



Office of Senate President Pro Tempore Del Marsh  
Press Clips  
Monday, April 19, 2010

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**[New payday, title loan bills filed in Legislature: Lawmakers cautious about prospects for legislation's passage this session \(Montgomery Advertiser\)](#)**

Advocates of payday and title loan reform, defeated in their efforts last year, are coming back with legislation that would impose caps on interest rates charged by the companies while attempting to strengthen regulations on the industry.

The bipartisan coalition, which includes ideologically diverse groups such as Alabama Arise and the Federation of Republican Women, is hopeful that the measures will be passed. However, leaders of the House and Senate sounded cautious about the proposals Thursday.

Rep. Patricia Todd, D-Birmingham, already has filed legislation addressing payday lending; Stephen Stetson, a policy analyst with Alabama Arise, said he expected Rep. Rod Scott, D-Birmingham, to file legislation addressing title loans.

Todd's bills would cap payday and title loan interest rates at 36 percent; cap the number of loans an individual can take out at six per year; cap the aggregate amount of loans a person can have out at \$500 and establish a single state database to track loans.

Payday loans are generally small loans with a short maturity cycle; there are more than 1,000 payday lenders in the state. The businesses can charge up to 456 percent APR on payday loans; title loan companies can charge 300 percent APR on title loans.

A Pew Charitable Trusts report published in 2012 found the average payday and title loan customer took out an average of eight loans per year, oftentimes to service interest rates on prior loans.

"It creates a cycle of debt that drives people into bankruptcy," Stetson said. "It's a problem posing as a solution. This is not a needed service."

The industry, in turn, says it provides a service that traditional financial institutions do not, and says that a cap of 36 percent on their high-risk loans would force them to close their doors.

Similar legislation was introduced by reform advocates last year, but died in the midst of strong opposition from the industry. A pared-down version of the proposals, sponsored by Senate President Pro Tem Del Marsh, R-Anniston, also failed to get out for a vote.

A call to Buck Wilson, president of the Modern Financial Services Association of Alabama, an industry group, was not returned Thursday.

Last fall, the Alabama Banking Department, with the support of Gov. Robert Bentley, announced that it would attempt to establish a central database to keep track of payday lenders. The industry quickly

filed suit to stop the implementation of the database. The case is still pending in Montgomery County Circuit Court.

Marsh said Thursday he wanted to see the database established before moving forward with any other changes.

"Get the database in place, and let's see how big a problem this is based on real data, and then move forward," he said. "So I don't see it this year. I would welcome a look at it again this year, but I would like to see the numbers as we proceed."

House Speaker Mike Hubbard, R-Auburn, said Thursday he was uncertain as to whether the bills would pass this year, but expected a "serious debate" on the issue.

"You don't want to be just immoral to people," he said. "I think there is a happy medium, and that debate will take place this year."

Last September, the Montgomery City Council voted to establish a moratorium on new payday and title loan businesses; Councilman Charles Smith has expressed concerns that the businesses stifle economic growth in the area. The City Council renewed the moratorium in December.

## **Bill seeks to increase boating fatality penalties (AP)**

MONTGOMERY (AP) — The Alabama Legislature is trying to increase the penalties for alcohol-related boating deaths to the same as deaths caused by drunken car drivers.

The Senate voted 18-1 Thursday for a bill to equalize the penalties. The bill's sponsor, Republican Sen. Bryan Taylor of Prattville, says a drunken boater should be held equally responsible to a drunk driver. The senator has Lake Jordan and part of Lake Martin in his district. He says the bill stems from fatal accidents on those lakes.

The House voted 83-0 Thursday for a similar bill by Republican Rep. Paul Beckman of Prattville. Beckman's bill goes to the Senate for consideration and Taylor's bill goes to the House. One of the bills must pass both chambers to become law.

## **Bill would allow unemployment recipients more money from work (Anniston Star)**

by Tim Lockette

MONTGOMERY – People drawing unemployment checks would still be able to earn up to \$88 per week for work without losing their benefits under a bill that passed the Alabama House of Representatives Thursday.

The bill, sponsored by Rep. Jack Williams, R-Vestavia Hills, would allow unemployed people to earn up to one-third of the amount of their unemployment check from work without losing their unemployment benefits. For someone receiving an unemployment check of \$265 per week – the maximum allowed in Alabama – that would allow up to \$88 of paid work per week. The current limit is \$15.

