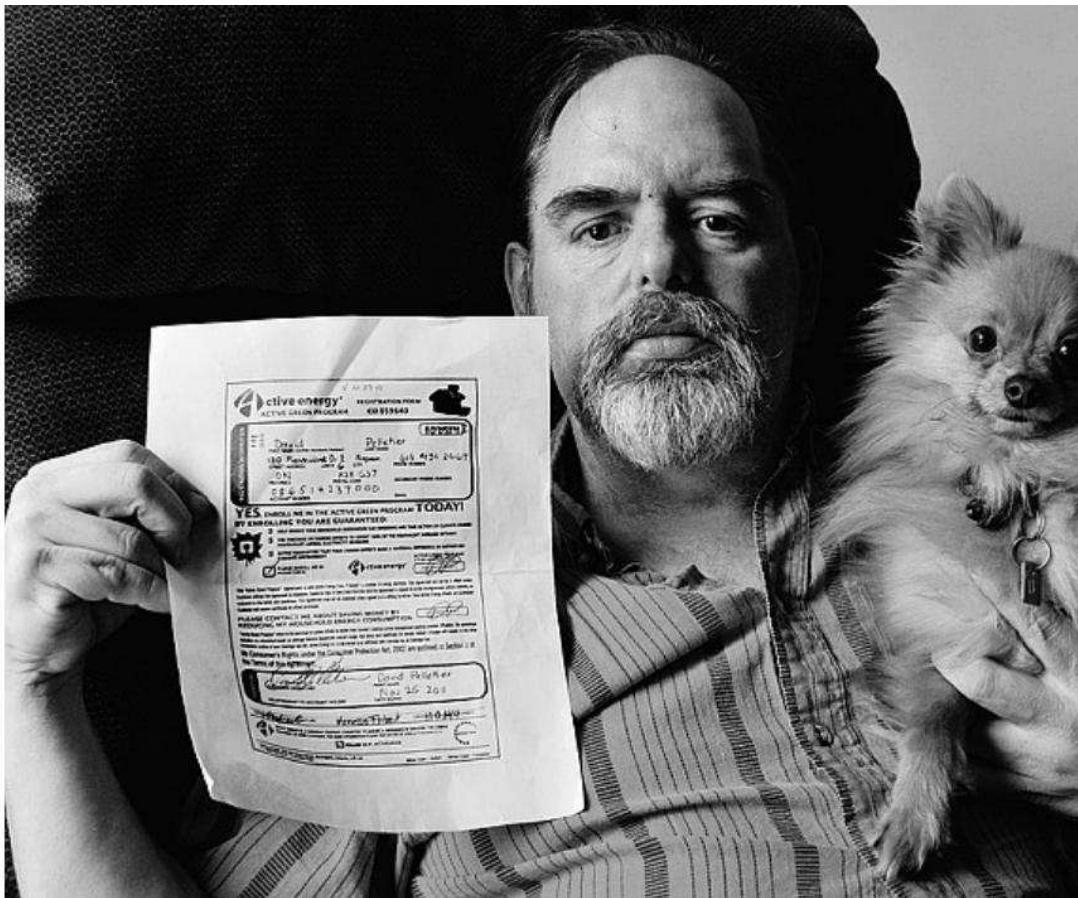


## The costly downside of going green

Man puzzled by \$20 'carbon offset fee' found on gas bill

BY HUGH ADAMI, OTTAWA CITIZEN FEBRUARY 12, 2012



Last month David Jeffrey Pelletier noticed a new charge on his gas bill, from Active Energy. He called the company and was told he had signed a five-year contract in which he would pay an extra \$20 a month for a "carbon offset fee."

**Photograph by:** Bruno Schlumberger, The Ottawa Citizen

Jeffrey Pelletier says he's "all for preserving the planet." But, he adds, "not over my wallet."

Pelletier, who receives a small disability pension because he has Parkinson's disease, didn't know what to think when he came across a \$19.99 "carbon offset fee" on his Enbridge gas bill last month.

The 48-year-old eventually discovered the extra charge was from Active Energy, a natural gas retailer that also pushes a "green program."

For \$19.99 a month, plus HST, Active Energy will invest that money - minus its profit margin, of course - into programs (i.e. tree planting) that work to decrease carbon monoxide emissions from hydro use, or into renewable energy projects (i.e. wind power, geothermal heat). In theory, those who sign up are having the electrical part of their own carbon footprint wiped clean. Pretty dippy stuff, says Pelletier. "I don't believe in all that nonsense."

