



## **Frequently Asked Questions—Missoula Water Billing for Previously Unbilled Water Usage**

### **1. Why do I have back-dated water charges on my utility bill?**

When a water meter does not send out a meter reading due to a dead or dying battery, Missoula Water's Customer Information System (CIS) automatically estimates the usage based on usage from the same month one year ago. When we billed in 2020, we based usage on what a customer used that same month in 2019. However, we hadn't anticipated that many customers may have used more water in 2020 than in the previous year as a result of people working from home and generally spending more time at home due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

As a result, once customers had a new meter installed, actual readings from the old meter could have been higher than what was estimated. So, some customers are being back-charged for water that they had used but were not fully charged for on previous bills.

### **2. Why is there unbilled water usage on many customer meters?**

Missoula Water experienced an unprecedented rate of battery failure of its MasterMeter™ (old) water meters. Once we became aware of this problem about two years ago, we selected a new meter vendor, Neptune Technology Group™. The COVID-19 pandemic prevented our staff from entering customers' homes to replace water meters for many months. To date, Missoula Water has installed more than 5,000 new Neptune meters, but we still have approximately 2,600 water meter transmitters that are failing to send readings to us. There are about 17,000 old meters still in use that we are working to replace.

Until we can get all meters replaced, we continue to estimate water usage each month (see question #1 above). In almost all cases, the meter itself is working, but the transmitter (battery) is not. When the meter is replaced with a new Neptune meter, an accurate reading can be obtained from the old meter, which has a physical counter that is similar to a car odometer. This meter reading is entered into our Customer Information System, which then compares the usage that was charged with the actual water usage from the old meter. If there is a significant amount of unbilled usage to be billed, Missoula Water Customer Service Representatives attempt to call the customer to notify them. If they are unable to reach them via telephone, they next try to email them.

### **3. Why was my water usage underestimated?**

Missoula Water's Customer Information System (CIS) automatically estimates the usage based on usage from the same month one year ago when a meter reading is not available due to a dead or dying water meter battery. We hadn't anticipated that many customers may have used more water in 2020 than in previous years as a result of people working from home and generally spending more time at home due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In a small number of cases, the old water meter continued to provide readings, but the reading was zero units, sometimes over many months. In those cases, CIS does not automatically estimate the usage because some of these "zero consumption" meter reads are correct for customers who use very little water. In other cases, the meter transmitter failed but the CIS system did not recognize it as a failed meter and does not estimate the usage. Due to challenges from COVID-19 and staffing issues, some of the new personnel were somewhat slow to recognize that this group of zero consumption meters should have been manually estimated. We apologize for this oversight and are working diligently to resolve these issues in our monthly billing reviews.

**MISSOULA****PUBLIC WORKS & MOBILITY DEPARTMENT—Utility Billing**1345 W. Broadway • Missoula, Montana 59802 • (406) 552-6700 • [ci.missoula.mt.us/utilities](http://ci.missoula.mt.us/utilities)**4. How do I know if my water usage is being estimated?**

Missoula Water's monthly bill indicates that the usage is estimated (circled in red on sample bill below), but we are working with our Customer Information System provider to re-design the bill so that it is more obvious when water usage is being estimated.

CITY OF MISSOULA UTILITY BILL																															
1345 W Broadway Hours: 7:30AM - 5:30PM Monday - Friday (Excluding Holidays) Customer Service: 406.552.6700																															
To pay by phone, call: 866.790.7218 To pay online, visit: <a href="https://utilitybilling.ci.missoula.mt.us">https://utilitybilling.ci.missoula.mt.us</a> For after hours emergencies, call: 406.552.6700 Visit us at: <a href="https://ci.missoula.mt.us/1256Utilities">https://ci.missoula.mt.us/1256Utilities</a>																															
CUSTOMER NAME STREET ADDRESS MISSOULA MT 598XX-XXXX																															
<b>SERVICE DETAILS</b>		<b>CHARGE DETAILS</b>																													
BILL DATE: 04/16/2021 BILL TYPE: METERED/REGULAR ACCOUNT NUMBER: 000000 CUSTOMER NUMBER: 000000 CUSTOMER NAME: CUSTOMER NAME ADDRESS: CUSTOMER ADDRESS		Water Service From: 03/11/2021 To: 04/12/2021 32 Days Public Fire Protection Fee 1.36 Estimated Usage Charge 17.24 MWC Service Charge (Basic Charge) 16.26 <hr/> \$34.86																													
STORM WATER CLASSIFICATION: 210 UNITS: 1 DU		Storm Water Service From: 03/11/2021 To: 04/12/2021 32 Days Storm Water Charge 4.21 <hr/> \$4.21																													
<b>WATER METER INFORMATION</b>																															
METER #	METER SIZE	READ DATES	USAGE																												
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YOUR MONTHLY WATER USAGE																															
<table border="1"><caption>Monthly Water Usage Data</caption><thead><tr><th>Month</th><th>Usage (Gallons)</th></tr></thead><tbody><tr><td>APR 20</td><td>9</td></tr><tr><td>MAY 20</td><td>15</td></tr><tr><td>JUN 20</td><td>26</td></tr><tr><td>JUL 20</td><td>55</td></tr><tr><td>AUG 20</td><td>126</td></tr><tr><td>SEP 20</td><td>114</td></tr><tr><td>OCT 20</td><td>37</td></tr><tr><td>NOV 20</td><td>3</td></tr><tr><td>DEC 20</td><td>0</td></tr><tr><td>JAN 21</td><td>9</td></tr><tr><td>FEB 21</td><td>8</td></tr><tr><td>MAR 21</td><td>8</td></tr><tr><td>APR 21</td><td>9</td></tr></tbody></table>				Month	Usage (Gallons)	APR 20	9	MAY 20	15	JUN 20	26	JUL 20	55	AUG 20	126	SEP 20	114	OCT 20	37	NOV 20	3	DEC 20	0	JAN 21	9	FEB 21	8	MAR 21	8	APR 21	9
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*1 unit = 100 Cubic Feet (CCF) 1 CCF = 748.019 Gallons																															
Please return bottom portion along with your payment																															
<b>BILL SUMMARY</b>																															
Previous Balance 37.15 Payment Received 0.00 Past Due Amount 37.15 Current Charges 39.07 <hr/> Total Amount Due \$76.22 DUE DATE: 05/12/2021																															
PO Box 5388 - 1345 W Broadway Missoula, MT 59806-5388 Payments: 866-790-7218 Visit us <a href="http://www.ci.missoula.mt.us/utilities">http://www.ci.missoula.mt.us/utilities</a>																															
Account Number: 000000 Customer Number: 000000 Customer Name: <b>CUSTOMER NAME</b> Service Address: <b>CUSTOMER ADDRESS</b> Cycle: M45 Book: 009																															
Due Date: 05/12/2021 <b>Amount Due</b> \$ 76.22 <b>Amount Enclosed</b> <input type="text"/>																															
CITY OF MISSOULA PO BOX 5388 MISSOULA, MT 59806-5388																															
CUSTOMER NAME CUSTOMER ADDRESS MISSOULA MT 598XX-XXXX																															