“What this is designed to do is allow people to get back to work,” Williams said.

Williams said the bill would allow people who’ve been unemployed to do temporary work that would bring home extra money – while giving them a chance to demonstrate to employers that they’re worth hiring. He said that when the \$15 limit on work-related pay was established in the 1960s, \$15 was nearly half as much as the average unemployment check.

“The Legislature in the 1960s, in their wisdom, felt you should be able to make 40 or 45 percent” of the amount of an unemployment check,” Williams said. He said the \$15 limit was “public policy that encourages people not to work.”

The bill initially came under attack from some of Williams’ fellow Republicans, and one independent member of the House.

Rep. Jim McClendon, R-Springville, asked about the bill’s estimated \$980,000 cost to the state’s unemployment trust fund, which is funded largely by payments from employers.

“You mean our businesses are going to have to come up with a million dollars?” McClendon asked.

Rep. Richard Laird, I-Roanoke, said the bill amounted to a tax hike on businesses, because employer contributions to the unemployment trust fund automatically goes up when the trust fund is drawn down to a certain level.

“Don’t be fooled into the idea that this is not a tax increase,” Laird said on the House floor.

Williams asked that the bill be set aside temporarily, so he could discuss it with other lawmakers. When the bill came back to the floor, it passed 74-9. House records show McClendon and Laird, among other former critics of the bill, voting "yes" in that final tally.

Laird said he changed his mind on the bill after Williams told him it was supported by the Department of Labor – and after he learned that the unemployment trust fund had \$220 million in it, more than enough to cover the cost of the bill.

Despite his recorded "yes" vote, Laird told The Star after the House adjourned that he was talking to constituents at the end of Thursday's session, and didn't know that the bill had come up for a final vote. House members have a long-standing practice of leaving instructions for fellow lawmakers to vote in their place if they have to leave the chamber.

The bill by Williams now goes to the Senate for a vote.

The House convened for only about two hours in what was an unusual day of deliberation – but the least bizarre day on Goat Hill this week. House and Senate business limped along on Tuesday and Wednesday, with many lawmakers unable to reach Montgomery due to the recent snowstorm. Only 59 of the 105 House members were present when lawmakers first convened Thursday; it was the first time this week that the House had a quorum.

In the Senate, lawmakers voted to pass more than a half-dozen mostly non-controversial bills, including a ban on sex with animals. Alabama has never passed a law making bestiality a crime, and the Senate bill, sponsored by Sen. Tom Whatley, R-Auburn, would make it a misdemeanor. The bill passed 20-1, according to Senate records. Sen. Hank Sanders, D-Selma, who was recorded as a "no" vote later said that he supported the bill and his vote was recorded in error.

Both houses passed separate bills that would make the penalty for negligent homicide for people boating while drunk the same as the penalty for negligent homicide while drunk driving. One version of that bill – the House or Senate version – will have to pass a second house for the bill to become law.

The more controversial bills that came before the Senate Thursday were set aside for later debate, largely due to the fact that about a third of senators weren't present to debate them. Senators set aside a bill to allow the death penalty when a defendant kills someone who has a restraining order against the defendant; a bill to set up an independent court to hear state tax appeals; and a bill that would prohibit the state from revoking a doctor's license for refusing to participate in any public or private health care plans. All those bills met with opposition from Senate Democrats Thursday.

President Pro Tempore Del Marsh, R-Anniston, said the Senate would likely take up sunset bills – re-approvals of state board that are authorized to exist for a limited time – when lawmakers return on Tuesday.

## **[Bestiality one step closer to being a crime in Alabama \(al.com\)](#)**

MONTGOMERY, Alabama -- Bestiality is one step closer to being illegal in Alabama after the Alabama Senate today passed a bill to criminalize sexual contact with animals.

Senate Bill 151 would criminalize sexual contact with animals, with exemptions for acceptable animal husbandry and veterinarian practices.

State Sen. Tom Whatley, R-Auburn, sponsored the bill which passed today with no debate by a vote of 20-1. The lone dissenting vote was due to a common procedure in the Legislature, whereby a vote on a previous bill can be used for the next bill up for a vote.

