



Season 1 Episode 1 – Money Saving Tips with Alabama Power Part 1

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Speaker 1:

It's time for Alabama Money with Cynthia White and Portia Johnson. We'll have financial tips from financial experts from across the state and extension specialists at Auburn University.

Cynthia White:

Hello and welcome to Alabama Money where we talk finance facts, fun and fast. I am your host, Cynthia White, and today, I am joined by two energy experts from Alabama Power, Chrissy Mitchell, who serves as senior market specialist and, Mike Jordan, division area manager for Southern Division.

Chrissy Mitchell:

Thank you for having us.

Mike Jordan:

Cynthia, thank you for having us.

Cynthia White:

Today is the first of several episodes that we have planned with Alabama Power. Our energy usage makes a large impact on our overall household bills, but did you know that we have options as customers of Alabama

Power? So we want this series to help educate you on several programs, tools and tips, services that can equip you to save money on your energy costs. Alabama Power experts are here to help.

Mike Jordan:

First of all, thank you, Cynthia, for having us. This is a treat for us and I would say that the information we're going to share may be specific to Alabama Power customers, but I also know the listeners are going to be from, perhaps, electric cooperatives, maybe municipal electric authorities. So I would encourage anyone that's listening to always touch base with their local energy provider because they also have a list of tips, perhaps separate than ours. Even though there are going to be some similar themes, some of this stuff is going to be unique to Alabama Power.

Cynthia White:

Well, thank you. We do appreciate this chance to talk with you today. What are some of the reasons, because I know, personally, I've been looking at my bill that has been going up, and what are some of the reasons that we see our energy cost rise and fall?

Mike Jordan:

We often hear from customers that, "Well, I don't know why my bill is so high this month" and the answer is that the amount of someone's bill is directly related to how much energy they have used that month. So obviously, colder months, energy uses is going to be higher, so the bills are going to be higher. Summer months, air conditioning is going to be running more, so the bills are going to be higher. So a baseline is always to assume that the amount of energy that one is using is directly going to correlate to the amount of the bill that they see each month.

Cynthia White:

Earlier, we mentioned some tools that could assist with lowering energy cost. What are some of those tools?

Chrissy Mitchell:

So one of the benefits of the tools that we have at Alabama Power is having an online account. That's one of the best ways that you can be informed about your bill. And let's first talk about the benefits of that online account. With that online account, you'll be able to quickly manage your account changes, track energy usage, set up outages and billing alerts, and organize billing history, all in one convenient location. It really puts everything at your fingertips.

Cynthia White:

So when you say online account, does that mean I'm switching to paperless billing?

Chrissy Mitchell:

No, that's not what that means. You can elect to enroll in paperless billing, but just because you have an online account does not mean you're automatically enrolled in paperless billing.

Cynthia White:

So if I go with the online account, can I ever go back to just dealing with someone directly or do I still have the right to call in and talk to a live individual?

Chrissy Mitchell:

Yes, absolutely. We always welcome calls to our customer service center.

Cynthia White:

Okay. So is the online account pretty much the only tool that you have available or do we have some other tools?

Mike Jordan:

I would like to maybe even go a step deeper with a comment that Chrissy made, which is that power usage tool is really important because we have customers that will often say, "Well, I was surprised at the amount of my bill." Well, having that online account allows that customer to go and they can drill down as granular as "I used more power on this particular day than on that particular day." So not only does it allow them to track how much energy they're using per month, but they can even see, "Well, I'm using more on weekends," or, "I'm using more on a random Tuesday," but it's going to put the power or the... it's going to put all of the tools in that customer's hands where they can manage their bill as they're going along throughout the month, rather than just waiting for that bill to appear in their email or in their mailbox.

Cynthia White:

So it sounds like if I wanted to set my budget at a certain amount and say, "Hey, I don't want to go over this amount," can I set up alerts or something through this tool?

Chrissy Mitchell:

Yes, you can select to get a bill alert message or a usage alert message. You can receive that by email, and this is based on how you prefer to receive that information.

Cynthia White:

And this is through the online account?

Chrissy Mitchell:

This is through, yes, through My Power Usage.

