



Autorità per l'energia elettrica e il gas



PRESS RELEASE

## Energy: Green Light for the *Consumers' Helpdesk* and the *Charter of Rights*

*More assistance and protection, new instruments at the service of citizens through a taskforce of experts and the toll-free number 800.166.654*

Rome, January 26<sup>th</sup> 2010 – What can be done if gas or electricity bills are wrong or in case of service inefficiencies? How can a complaint be filed? How can the best offer or contract be chosen? How do markets and services operate? In order to answer these and other questions, a *Consumers' Helpdesk* for electricity and gas users was instituted to provide them with prompt support in the provision of information on consumers' rights – as contemplated by the Energy Regulatory Authority in its regulations – and on how to claim them.

The *Helpdesk* is promoted by the Authority and managed in association with “Acquirente Unico”. It consists in the operation of a call centre (to be reached on the toll-free number 800.166.654) and a taskforce of experts specialised in providing information and receiving reports or complaints. The twin initiative that has been offered in combination with this “*Helpdesk*” is a *Charter of Rights* meant for energy consumers, i.e. an easily consultable guide offering a concise, clear and outright overview of forms of protection, guarantees and rights provided for by the full set of measures so far introduced by the Authority. The *Charter* is made available to Consumers' Associations and all citizens and can be viewed on or downloaded from the Authority's website [www.autorita.energia.it](http://www.autorita.energia.it). Both the *Helpdesk* and the *Charter* are part of a sequel of other initiatives which have long been promoted by the Authority in association with the National Council of Consumers and Service Users (CNCU).

“Ever since its institution, the Authority has concentrated its efforts on one of its most prominent missions, i.e. consumer protection, by regulating the main aspects behind the provision of electricity and gas services and by progressively strengthening the rights of consumers who are ultimately those who pay bills” – observed Mr. **Alessandro Ortis**, President of the Energy Regulatory Authority – “The *Helpdesk* and *Charter* are tools allowing citizens to know more, make better choices and claim their rights. We therefore intend to enhance the role and *power of consumers*; this also goes hand in hand with the promotion of virtuous competition, business competitiveness and, ultimately, the overall competitiveness of our energy system in terms of cost-effectiveness, quality of service and environment protection”.

“The Government’s commitment to liberalise the market also consists in supporting the Regulatory Authority for Electricity and Gas in its fostered initiatives for the protection of consumers’ rights” – commented Mr. **Stefano Saglia**, President of the National Council of Consumers and Service Users (CNCU) and Undersecretary of the Ministry for Economic Development - “In such respect, the Consumers’ Helpdesk assists consumers in making an informed choice of their energy suppliers and the Charter of Rights is a valid tool helping Consumers’ Associations represented in the CNCU in their daily activities”.

“Through the introduction of a Helpdesk for energy consumers, the Acquirente Unico combines the experience of a Call Centre – with 290 thousand calls in 2009 and daily peaks of up to 14 thousand – with that of the Electricity and Gas Regulatory Authority’s Complaint Handling Unit”, observed the Acquirente Unico Chief Executive Officer, Mr. **Paolo Vigeveno**. “The integration of these two functions have endowed the Authority, service users and operators with essential means for the process of deregulation to be effectively implemented in a common context shared by all players”.

### **What is the energy and gas Consumers’ Helpdesk?**

The idea behind this *Consumers’ Helpdesk* is to provide end consumers of electricity and gas with information and assistance in the form of a direct communication channel through which responses are also given to complaints, requests and reports.

The *Helpdesk* relies on a panel of experts having received specialised training – to be reached through the *toll-free number* 800.166.654, email, fax or ordinary mail – to provide responses to all incoming requests and complaints. More specifically, if a consumer has already filed a complaint to its supplier or distributor but fails to receive a satisfactory reply, he has the further option of filing a complaint to the Authority through its *Helpdesk*, which will in turn acquire the necessary additional information from the operators/suppliers concerned, and then provide recommendations for a solution thereto.

The *Helpdesk* further provides information on the deregulated energy markets and consumers’ rights; and offers all of the required assistance in the filing of applications for *electricity bonus* or *gas bonus*; it further informs consumers on how to benefit from saving opportunities to be offered as from 1 July 2010 with the introduction of *two-tier prices* for electricity; ultimately, it provides clarifications on the best use of the *Offer Finder* tool, which is already available on the Authority’s website to identify the offer most suited to individual needs.

In further detail, users wishing to contact the *Helpdesk* can do so through a *toll-free number* 800.166.654, a dedicated number for mobile calls, 06.80134060, a toll-free fax number (800 185 024 for requests for information, or 800 185 025 for complaints or reports), the email addresses [info.sportello@acquirenteunico.it](mailto:info.sportello@acquirenteunico.it) or [reclami.sportello@acquirenteunico.it](mailto:reclami.sportello@acquirenteunico.it), and the postal address *Sportello per il consumatore* c/o Acquirente Unico, Via Guidubaldo Del Monte 72, 00197 Rome.