But he just couldn't tell Active to buzz off. Active informed him of a five-year contract he supposedly had signed and initialed on Nov. 25. Total cost to clean up those pesky carbon footprints: \$1,199.40, plus \$156 GST. Active emailed him a copy of the contract.

Pelletier quickly noticed the signature and initials on the contract were not his.

The contract was also signed "David Pelletier." David is his first name, but Jeffrey, his second name, wasn't used. He says he always signs his name "DJ Pelletier." When he uses his initials, he signs "DJP." "DP" was on the contract.

Consumers across Ontario have fallen victim to similar practices when commission paid marketers for energy companies appear at the door, trying to get them to switch their natural gas, electricity or water-heater suppliers.

There were other discrepancies in Pelletier's "contract." The phone number on the form wasn't even close to his, and his Meadowlands Drive East home was listed as being in Nepean, when it's always been in Ottawa, even before amalgamation.

He remembers two people at his door last fall, trying to sell him something, but he told them to go away. After being duped some time ago into signing a contract that was supposed to lower his natural gas costs over the long run, Pelletier says he gives door-to-door salespeople the boot.

Active wanted proof the signatures and initials were forgeries. He was asked to email its Toronto-area office a document with his signature. "Oh yeah, like I was going to do that after this happened," says Pelletier.

Pelletier is steamed with Enbridge, too. He says it gave him the brush-off when he tried to enlist its help to get Active to cancel the contract. Enbridge's position is that it is not responsible for any products or services it buys from other companies that use its billing service.

Like other natural gas retailers, Active targets Enbridge customers as it is the only natural gas distributor in Eastern Ontario, and pays Enbridge billing to collect on its behalf.

Pelletier is not happy with Ottawa police, either, who told them they couldn't do anything. They suggested he call Enbridge. "Forgery was a crime the last time I checked," says Pelletier.

He spoke to a lawyer to whom he was referred by the Law Society of Upper Canada. The lawyer wasn't much help.

"Everyone is referring me to somebody else, but I have a contract with a forged signature ... who knows how many other people they're doing it to, and nobody seems to want to do a bloody thing to help me."

The Ontario Ministry of Consumer Services says complaints can be made by calling 1-800-889-9768 or online at [www.ontario.ca/consumer services](http://www.ontario.ca/consumer services). But evidently, complaints only go so far. The con artists haven't stopped trolling neighbourhoods for their respective companies. The Citizen gets as many calls from readers now as it did when these scams started becoming an issue across the province about five years ago.

Ottawa resident Peter Garvey emailed the paper Wednesday. He says marketers from two companies were at his door within the last two weeks. One was with Summitt Home Services, who claimed his company was working for Direct Energy, from which Garvey rents his water heater. Direct Energy apparently wanted all water heaters in the area checked.

Garvey says he was told he needed a new one, and a contract was drawn up, which would have added \$3 plus tax to his monthly bill. He was then asked by the canvasser to speak to a representative at Summitt's head office. When Garvey asked if Summitt was doing the work for Direct Energy, he was told it was not. The marketer left empty-handed.

Last Tuesday, a marketer for National Home Services told Garvey that the Ontario government had contracted the company to check residential water heaters for Energy Star efficiency ratings. Suspicious, Garvey asked to see a letter which gave National that authority. Garvey told him to leave when he couldn't produce it.

Meanwhile, after Charlie Zilvytis, Active Energy's operations manager, was contacted Thursday by The Public Citizen, he promised to look into Pelletier's complaint immediately.

The company website says it has a code of conduct that must be followed by all marketers, and all undergo training. Unfortunately, says Zilvytis, the marketers are on the street and can't be policed by the company. So it relies on the public to complain to it if anyone feels cheated or mistreated. The numbers are 1-866-628-9427 or 1-416-238-5540.

Within a few hours of contacting Zilvytis, Active Energy left a voice message on Pelletier's phone, telling him his contract had been cancelled, and that his Enbridge account would be credited \$45 for his troubles. Zilvytis also told me the company would be following up with the marketer who dealt with Pelletier "to see what can be done at the other end."

Pelletier wasn't impressed with the credit. "\$45 is kind of light," says Pelletier, considering Active thought it had him on the hook for \$1,200 and taxes.

Is something bothering you? Please contact [thepubliccitizen@ottawacitizen.com](mailto:thepubliccitizen@ottawacitizen.com).

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