Cynthia White:

Okay. So could you tell us again how they can go in and set up this online account?

Chrissy Mitchell:

Yeah. Setting up an account is really easy. All you need to do is visit alabamapower.com/residential and you first register your existing account. We'll walk you through the steps, setting up a password and ensuring your account information is secure. You can also call the customer service center at 1-800-245-2244, Monday through Friday, 7:00 AM to 7:00 PM. But just please have your bill ready with you and with that account information and your access code found on your paper bill in hand in case the customer service rep needs it.

Cynthia White:

That's great. I was going to ask that. Some of us just aren't quite as computer savvy, so we might need a tad bit of assistance with that. I have an online account myself, but I did not realize that there were so many other tools and things that we could utilize to kind of help.

So what about if I just wanted to do that Budget Billing program. I've heard different things about that. Can you guys give us a little additional information on that?

Chrissy Mitchell:

Yeah, so Budget Billing is one of those programs that we have to help level out those seasonal peaks that you see in the extreme weather months, especially in that summer and winter months. Depending on the time of year, weather can cause your electricity usage to go up and your power bill to go up, kind of like what Mike said earlier. And this can change dramatically and your bill fluctuates a lot. So Budget Billing is a free service that eliminates those extreme peaks by leveling out your payment, so you pay the similar amount each month.

Cynthia White:

So by paying the similar amount or the same amount each month, does that mean I'm getting a discount on my power bill, or how's that amount determined?

Chrissy Mitchell:

So no, Budget Bill is not a discount program, but it does allow you to better manage your monthly budget by keeping your monthly energy costs predictable and manageable. Some months, you'll pay less than your actual bill and some months, you'll pay more to make up that difference. But keeping those bills more consistent is very helpful when you're trying to budget.

Cynthia White:

So actually, how is that amount determined? Where does that amount come from?

Chrissy Mitchell:

So when you sign up for Budget Bill, we first determine your monthly average bill by simply dividing your electric bills from the previous 12 months and dividing by 12 and rounding to the nearest dollar amount. This gives us your first monthly budget billing amount and then, we recalculate your budget billing amount on a monthly basis to make sure your average uses hasn't changed significantly. If there's a change, we adjust that to your next monthly Budget Billing amount, but to make sure you're aware of this change, we let you know this new amount the month before we start billing.

Cynthia White:

What if the amount gets to be a little bit too high and I just want to stop Budget Billing? Can I just stop at any time and what happens if I do that?

Chrissy Mitchell:

Yeah, you can stop at any time. If you discontinue the program or you close your account, the balance that we talked about earlier will be applied to your next bill.

Cynthia White:

So that might make that last bill go up a tad bit?

Chrissy Mitchell:

It may go up or it may go down, depending on if it is a debit or a credit.

Cynthia White:

So if I decide I want to go with this Budget Billing, how do I enroll in that program?

Chrissy Mitchell:

There's no fee to enroll and it's easy and you can go online using that online account that we talked about earlier and sign up for Budget Billing.

Cynthia White:

Is that the only way I can sign up. If I get online and I'm kind of messing up or not really sure how to navigate to that Budget Billing program, can I still call customer service as with the other programs?

Chrissy Mitchell:

Absolutely. Our customer service representatives are always happy to help you set up with Budget Billing.

Cynthia White:

This has been really helpful. Are there any other tools or little tips that you all can give us to help reduce that energy cost?

Mike Jordan:

So Alabama Power is regulated by the Alabama Public Service Commission, which means that rate adjust or different rates that a business or a residential customer might pay is governed by the Public Service Commission. So without going into too much detail, the avenues that Chrissy has mentioned about finding out about Budget Billing, those are also great opportunities. Calling our 1-800 number, going online, visiting someone in one of our business offices, they could find out about time of use rates and that's rates specifically set up for when the customer might use the majority of their energy. So for instance, they could sign up for that rate, which would allow them... they get a different rate when they use more energy at night rather than during the daytime. So this is going to be different rates for individuals or perhaps a business where they can apply for, sign up, rather, for a rate that's going to allow them to take advantage of rates that are more applicable to their lifestyle. So perhaps they use more energy at night or perhaps they could use more energy at night. There are rates that are available to help.