Next, the bill will go before the Alabama House for approval.

Currently, bestiality is still legal in 14 states and the District of Columbia.

## **[Tracking the 2014 session: House gets back to work after missed days for weather \(al.com\)](#)**

MONTGOMERY, Alabama --- After losing two days because of the winter storm, the Alabama House of Representatives mustered a quorum today, with 59 of the 102 members answering roll.

The Senate also met and passed nine bills that had little or no opposition.

What they did:

The Senate:

-- Passed SB 89, which would apply the same penalties for boating under the influence accidents that result in a death as for vehicular DUI accidents that result in a death. The House later its own version of the same bill.

-- Passed SB 151, which would make bestiality, sexual contact with an animal, a misdemeanor.

-- Passed SB 229, which would raise the fee to obtain a license for trapping furry animals.

-- Delayed action on SB 168, which would prohibit smoking in work places and public places.

-- Delayed action on HB 105, which would set up an independent tribunal to hear tax disputes between taxpayers and the state.

The House:

-- Passed HB 88, which would increase the amount people are allowed to earn while receiving unemployment benefits without having their benefits reduced.

-- Passed HB 44, which would allow farmers to buy more than one vehicle tag at a reduced cost for vehicles that haul farm products.

-- Passed HB129, which puts into law a state regulation that private schools are exempt from sales and use taxes on tangible personal property and lunches provided to K-12 students that are not sold for a profit.

Coming up:

The Senate returns at 2 p.m. on Tuesday, the House at 1 p.m.

Quote of the day:

"I'll sit down and explain it to you again after we pass it."

Rep. Jack Williams, in response to question from Rep. Jim McClendon about a bill on unemployment compensation.

McClendon: "Where have I heard that before?"

## **Bill would remove PSC authority to hear telecom complaints (Anniston Star)**

by Tim Lockette

MONTGOMERY – An Alabama Senate committee voted Thursday to approve a bill that would eliminate much of the Public Service Commission’s authority to handle complaints against telecommunications companies.

Members of the Commerce Transportation and Utilities Committee voted 5-0 to send the full Senate a bill that would remove the PSC’s authority to handle complaints about telecommunications companies related to inaccurate billing, billing of telecommunications services the customer didn’t order, and the establishment or disruption of phone service.

Alabama AT&T president Fred McCallum told lawmakers the complaints line was one of the few aspects of retail phone service still regulated by the PSC. Competition between phone providers, he said, has made most regulation of the industry unnecessary.

“We’re just proposing that this last bit be allowed to end,” he said after the committee meeting. McCallum said the telecommunications company is prepared to handle those complaints through its own 800 number.

PSC president Twinkle Cavanaugh told lawmakers the commission had no opinion on the bill. She said commissioners believe the Legislature has the authority to decide what the PSC regulates.

Still, Cavanaugh said, the PSC’s complaint line took 749 complaints against telecom companies over the last year – 588 of them against AT&T. Cavanaugh said the number of complaints against AT&T may be due to its share of the market.

Cavanaugh urged lawmakers to provide the PSC with some option for directing customers to a help line when complaints are made.

“By the time these 749 people get in touch with the commission, they’re pretty unhappy,” she said.

The PSC doesn’t regulate most retail telecommunications services, which are sold directly to customers. McCallum said the commission still regulates rates for wholesale services, such as use of transmission lines, that large telecommunications companies sell to other providers.

The bill moves on to the full Senate for a vote.



## **Should Alabama grandparents have a legal right to visit their grandkids over a parent's objections?** **(Yellowhammer News)**

Several years ago, a business dispute led an Alabama mother and father to stop allowing their children's grandparents to visit. The grandparents sued for access to the children under Alabama's Grandparent Visitation Act. The judge ruled for the grandparents and granted them unsupervised visitation rights for a few hours one day a week and allowed them to have daily telephone communication.

However, the parents appealed the judge's decision and the ruling was reversed.

The case ultimately made its way to the Alabama Supreme Court, which not only sided with the parents, it also struck down Grandparent Visitation Act altogether, calling it a violation of the parents' due process rights.

The grandparents continued fighting and petitioned the U.S. Supreme Court to hear their appeal. But the nation's highest court declined to hear the case in early 2012, leaving the Alabama Supreme Court decision as the final word.

