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August 22, 2023

Via Electronic Filing

Public Utility Commission of Oregon
Attn: Filing Center
201 High St. SE, Suite 100
Salem OR 97301

Re: In the Matter of PORTLAND GENERAL ELECTRIC CO.
Request for a General Rate Revision.
Docket No. UE 416

Dear Filing Center:

Please find enclosed the Rebuttal General Rate Case Testimony of Christopher C. Walters on behalf of the Alliance of Western Energy Consumers and Oregon Citizens' Utility Board (AWEC-CUB/200) in the above-referenced docket.

Thank you for your assistance. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to call.

Sincerely,

/s/ Jesse O. Gorsuch
Jesse O. Gorsuch

Enclosure

**BEFORE THE PUBLIC UTILITY COMMISSION
OF OREGON**

UE 416

In the Matter of)
)
PORTLAND GENERAL ELECTRIC)
COMPANY,)
)
Request for a General Rate Revision.)
_____)

REBUTTAL TESTIMONY OF CHRISTOPHER C. WALTERS

ON BEHALF OF

**ALLIANCE OF WESTERN ENERGY CONSUMERS /
OREGON CITIZENS' UTILITY BOARD**

August 22, 2023

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REBUTTAL TESTIMONY OF CHRISTOPHER C. WALTERS**

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1 **Q. PLEASE STATE YOUR NAME AND BUSINESS ADDRESS.**

2 **A.** Christopher C. Walters. My business address is 16690 Swingley Ridge Road, Suite 140,
3 Chesterfield, MO 63017. I am employed by the firm of Brubaker & Associates, Inc.
4 (“BAI”), regulatory and economic consultants with corporate headquarters in Chesterfield,
5 Missouri.

6 **Q. ARE YOU THE SAME CHRISTOPHER C. WALTERS WHO PREVIOUSLY**
7 **FILED TESTIMONY IN THIS PROCEEDING?**

8 **A.** Yes. I filed opening testimony on behalf of the Alliance of Western Energy Consumers
9 (“AWEC”) and the Oregon Citizens’ Utility Board (“CUB” and, collectively
10 “AWEC/CUB”).

11 **Q. WHAT IS THE SUBJECT MATTER OF YOUR REBUTTAL TESTIMONY?**

12 **A.** The purpose of my rebuttal testimony is to respond to the Reply Testimony of Dr. Bente
13 Villadsen and Mr. Christopher Liddle, which is collectively presented in PGE/2400. My
14 silence with regard to any position taken by PGE or other parties in this proceeding does
15 not indicate my endorsement of those positions.

16 **Q. ARE YOU SPONSORING ANY EXHIBITS IN CONNECTION WITH YOUR**
17 **REBUTTAL TESTIMONY?**

18 **A.** No.

19 **I. SUMMARY**

20 **Q. PLEASE SUMMARIZE YOUR RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS**
21 **ON RATE OF RETURN.**

22 **A.** The modifications that the Company witnesses make to my analyses result in an overstated
23 fair return on equity and should be ignored. Throughout the balance of this testimony I
24 will address them accordingly. I continue to recommend that PGE’s ROE be set at its

1 currently authorized level of 9.5%, which is within my recommended range of 9.2% to
2 9.9%.

3 **II. RESPONSE TO DR. VILLADSEN AND MR. LIDDLE**

4 **Q. PLEASE SUMMARIZE THE PRIMARY CONCERNS THE COMPANY**
5 **WITNESSES HAVE WITH THE ANALYSES PROVIDED IN SUPPORT OF**
6 **YOUR RECOMMENDATION.**

7 **A.** The primary concerns expressed by the Company Witnesses can be summarized as follows:

- 8 • My sustainable growth DCF model suffers from relying solely on one source of growth
9 rates (*Value Line*) and that the model assumes an expected earned ROE that is
10 inconsistent with the calculated ROE of 8.89%.
- 11 • They assert that my Risk Premium method fails to account for the inverse relationship
12 between interest rates and the equity risk premium. The Company Witnesses assert
13 that one must perform a simple regression to estimate the equity risk premium and that
14 an arithmetic average may understate the risk premium.
- 15 • With regard to my CAPM, the Company Witnesses disagree with: (1) my use of historic
16 average *Value Line* Betas; (2) my failure to account for re-levered Betas from the S&P
17 Beta Generator Model; and (3) my use of a projected risk-free rate of 3.7%.

