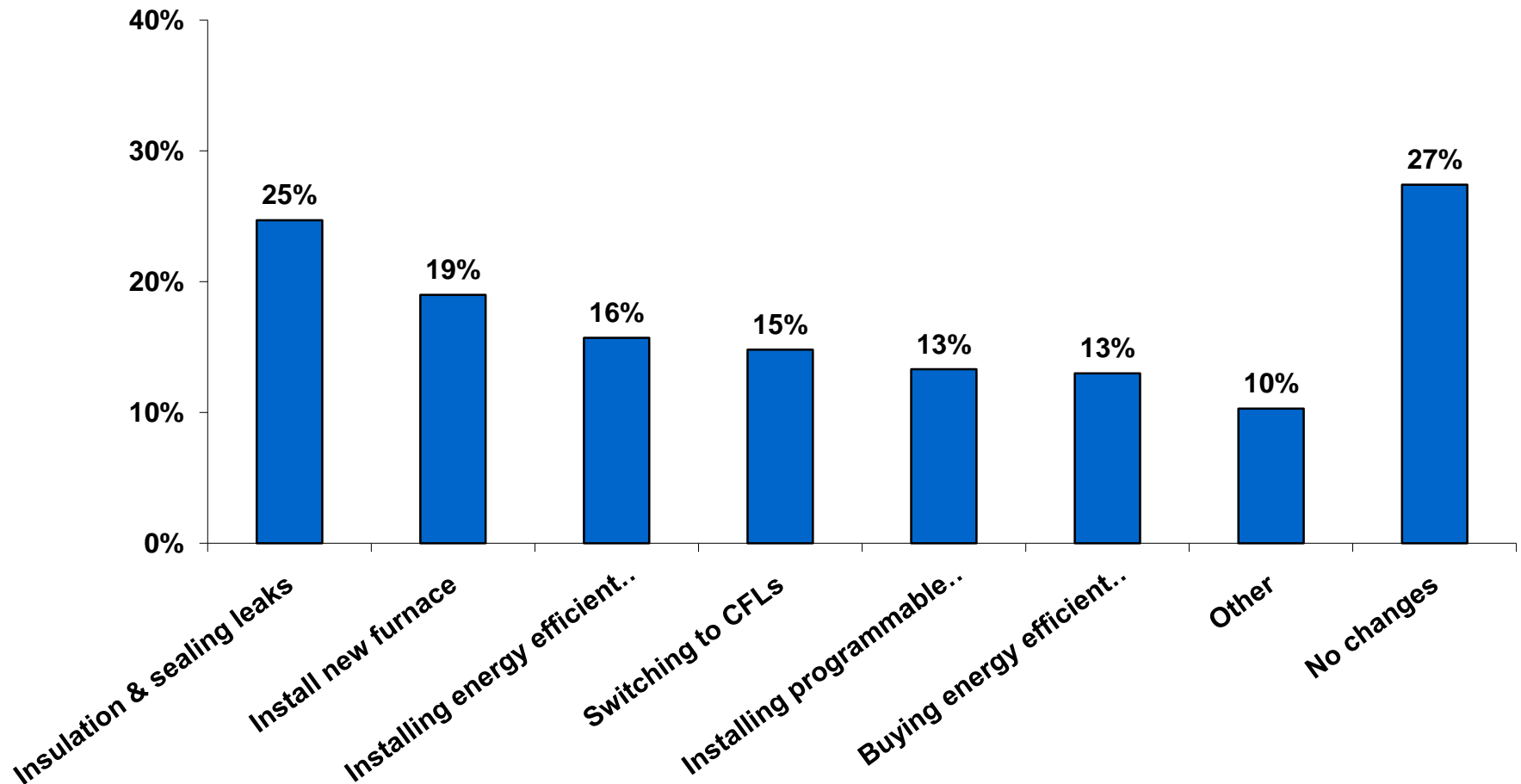


- Global warming has been established as a serious problem and immediate action is necessary.
- There is enough evidence that global warming is taking place and some action should be taken.
- We don't know enough about global warming and more research is necessary before we take any actions.
- Concern about global warming is unwarranted.