Today, Sen. Gerald Allen, R-Tuscaloosa, brought the issue back up by introducing a new Grandparents Visitation Act (Senate Bill 190) in the Alabama Senate.

The bill would allow a grandparent to petition the court for visitation rights if the marital relationship between the parents of the grandchild has been severed by divorce, death or separation.

"Most families in circumstances of divorce or separation can work out favorable circumstances and visits for grandparents to continue to enjoy the company of their grandchildren," Sen. Allen said. "This legislation addresses grandparents rights in those unusual circumstances where a grandchild is denied a visit to their grandparents. Our bill does not take anything away from parents and provides stability and emotional well-being for children."

To obtain visitation rights over the objection of a parent, the grandparent would have to prove that the lack of visitation has caused harm to the grandchild, and that it would be in the best interest of the child for them to resume contact.

All 50 states have some form of "grandparent visitation" laws granting a judge the authority to require regular access to grandchildren.

The question is, does a parent's right to decide how to best raise her child include the authority to not allow grandparents to visit?

"I am very committed to ensuring that every grandparent is allowed to visit their grandchild and should not be denied because of an unforeseen circumstance like a divorce," Allen said. "The safety of the child is of the utmost importance and is emphasized throughout our bill."

Senate Bill 190 is pending before the Senate Judiciary Committee.

## **[Billy Canary: Legislature should leave alone Alabama's College and Career Ready Standards \(al.com\)](#)**

The 2014 session of the Alabama Legislature is underway, and while a number of important issues are being debated and discussed, perhaps no issue has garnered more attention or been the source of more misinformation than Alabama's College and Career Ready Standards.

These standards, which were put into place by the State Board of Education in November of 2010, affirmed new, tougher benchmarks of proficiency in mathematics and English language arts to better prepare Alabama students for success after graduation.

The standards require more critical thinking, problem solving, and teamwork instead of rote memorization. They were developed by Alabamians for Alabamians using a comprehensive and transparent process dictated by state law and long-standing tradition.

Just like any smart business plan, the standards provide states with a roadmap for student learning. By adopting standards with clear, detailed expectations of proficiency for what students should be able to master at each grade level, when a student in Alabama successfully completes each grade, it is clear what skills that student has mastered.

For far too long, we have been deluding ourselves that students who receive good grades and graduate from high school are on track to succeed in college or the workforce. U.S. employers have seen a growing gap between the skills they need in their employees and skills recent high school and college graduates have developed. In fact, 34.4 percent of 2010 Alabama high school graduates had

to take at least one remedial course to improve their English or math skills, according to a Birmingham News analysis of data from the Alabama Commission on Higher Education.

In a state like Alabama that has such a concentrated military presence – from Huntsville to Anniston, Montgomery and Dothan – it is important for families who move here that their children can read and do math on the same level at the equivalent grade level in any other state.

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In the very same way, companies that are looking to locate, stay or expand to Alabama must know that we can produce an educated workforce. Alabama's College and Career Ready standards are vital in preparing students to compete in the 21st Century global workforce. With corporate citizens like Austal, Mercedes-Benz U.S. International, Hyundai Motor Manufacturing of Alabama and Airbus to name a few, it is easy to see we are no longer competing for a workforce with our sister states but instead we are competing internationally.

Since the State Board of Education adopted the College and Career Ready Standards, the criticism has continued from those opposed to the standards. For months, the board has addressed every complaint lodged by opponents of Alabama's standards, including increasing the protection of student personal data and rescinding the Memorandum of Understanding between Alabama and the National Governors' Association. Despite these efforts, among others since our standards were adopted in 2010, the opposition continues to move the goal posts.

Let's be clear about one thing: in no instance has the federal government taken over, or attempted to take over, Alabama's education system, nor will our elected officials on the State Board of Education allow that to happen. That accusation is based in fear, not reality. We have real battles with the federal government when it comes to their overreach in Alabama, and Common Core is not one of these battles.

Any attempt by the legislature to assume control of this issue, relegated by law to the State Board of Education, is the very definition of a government overreach.

We remain united with Alabama's business, education and military communities as we work to offer our children a brighter future, regardless of the zip code in which they live. We welcome all those who strive for a better Alabama to stand with us.