### **5. Why doesn't Missoula Water just replace all these meters?**

Missoula Water's ability to replace meters is limited both by the quantity of meters approved to be purchased each year in our Capital Improvement Program as well as by the availability of Missoula Water personnel to install them. Because most failing meters are in customers' houses, we prefer to send our own personnel to perform this work rather than hiring contractors to do it. We would like to accelerate our meter replacement program, so we recently applied for a State Revolving Fund Loan for approximately \$4.5 million that would allow us to replace the remaining 15,000 old meters by the end of June 2023.

Missoula Water's goal is to replace meters as efficiently as possible, so we are focusing in one area of town at a time in order to reduce time spent driving across town from one appointment location to another. We simply don't have the ability to replace every meter that a customer requests to be replaced in a short timeframe. We ask our customers to continue to be patient as we work through the backlog of meter replacements.

### **6. Why should I have to pay for this unbilled usage?**

Missoula's water utility is an enterprise fund, meaning that all costs related to operating the utility are paid 100% by the customers utilizing the service. No tax dollars are provided by the City to support the operation of the water utility, and there are no other funding mechanisms available to support the operations of the utility. Each customer is required to pay for the water they use in accordance with the rate schedule adopted by the City Council. If a customer does not pay for the water they use, then all other customers would have to pay for that cost.

Missoula Water strives to provide accurate monthly bills to each customer so that they can budget accordingly and modify their water usage in response. We recognize that the problems described in this document have resulted in some large unanticipated bills for a number of customers. We will always offer our customers the ability to enter into a payment plan to spread these costs over as many months as they need, without interest, in order to get caught up. We also recognize that some customers may have a particular hardship, whether related to the COVID-19 pandemic or something else, in paying for these underbilled amounts. As a result, we ask our customer service representatives to collect the full bill but provide the ability to forgive a portion of the unbilled usage in situations where the customer can explain a hardship. We also look at historic usage and if the unbilled amounts significantly exceed historic usage (typically over 2 to 3 years), we also factor that into our decision on whether to reduce a portion of a customer's bill. We always have to keep in mind that any portion of a customer's bill that we reduce is being passed on to other customers to pay.

### **7. What if I want to protest the amount of my bill that customer service tells me I owe?**

If a customer is not satisfied with the payment arrangement offered by the customer service representative, they can request to have a manager review the bill and can provide further explanation of what hardship they may be experiencing. If the manager agrees with the amount being billed but the customer still wishes to appeal, the customer can request that their bill be reviewed by the Utility Service Appeals Committee, which consists of the Deputy Public Works Director of Utilities, the Public Works Director, the Water Utility Superintendent, and the chairperson of the Public Works Committee of the Missoula City Council.



**MISSOULA**

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**8. I have signed up for e-billing, why can't I see my detailed bill?**

Missoula Water recently became aware of this problem and are working with our third-party billing provider to resolve it. Customers signed up for e-bills can currently see a summary page of their bill but not the detailed description of charges. We are working on this problem as rapidly as we can, but in the meantime if you wish to see a detailed bill, you can email [watercs@ci.missoula.mt.us](mailto:watercs@ci.missoula.mt.us) to request a detailed copy of your bill or call our Customer Service office at 406-552-6700.