18 **A. Sustainable Growth DCF Model**

19 **Q. WHAT IS YOUR RESPONSE TO THE CONCERNS WITH YOUR**
20 **SUSTAINABLE GROWTH DCF MODEL AS EXPRESSED BY THE COMPANY**
21 **WITNESSES?**

22 **A.** As an initial matter, no one model is perfect, and at times can be more or less accurate than
23 other models depending on various factors, such as economic conditions. For this reason
24 alone, it is important to perform a thorough analysis, and apply informed, reasoned
25 judgment in the interpretation of the results.

1 In addition, using the retention growth methodology is a recognized reasonable
2 method for estimating sustainable dividend growth and should not be ignored.

3 As noted by the CFA Institute curriculum text:

4 We define the sustainable growth rate as the rate of dividend (and earnings)
5 growth that can be sustained for a given level of return on equity, assuming
6 that the capital structure is constant through time and that additional
7 common stock is not issued. The reason for studying this concept is that it
8 can help in estimating the stable growth rate in a Gordon growth model
9 valuation, or the mature growth rate in a multistage DDM in which the
10 Gordon growth formula is used to find the terminal value of the stock.

11 The expression to calculate the sustainable growth rate is

12
$$g = b \times \text{ROE}^{\frac{1}{}}$$

13 In my sustainable growth rate methodology, I measured growth through internal
14 means and external means in deriving an outlook for cash flow growth to the proxy
15 companies over time. This cash flow outlook was both created by retaining earnings for
16 reinvestment in new plant, growing rate base, and growing earnings and dividend-paying
17 abilities. The sustainable DCF model develops a growth rate estimate for future cash flows
18 based on dividend growth through retaining earnings and the expectations that growth can
19 be enhanced by the utility selling new stock to the public at prices in excess of book value,
20 which will create incremental growth in book value per share and enhances outlooks for
21 earnings and dividend growth.

22 With regard to the limited sources of estimates, I generally agree with the concern
23 that relying on a single source of growth rates. However, I am unaware of any other data
24 provider that provides projections for all the components used within the model. The use
25 of Value Line data in this model serves as a suitable complement to the consensus
26 projections used elsewhere in my DCF analyses. This particular concern is trivial and need

^{1/} CFA Program Curriculum, 2014, Level II, Volume 4, “Dividend Discount Valuation,” at 264.

1 not be addressed further.

2 None of the Company Witnesses' arguments effectively negate the use of the
3 model.

4 **B. Risk Premium Method**

5 **Q. WHAT IS YOUR RESPONSE TO THE CONCERNS WITH YOUR RISK
6 PREMIUM METHOD AS EXPRESSED BY THE COMPANY WITNESSES?**

7 **A.** I find it hard to see how the Company Witnesses can assert I have not recognized an inverse
8 relationship between the two variables considering the equity risk premiums I relied on are
9 higher than the average equity risk premium while, inversely, the interest rates used to
10 estimate the Risk Premium-derived cost of equity are below average. For example, as
11 shown on my AWEC-CUB/111 filed with my Direct Testimony, the average long-term
12 Treasury yield and allowed equity risk premium since 1986 is 5.19% and 5.71%,
13 respectively. As I explain in my Direct Testimony, I relied on a projected Treasury yield
14 of 3.70% (below the long-term average) and an allowed equity risk premium of 6.04%
15 (above the long-term average). We just happen to use different methods of capturing the
16 relationship. I continue to support my risk premium methodology.