## **Students won't have to make up snow days after Tuesday ice storm, state superintendent says (al.com)**

Every school district in the Birmingham-metro area has been closed since dismissing early Tuesday, but students won't have to make up those days, state Superintendent Tommy Bice said this morning. School districts must seek a waiver from the state Department of Education to have their missed days excused, but Bice said he doesn't anticipate any problems with that.

After the April 27, 2011, tornadoes that ripped through Alabama and killed hundreds of people, the Alabama Legislature passed a law that allowed missed school days to be excused if the governor declares a state of emergency and the state superintendent approves the request to forgive the missed days.

Bice said this morning that he sent school systems affected by the snow and ice storm a list of requirements and forms to have the missed days excused. Districts can fill them out, send them back in and he will approve them.

All school systems in the Birmingham area are closed today. There is no word on school closings for Friday, but temperatures today are supposed to go above freezing for the first time since the snow fell on Tuesday.

State officials said 11,375 Alabama students had to spend the night at their schools Tuesday because roads were not drivable.

## **Leeds to reimburse drivers surprised by towing fees (ABC 3340)**

LEEDS, Ala. -

The city of Leeds is trying to make things right with drivers who had their cars towed.

Many drivers returned to where they abandoned cars during the storm, but their vehicles weren't there. The city had many cars towed from Scott City Hill, Parkway Drive, and Faye Street.

Mayor David Miller said those roads were the only route from the interstate to city shelters set up for stranded motorists.

"We had over 300 people that we were able to transport to safety because we did move the cars," Miller said.

"It was not something we wanted to do. It was something we had to do. There was no opportunity to move them to the side.

"There was no room there because there's a big ditch on one side and a steep hill on the other," the mayor said.

Miller said the city's priority over the past two days was providing shelter for stranded motorists. He is proud the city could provide shelter for hundreds of people in three city shelters. Two people were still at the Civic Center on Thursday afternoon, waiting for word that roads were clearer at their destinations. The city also made sure everyone had food.

The mayor said he sympathizes with the drivers who had their cars towed. He does not want them to think the city gave special treatment to people who abandoned vehicles on the Interstate or other roads. Miller wants to show compassion to those surprised their cars were moved.

"We've been accused of just kind of doing that and not caring about them. We certainly do care about those people and we're taking care of all the fees they have to pay," he said.

"With the help of state representative Dickie Drake and state senator Slade Blackwell--I'm having another meeting with them this afternoon, they're coming up with a way to get this fee taken care of."

The two Leeds impounds for the towed cars are Murray's Garage and Ryan Automotive. Miller said they will release the vehicles for free to anyone who hasn't claimed their car. Reimbursements are available to those who have.

## **Alabama Farmers Federation rolls out endorsements (Yellowhammer News)**

FarmPAC, the political action committee of the Alabama Farmers Federation, earlier this week endorsed candidates for Alabama secretary of state, auditor and public service commission. The Alabama Farmers Federation, an affiliate of the American Farm Bureau Federation, is the state's largest farm organization with more than 365,000 members.

FarmPAC endorsed John Merrill for secretary of state. Merrill is a freshman state representative from Tuscaloosa who's making his first run for statewide office.

"This endorsement bears witness to the strength of the grassroots efforts of our campaign throughout all 67 counties in the great state of Alabama," Merrill told Yellowhammer. "We are not aware of any other entity that has the same level of local membership of individuals who are committed to providing for their families, their communities, and our state at the same level the members of the Federation are. I am humbled by their support and especially their endorsement."

Adam Thompson, a senior staffer in the Alabama secretary of state's office, received FarmPAC's endorsement for state auditor.

"[A]griculture is the backbone of Alabama's economy and members of the Alabama Farmers Federation are actively involved in their government and understand how it affects their daily lives," Thompson said in a statement. "They support candidates who know and support Alabama's farming and agricultural interests and I am proud to be among the ones they have chosen to endorse this election year."

FarmPAC also made two endorsement for the public service commission. They endorsed Commissioner Jeremy Oden for place 1 — he's currently running unopposed — and Chip Beeker for Place 2.

