

Payments Made Easy

Most of us remember when we had to take time out of our busy schedules to pay bills. Driving in heavy traffic, standing in long lines, patiently waiting and finally paying our bill(s) in person. Given the number of people using the Internet to conduct business on a regular basis, it makes sense to pay bills online as well. El Paso Water Utilities has created services to do just that.

An Online Tool

"WebConnect is an online tool provided via enQuesta (Systems & Software Customer Information System) where customers can enroll and view their billing information," said Chief Information Officer Armando Renteria. Customers who want to pay their bill online are redirected from WebConnect to either BillMatrix or CheckFree.

Making payments wasn't always this simple.

"Before online bill payments, the only options available for customers to pay their water bill were in person at our Main Office, by mail, bank draft or at an authorized payment location," Renteria said. "Customers using our online bill payment services can now also make payments at any time, day or night, seven days a week, with a credit card or electronic check."

Easy Ways To Pay

The BillMatrix online credit card/electronic check payment option posts payments within one to two business days and charges \$2.50 for the transaction. To avoid that fee, sign up for EPWU's Online Billing and Payment Service, known more commonly as CheckFree. This allows access to your account, where you can view and pay your bills online without being charged. An electronic bill (e-bill) is sent monthly by e-mail to those who sign up for the service. They simply log in, view the bill and pay.

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Employees Rally During Weather Emergency

From Feb. 1-3, single-digit temperatures caused problems for the Utility. According to Water Division Manager Fernie Rico, employees noticed problems in the early morning hours following the first night of the freeze. Central Control was not receiving readings from some of the reservoirs.

Continuous subfreezing temperatures affected electrical and mechanical equipment, telecommunications systems and instrumentation. To compound problems, service lines and plumbing fixtures ruptured in 15,000-20,000 homes and businesses. The result was low water pressure and water outages in some areas of the city.

Restoring the System

Water Division employees worked tirelessly to restore the system and instrumentation.

"Employees were exposed to extremely cold temperatures," said Rico. "Wednesday and Thursday stayed below freezing and exposed workers to temperatures and conditions never before felt."

Demand averages 70 million gallons per day (MGD) in February, but production ramped up to fill the reservoirs. Production at the Kay Bailey Hutchison Desalination Plant, usually less than 4 MGD, reached 22.6 million gallons.

The Robertson/Umbenhauer Plant was undergoing scheduled maintenance, but the plant operated from Feb. 6-18. With the plant on line, total water production reached 127 MGD as reservoirs were filled to adequate levels.

Dispatch and Customer Service increased staffing, and Auto Shop, Water Distribution and Stormwater employees helped respond to customers' weather-related requests.



Northeast El Paso. Photo by Nick Costanzo

"The entire Customer Service Team worked during the crisis," said Business and Customer Service Manager Mark Bolduc. "We responded to nearly 850 customers in the field, related directly to the freeze, and approximately 4,700 total work orders during that week."

"Our Call Center received a total of 41,302 calls as compared to 9,112 a year ago during this same time period. That is over 450 percent more calls."

The Crisis Communication Team was activated to get critical information to the public and media. The team coordinated three news conferences and responded to hundreds of local and national media requests and interviews.

Pretreatment, Stormwater and Water Conservation employees helped with communication and enforcement. IT employees

were charged with keeping Utility systems running. They also kept the phone system recording and website current with regular updates.

Exceptional Performance

Chief Information Officer Armando Renteria oversees the IT section. He says the staff was proactive and performed exceptionally well. He added, "I have the privilege of working with a great group of individuals. They have outstanding leadership skills, are very responsible and are willing to go the extra mile, even under extreme circumstances."

EPWU employees worked throughout the week and during the weekend. Thanks to dedication and teamwork, reservoirs were filled on Feb. 7, and water restrictions were lifted.

— Edward Sias

Employees and Relatives Race for the Cure

EPWU was well-represented at El Paso's 19th annual Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure. A team of 41 employees and relatives joined thousands of participants at Cohen Stadium on Feb. 20 to run or walk for the cause.

Race for the Cure increases breast-cancer awareness and celebrates the disease's survivors. Proceeds help fund breast-cancer education, diagnosis and treatment in El Paso County and support global cancer research programs.

EPWU Runners

Participants traveled a one-mile route or a 5K route, which offered competitive or non-competitive options. Nine members of Team EPWU signed up for the 5K run.

The fastest runners were Anai Padilla (34:34), Janeth Chavez (36:51) and Gisela Dagnino (37:35). Marisela Barcenas, Adriana Castillo, Gladis DeSantiago, Erika Munoz, Renata Renova and Jessica Romo also competed in the 5K race.



Participants:

(top photo l-r) Irma Campos, Yvonne Chacon, Jessica Romo, Corina Ledesma, Martha Cervantes, Belinda Villa, Erika Munoz, Amy Castner, Patty Ferguson, Belia Payan, Gladis De Saniago, Martha Navarro, Janeth Chavez, Ted Marin, Anai Padilla, Renata Renova, Sarah Wood, Marisela Barcenas

(bottom photo) Adriana Castillo, Marcela Navarrete, Martha Aguilera, Vicky Chavez, Alma De Anda, Gisela Dagnino (not shown) Ana Sanchez

Payments Made Easy (con't)

New Payment Locations

Since the end of January, customers have the option of making payments at any of the seven ACE Cash Express locations. Beginning in March, customers can also pay their bills at Walmart Supercenters and Neighborhood Markets.