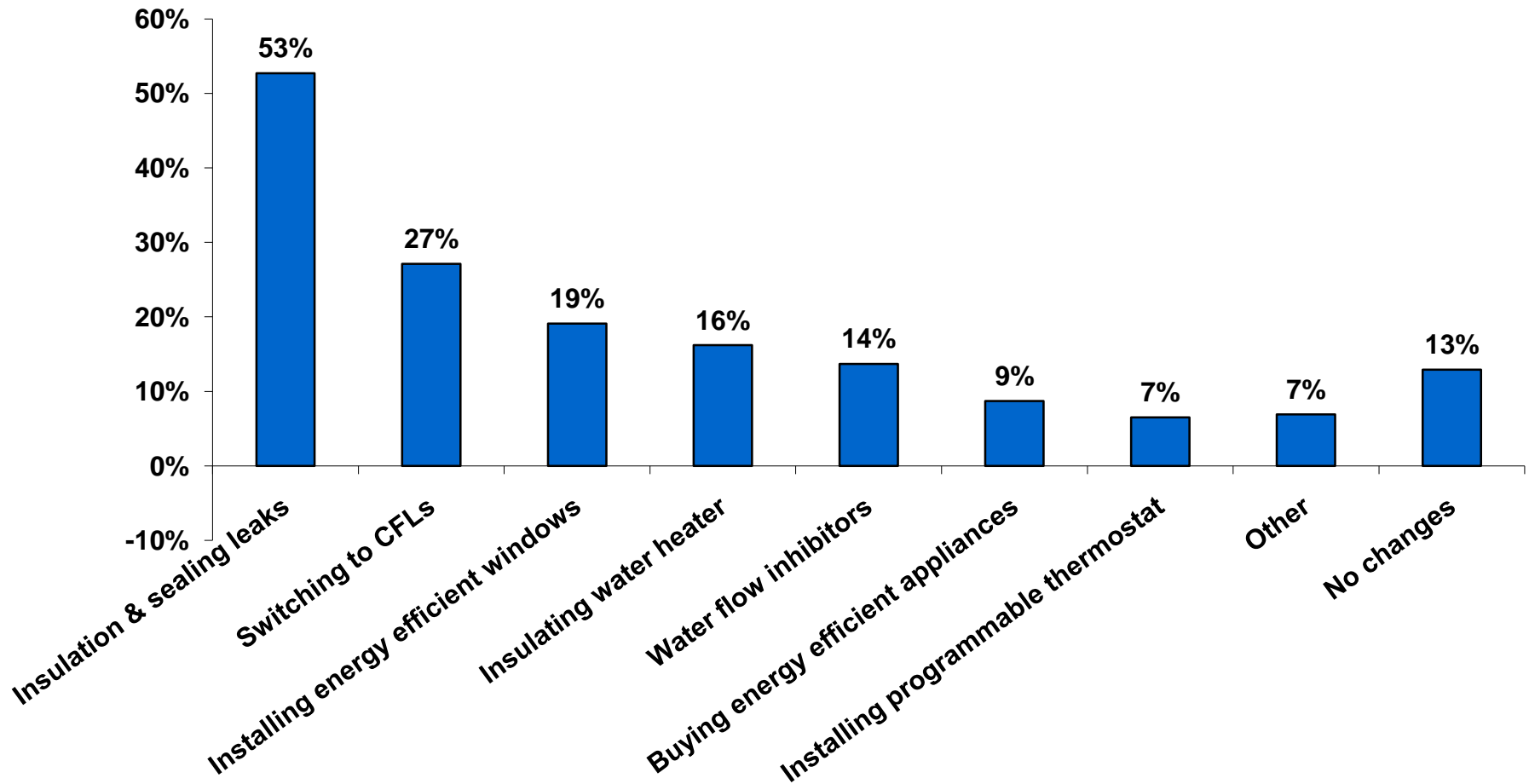
Public Survey on Energy Knowledge

Question 2: Changes made in last 2 years to conserve energy



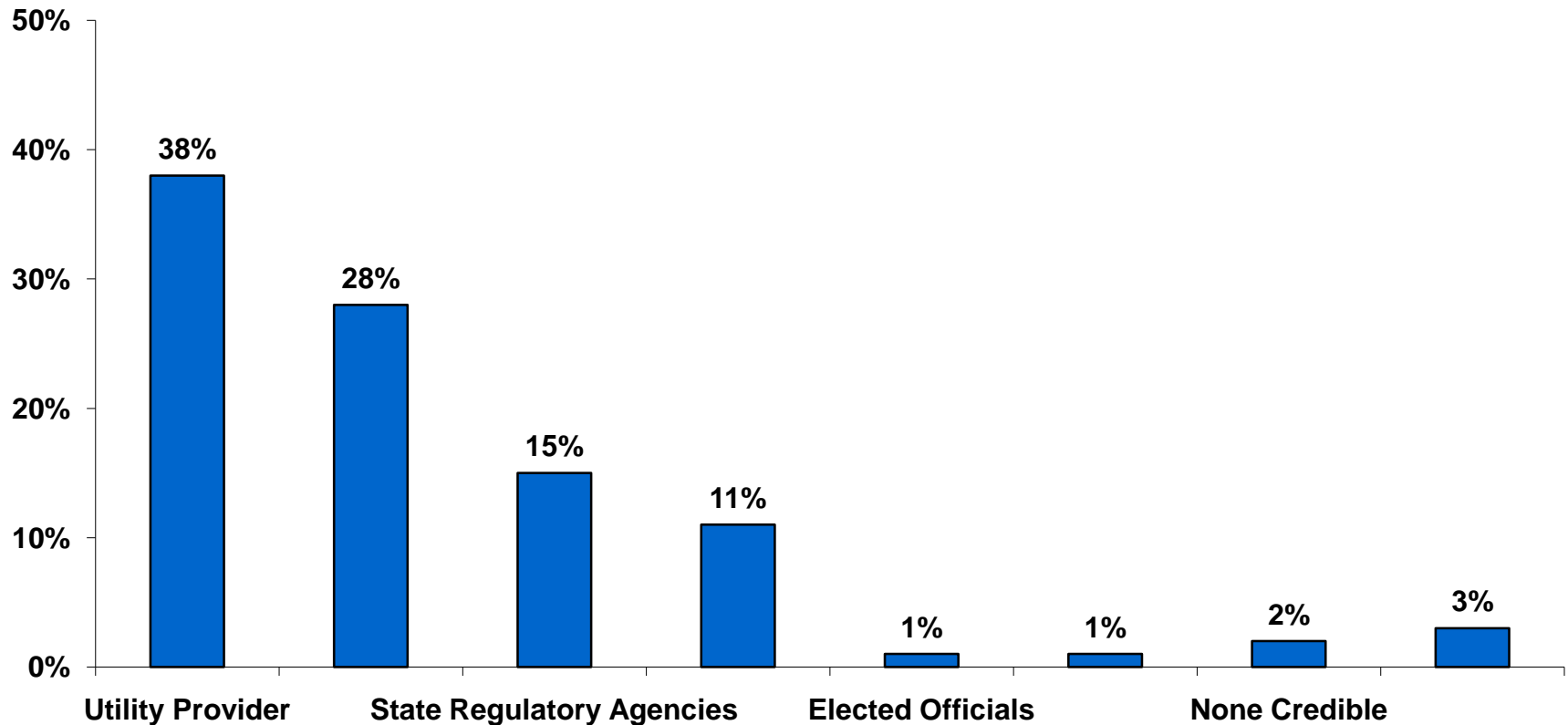
Public Survey on Energy Knowledge

Question 3: Changes made as a result of an energy audit



Public Survey on Energy Knowledge

Question 4: Most credible sources for energy information



The Public and Industry Educate the IUB

Workshops and formal notices of inquiry on:

Energy efficiency

Federal carbon legislation

Smart grid

Advanced metering and time-based rates

PURPA interconnection standards

Status of energy efficiency programs

Electric load service limiters

American Clean Energy and Security Act of 2009



Consumer Input in Regulatory Decisions

- Consumer complaints are monitored for trends and service quality considerations
- Consumers voice their opinions at rate case public hearings, transmission line information meetings
- Consumers may become a party to a docketed case
- Consumers contact the IUB regarding various issues
- Consumers contact the Governor or Legislature regarding utility issues



Questions?



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