17 **Q. DO YOU HAVE CONCERNS WITH THE SIMPLE LINEAR REGRESSION
18 METHOD FOR ESTIMATING THE EQUITY RISK PREMIUM?**

19 **A.** Yes. Equity risk premiums can move based on changes in market conditions that can
20 impact both equity returns and bond returns in a like manner. In addition, there are several
21 factors that are not explicitly accounted for in a simple regression analysis that likely have
22 some influence on the equity risk premium including, but not limited to, regulatory regime,
23 yield spreads, rate affordability, company management, ESG factors, settlement versus
24 litigated outcomes, alternative regulation mechanisms, and business cycles. This simple

1 regression analysis of equity risk premiums and interest rates ignores other relevant market
2 factors in describing the current market-required equity risk premium.

3 **Q. HAVE YOU REVIEWED WHAT THE YEAR-TO-DATE EQUITY RISK**
4 **PREMIUM IS FOR ELECTRIC UTILITY ROEs OVER LONG-TERM**
5 **TREASURY BOND YIELDS?**

6 **A.** Yes, I have. Through August 11, 2023, the year-to-date average authorized ROE for
7 regulated electric utilities is 9.62%, while the year-to-date average 30-year Treasury yield
8 is 3.83%. As such, the year-to-date average equity risk premium over 30-year Treasury
9 yields is 5.79%, or 25 basis points lower than my recommended 6.04% equity risk premium
10 over 30-year Treasury yields. In other words, my equity risk premium potentially
11 overstates the cost of equity given current data. I continue to believe my methods and
12 results are reasonable, and the Company Witnesses' criticisms should be ignored.

13 **C. CAPM**

14 **Q. WHAT IS YOUR RESPONSE TO THE CONCERNS WITH YOUR CAPM AS**
15 **EXPRESSED BY THE COMPANY WITNESSES?**

16 **A.** As an initial matter, prior to the pandemic, electric utility betas had steadily declined over
17 the 2014-2019 period. It was not until the onset of the pandemic that betas increased. In
18 fact, electric utility betas declined from about 0.75 in 2014 to 0.58 in early 2020. As I
19 explained in my Direct Testimony, currently published beta estimates from *Value Line* are
20 significantly above historical standards and cannot reasonably be expected to be as high in
21 the future as they are now. The purpose of measuring the historical betas was to provide
22 context on how out-of-line current betas are with what is normal, and to get a more
23 normalized estimate of the beta component for my CAPM analysis. Clearly, betas for
24 electric utilities spiked with the emergence of COVID-19 in early 2020, an anomalous
25 event that is not expected to continue. Because *Value Line's* betas are measured over a

1 five-year historical period, the volatility caused by COVID-19 in early 2020 will be present
2 in *Value Line* betas for another three years even though that volatility caused by COVID-
3 19 is not expected going forward. In other words, “current” *Value Line* betas will be
4 impacted by an anomalous historical event for approximately two more years and not
5 reflective of existing or expected conditions. As such, historical betas provide a useful
6 perspective.

7 The Company Witnesses’ assertion that I failed to adhere to the instructions
8 provided in the S&P Beta Generator Model workbook are completely unfounded. The
9 adjusted betas I relied on from the S&P workbook are the recommended adjusted betas as
10 calculated by S&P and are based on the existing leverage of each company. They are
11 adjusted using the Vasicek-method, and as explained by S&P (and cited in my Direct
12 testimony), the Vasicek method of adjustment is superior to that of the Blume adjustment
13 method employed by *Value Line*.

14 In addition, while S&P does provide an unlevered beta for each company, it is not
15 re-levered in any capacity. Notably, the proxy group’s average unlevered beta as calculated
16 by the S&P model is 0.45. This is in stark comparison to the average unlevered beta of
17 0.60 for the proxy group as estimated by the Company Witnesses in their Direct Testimony.
18 While the method of calculating an unlevered beta is a similar process, the results are
19 drastically different.