Having a variety of options allows customers to "save gas, time and postage and adds to the number of locations where customers can conveniently pay water and other utility bills. Providing these services also benefits the Utility by meeting its goal of increased customer satisfaction and overall efficiency of the bill payment process," Renteria said.

A Common Occurrence

In today's world, paying bills online is a common occurrence, he added. It's largely due to the growth in Internet usage and the availability of convenient and easy-to-use applications.

"There were not many home PC's with Internet access when CheckFree was implemented in 2003, but the number of customers is steadily growing," said Renteria. "With all the advancements in mobile and smart phone technology, it might replace the traditional way of paying bills. As of today, we have 47,514 active accounts."

With the numbers alone, one can already tell how quickly this new method of paying your EPWU bill is catching on. You can find more information on these services at www.epwu.org under the Customer Service drop-down menu.

— Edward Sias

Montoya Appointed to Public Affairs Council

The American Water Works Association (AWWA) has appointed Vice President Christina Montoya to its Public Affairs Council. Her three-year term begins in June.



Christina Montoya

The council coordinates public information programs to educate member utilities and their customers on emerging industry issues. It also assists with AWWA public involvement activities. Meetings are held three times per year.

Each spring, the Public Affairs Council joins other AWWA members in visiting lawmakers in Washington, D.C., to discuss the association's national agenda. Key members of the administration and Congressional staffers are briefed on issues such as security, infrastructure and regulation.

Nominees to the council are evaluated based on public affairs expertise and experience. The appointing committee also considers diversity and geographic distribution when selecting members.

Announcements

Promotions:

Juan Carlos Castro Chemist
Sabino Estrada Equipment Operator

Retirements:

Marco Barajas Equipment Operator
Jan. 21, 2011 (14½ years)

EPA Administrator Visits EPWU

Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Administrator Lisa Jackson visited El Paso Water Utilities' Kay Bailey Hutchison Desalination Plant as well as the Tech₂O Water Resources Learning Center on Jan. 27. She stopped in El Paso during a tour highlighting the effect of environmental issues, which also included visits to water management facilities and sites that incorporate innovative green technology.

Vice President John Balliew conducted the desalination plant tour. He enlightened Jackson on the desalination process and gave her an opportunity to see and touch some of the equipment used inside the plant, including a life-sized membrane. Membranes filter the water during the treatment process.



EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson (left) tours the Tech₂O Center with Water Conservation/Tech₂O Manager Anai Padilla.

"I just toured the desalination plant here, and El Paso really fascinates me," Jackson said. "Getting a tour here is very different than touring a normal drinking water plant – very clean, very quiet, very high-tech and very cutting edge."



EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson tastes the water from the Kay Bailey Hutchison Desalination Plant.

Jackson, who has an engineering background, was delighted to get a close look at some of the different forms of technology in use at the plant.

"I certainly know how important the technology is, but to see it in action is really important," Jackson said. "I really had no sense of how quickly the technology is changing in order to become more and more efficient."

"As an engineer, it's always good to be some place where I can see technology in application. Having been head of the EPA for two years and worked in the environmental field all my life, it's my first time seeing a reverse osmosis system," she said.

After leaving the plant, Jackson took a brief tour of the Tech₂O Center, led by Water Conservation/Tech₂O Manager Anai Padilla. There she saw the learning resources and hands-on activities in place for younger generations to discover.

The visit concluded with a presentation by Vice President Nick Costanzo. His main focus was the Utility's efforts to achieve sustainability, which include reducing per capita water use over the past 30 years and stabilizing levels in the Hueco Bolson. Costanzo also discussed the Utility's investigations into solar power use at the desalination plant.

— Edward Sias

Fourth-Quarter Safety Awards

by Paul V. Fonte, Safety Specialist

Stormwater Operations (Section 210)



Jonathan Rogers Plant (Section 450)

Wastewater Division (Section 210)

Stormwater Operations
Jose Luis Sierra, Stormwater Operations Manager

Water Division (Section 450)

Jonathan Rogers Plant
Roy Holland, Superintendent

Support Services (Section 525)

Laboratory Services
Paul Rivas, Laboratory Services Manager

Laboratory Services (Section 525)



Safety awards are presented to the sections with the lowest accident rate. These employees performed their jobs safely as a team and as individuals.

Other sections that were accident free for the fourth quarter were Canal Plant (430), Field Engineering (320), Lift Stations (620), Delta Plant (650), Bustamante Plant (670), Fred Hervey Plant (680), Sewer Construction (690), Meter Shop (912), Warehouse (914) and Building Maintenance (917). These sections also had no "lost time, doctor treated, or vehicle" accidents. Keep up the good work.

In The Works is an informational publication for the employees of El Paso Water Utilities and their families.

Christina Montoya, Vice President, cmontoya@epwu.org

Karol Parker, Public Affairs Officer, kparker@epwu.org

Edward Sias, Public Affairs Specialist, esias@epwu.org

Gretchen Byram, Public Affairs Graphic Specialist, gkbyram@epwu.org

P.O. Box 511, El Paso, Texas 79961-0511

(915)594-5692 fax (915)594-5699

Interdepartmental Address: 4-H