### **What is the energy and gas Consumers’ Charter of Rights?**

The *Charter of Rights* is a guide that organically collects information and clarifications on the guarantees and protections offered by the full set of standards so far introduced by the Energy Regulatory Authority in favour of consumers. For the sake of simplification and rationalisation, a question-and-answer layout was used in order to help citizens make an informed choice of their suppliers and, if need be, claim their rights.

The *Charter* consists of four sections: the first explains how new electricity and gas markets are structured; the second illustrates any information related to the electricity sector, i.e. connections, activations, contracts, offers, faults, safety etc.; the third section is devoted to the gas sector and its themes are structured similarly to those presented for the electricity sector; the fourth section provides information on all rights and forms of protection shared by both electricity and gas sectors,

i.e. technical or commercial quality, complaints, adjustments on bills, quality and transparency obligations of operators' or suppliers' call centres, etc.

The *Charter* can be practically viewed on or downloaded from the Authority's website ([www.autorita.energia.it](http://www.autorita.energia.it)) and is available to all consumers and Associations involved in the protection of citizens' rights nationwide.

### **FURTHER DETAILS**

#### **The Authority and consumer protection: collaboration with Associations**

The *Consumers' Helpdesk* and the *Charter of Rights* are now added to the series of initiatives already promoted by the Authority in association with the National Council of Consumers and Service Users (CNCU), among which the following are worth recalling:

- signature of specific *Memoranda of Understanding* between the Authority and the CNCU for the organisation of joint activities, such as the training of Associations' personnel;
- quality-of-service monitoring on the helplines operated by energy suppliers;
- circulation of *conciliation procedures* for the settlement of disputes between customers and electricity/gas service suppliers;
- support in favour of specific projects launched by Associations in favour of consumers and financed by the Authority's inflicted fines.

In addition, in order to further investigate the consumer associations' main themes of interest, a *Consumer Forum* was instituted (for all CNCU member associations), with periodical meetings and preventive consultations on any significant measures to be adopted by the Authority.

#### **Other instruments to protect households in the liberalised market**

The *Helpdesk* and the *Charter* are the most recent tools of the "package" of means and initiatives prepared by the Authority to protect customers in the new deregulated electricity and gas markets – among which the following are worth recalling.

*An Offer Finder tool for customers to choose the most suitable offer.*

The *Offer Finder* made available by the Energy Regulatory Authority on its website ([www.autorita.energia.it](http://www.autorita.energia.it)) is used to compare offers from numerous retailers on the web, thereby helping customers assess the various terms and prices proposed and also make a comparison with the *protected tariffs* established by the Authority. Using this tool is simple, customers only need to enter the postal code of the municipality of interest, the type of contract and their annual consumption; when the user has completed each of the steps shown on screen, the search will return offers of retailers operating in the selected area.

*Commercial codes of conduct: new rules for operators and suppliers*

The Authority's compiled *Commercial Codes of Conduct* contain conduct rules and correctness and transparency principles to be applied by retailers in the promotion of their offers, and in any executed or changed contracts, so as to provide all customers with the information needed and offer them the opportunity to compare prices between various offers. The Authority in turn checks that terms and conditions are complied with.

*Frequently Asked Questions-User's Instructions*

*FAQs – Users' Instructions* (available on the Authority's website [www.autorita.energia.it](http://www.autorita.energia.it)) are presented in the form of questions and answers with the opportunity for readers to add their comments. "*User's Instructions*" inform consumers about innovations in the sector. Users can therefore gain a better understanding of the electricity market deregulation and any opportunities offered with it. A total of nearly 40 questions and answers are designed to help citizens-consumers become familiar with the liberalised energy market.

### Tables for comparing offers

In order to minimise the likelihood of unfair conduct by retailers and make choices easier, the Authority introduced the obligation of a *price comparison table* which retailers are required to present when making a commercial offer. The *Table* shows the following parameters divided into five different consumption levels: estimated annual consumption, if customer subscribes to the commercial offer proposed by the retailer; presumed annual expenditure, if the consumer opts for the standard terms established by the Authority; and difference between the two alternatives in absolute and percentage terms.

### A List of Retailers to make the choice of retailers easier

As part of the Authority's customer information initiatives, its website features a list of retailers meeting a number of reliability requirements. Retailers may voluntarily apply for inclusion in the list, provided they meet the Authority's defined criteria such as, for instance, financial solvency and availability of a commercial network throughout the territory. As of today's date, the list includes more than 140 companies.

### The Simple Energy guide

In order to inform families and small consumers about opportunities offered by deregulation and related forms of protection, the Authority, in association with the European Commission, has already compiled and distributed a guide titled *Energia semplice, le novità sul mercato dell'energia elettrica e il gas* (Simple Energy, innovations in the electricity and gas markets). This informative brochure was issued in more than one million copies and made available to Consumers' Associations. It can also be *downloaded* from the websites of the institutions concerned (<http://ec.europa.eu/italia>, <http://ec.europa.eu/energy>, [www.autorita.energia.it](http://www.autorita.energia.it)).