20 Finally, the assertion that I understated the CAPM by relying on a projected risk-
21 free rate of 3.70% that was too low is trivial, at best. As an initial matter, 3.70% was the
22 **consensus** projected interest rate at the time of my study. The current consensus projected
23 30-year Treasury yield for six quarters out has increased from 3.7% to 3.8%, which still

1 marks a 60 basis point decrease from spot yields as of August 17, 2023. In any event, even
2 if I were to revise my CAPM analysis using a 3.8% projected yield instead of the 3.7%, the
3 impact on the results would have been in the range of 0.01% to 0.03% (one to three basis
4 points).

5 **Q. IS THERE FINANCIAL LITERATURE DISCUSSING THE VASICEK METHOD**
6 **OF ADJUSTING BETA IN COMPARISON TO THE BLUME METHOD**
7 **EMPLOYED BY VALUE LINE?**

8 **A.** Yes. In an article titled “An Examination of Blume and Vasicek Betas” published in the
9 journal *The Financial Review*, Martin Lally discusses the merits of both methods of
10 adjusting beta. An observation made by Lally as it relates to the utility industry is as
11 follows:

12 A dramatic example of this is in U.S. electric utilities. A typical such firm
13 has an estimated beta (unadjusted) of around 0.4 (Value Line, 1993). By
14 virtue of being typical, the Vasicek estimate, with prior corresponding to
15 this industry, will also be 0.4. By contrast, Blume adjusts the 0.4 to 0.6 [i.e.
16 $0.33 + 0.67(0.4)$]. The result is a dramatic overestimate by Blume, because
17 a singularly relevant fact is ignored, i.e., membership of an industry whose
18 average estimated, and therefore presumably also true, beta is well below
19 one. Given that these firms have output prices that are set so as to recover
20 costs, including the cost of equity, and they have substantial equity
21 investment, then the implications of using Blume betas (i.e., not partitioning
22 into industries) for measuring costs of equity are particularly severe.²

23 The Company Witnesses’ concerns with Vasicek-adjusted betas should be
24 disregarded.

25 **D. Company Risk**

26 **Q. THE COMPANY WITNESSES MAKE REFERENCE TO THE COMPANY’S**
27 **RELATIVE SIZE TO THE PROXY GROUP AS EVIDENCE THAT THE**
28 **COMPANY IS RISKIER. DO YOU AGREE?**

^{2/} The Financial Review, Vol. 33 (1998) at pages 183-198, “An Examination of Blume and Vasicek Betas,” Martin Lally (emphasis added).

1 **A.** No, I do not believe the Company is riskier based on its relative size, nor do I believe that
2 it is appropriate to award the Company a higher ROE for it. In fact, there is empirical
3 evidence which concludes that, while size premiums are present in industrial companies,
4 such a size premium is not present in utility companies, nor are they appropriate to include
5 in valuing utilities.^{3/}

6 **Q.** **THE COMPANY WITNESSES MAKE REFERENCE TO THE COMPANY'S**
7 **SMALL GEOGRAPHIC FOOTPRINT RELATIVE TO THE PROXY GROUP AS**
8 **EVIDENCE THAT THE COMPANY IS RISKIER. DO YOU AGREE?**

9 **A.** No, I do not. Again, as I explained in my Direct Testimony, modern portfolio theory does
10 not allow for compensation of business risks that can be diversified away through carefully
11 crafted, well diversified portfolios. In addition, ratings agencies are aware of, and include
12 as part of their assessments of the Company, PGE's size and geographic footprint.^{4/}

13 **Q.** **DOES THIS CONCLUDE YOUR REBUTTAL TESTIMONY?**

14 **A.** Yes, it does.

^{3/} Wong, Annie, 1993, Utility stocks and the size effect: An empirical analysis, Journal of the Midwest Finance Association, 95-101.

^{4/} See AWEC-CUB/100 at 23, lines 10-28. Notably, PGE's BBB+ rating from S&P is identical to those of the proxy group.