Cynthia White:

That's very interesting. What's the criteria for signing up for that type of program?

Mike Jordan:

Yeah, so you would go and essentially, you would find out from whether it's calling our customer service number. Perhaps there's a lot of information online at alabamapower.com/residential that an individual could find out my lifestyle meets X and therefore, this rate might be more applicable to me. Or just calling one of our customer service reps are among the best in the business in helping customers maximize that dollar.

Cynthia White:

Now, on that website, there's like a lighting and energy calculator. Is that part of this?

Mike Jordan:

Yes. So the Home Energy Checkup, the calculator is a really helpful tool and that's a checkup that can be personalized for your individual home because we're all different, right? I mean, everybody's house is a different size. Everybody's needs are perhaps a bit different. So this is going to allow that customer to individualize their energy checkup, if you will.

Cynthia White:

All of this has been really helpful information. Are there any other tools out there to help learn about saving on energy cost?

Chrissy Mitchell:

Yes, Cynthia. One of my favorite tools that I find the most helpful is that Energy Checkup that you can find on our website, alabamapower.com/residential. And with your online checkup, it's personalized for you and based on your actual energy usage. The tool online will conduct an assessment based on the size of your home, the different appliances, and other key factors that you have in your home. It takes about 20 minutes to complete, but it gives you valuable insights on how you can save money.

Cynthia White:

So with this tool, I actually go in and put in the individual specs of my particular home or resident and it will help me to figure out some tips on saving different ways.

Chrissy Mitchell:

That is correct. You can even put that you have two refrigerators or one refrigerator, just depending on your house.

Cynthia White:

That's great. What about that lighting and energy calculator on the website?

Mike Jordan:

Yeah, so it's going to be less intense. It's about a five-minute program or a five... it's going to take about five minutes to put that information in, and it's going to give you some good information on how much energy you're actually using or the customer's using. So it's going to help... how many hours a day you're keeping the lights on. But more broadly, I would say that these are only a couple of tools that exist on when a customer were to set up an online account. These are just a couple of tools that are available to them.

So throughout our segment, I hope that we've been able to express that there's just a lot of information that's available to customers, whether it's saving money, whether it's how to use their energy more effectively, whether it's energy saving tips, whether it's to get outage information in the event of a storm. Maybe the lights go out? Well, not only to know that my lights are out, but more importantly, when are my lights coming back on? So those estimated restoration times. So those are just a couple of tools that we've discussed today as to how that online account is really benefiting the customer.

And I started by saying that we are providing information that's very Alabama Power specific. However, I think customers should also contact their local electric cooperative, their municipal electric authority because that same information is going to be... it's going to be readily available for other electric utilities as well.

Cynthia White:

But the key to all of this, everything that we've discussed, these have been some really good tools, really good information, but we'd still want to, I guess, stress the fact that the key for anyone to be able to access this information is to set up that online account. Is that right?

Mike Jordan:

That's right.

Cynthia White:

Now, one other question that I did want to touch. We've got a lot of tools to help save. What happens with those individuals? Sometimes, you kind of run into those bumps in the road, those life happening situations where there are some financial challenges. Are there any type of programs out there to assist with those situations?

Mike Jordan:

Absolutely. And Alabama Power understands that at any time, someone could fall into a very hard time, whether it's they've lost their job, their life situation has changed, there's an unexpected medical expense that has occurred. So we are always happy to help those customers that have fallen into that hard time that they just need a bridge. And I would encourage customers, if they find themselves in that spot, to please call us because we can't help unless we know that they're going through that difficult situation. So get in touch with us via social media, whether it be coming into the office itself and talking or calling at the 1-800 number.

Cynthia White:

Well, I thank you guys both, Mike and Chrissy, so much for your assistance today and all of that useful, very useful information. I'm definitely going to go to work and see what I can find on my own. I'm Cynthia White, and this is Alabama Money where we talk finance facts, fun and fast.

Speaker 1:

This has been a production of Alabama Extension at Auburn University.