"My family has worked the land of Alabama for generations, and I am proud to say that my family still calls rural Alabama home," said Oden. "My wife Samantha and I plan on raising our daughter Anika 'in the country' just as we were raised. We want her to have the same 'country' Alabama values that we treasure — and that the Alabama Farmers Federation represents."

The Beeker endorsement is perhaps most notable because ALFA decided to endorse him over a sitting commissioner, Terry Dunn, in the Republican primary.

"I'm honored to receive the support of our state's largest industry," Beeker told Yellowhammer. "As a farmer, I know first hand the impact the agriculture community has on Alabama by providing thousands of jobs. It serves as a cornerstone of our economy and I pledge to do all I can to protect and grow this important industry."

Alabama Farmers Federal President Jimmy Parnell said he hopes the FarmPAC endorsements will help elect candidates who support agriculture in Alabama, which is the state's largest industry.

"The Alabama Farmers Federation encourages our members to be politically engaged and support candidates who understand the importance of agriculture to our state," said Parnell. "We hope our endorsements will help guide our members when they vote in June and November."

FarmPAC Advisory Trustees, who are farmers representing every county in Alabama, made endorsement recommendations at the group's Jan. 21 meeting at the Federation home office in Montgomery.

The group previously announced endorsements for other state and congressional races. That list can be found here.

The 2014 primary election is June 3 with primary runoffs July 15. The general election is Nov. 4.

## **[Reports: Energen seeking offers for Alagasco \(al.com\)](#)**

BIRMINGHAM, Alabama – Is Energen putting Alagasco up for sale?

The Wall Street Journal and Reuters, citing unnamed sources, reported Tuesday Alagasco's parent, Energen Corp., is soliciting bids for its Alabama Gas Co. utility, which provides natural gas to 425,000 customers.

The Wall Street Journal said Alagasco could fetch more than \$1 billion.

However, Energen officials are not confirming the reports.

"James McManus (chief executive of Energen) has stated that Energen's board of directors is expected to address corporate structure this year," Sherri Goodman, spokeswoman for Energen, said in an email. "We have no further comment on the matter at this time."

Energen has an annual and quarterly earnings conference call scheduled for Feb. 12. Shares in Energen were trading above \$71 Thursday after opening at \$70.54.

## **Higher power bills possible due to greater demand (Anniston Star)**

by Patrick McCreless

Electrical power customers could soon see higher bills due to above-average demand for electricity during the recent snow storm and most of January.

Alyson Tucker, spokeswoman for Alabama Power, said customers' bills could rise, even for those who participate in the company's budget billing program.

The budget billing program is designed to ease the burden of rate spikes caused by weather by spreading the cost over a 12-month period. Budget bill customers' monthly bills are figured on a rolling 12-month average and are evaluated monthly.

"Higher usage could impact those averages and might trigger an adjustment," Tucker said. "The benefit is that it allows customers to pay their higher bills over an extended period of time."

Tucker did not specify by how much bills could increase, but noted there has been considerable demand. Tucker said Southern Company, one of the nation's largest electricity producers and operator of Alabama Power, reached a historic peak winter demand earlier this month.

"And there has been an increase in demand over the last few days due to the frigid temperatures we are experiencing and people needing and using more power," Tucker said. "But the winter storm demand for the past several days, while higher than average, was not as high as earlier this month."

For comparison, the Southern Company's peak demand was 45,887 megawatts between 7 and 8 a.m. Jan. 7. On Thursday morning, the peak was 43,782 megawatts.

A megawatt is a unit of measurement for electric power.

Wayne Mizzell, owner of Mizzell Heating and Air Conditioning in Oxford, said for the most part, electric heat pumps are cheaper to operate in the winter than natural gas furnaces, but not during significant cold.

"When it's really cold, gas is probably a little bit cheaper," Mizzell said. "But we have such mild winter weather in Alabama ... when you look at the whole winter combined, operating a heat pump is cheaper."



Mizzell said the recent cold weather has increased his business in terms of repair work, mainly for residential customers.

"Oh yeah, we've done a lot of repair work," he said. "Demand has been very high this year."

Tucker said that though electricity use is up, Alabama Power has had no trouble meeting demand. She added that the company faced few problems and outages in Calhoun County during the snowstorm.

Tucker said the minimal outages related to the snow were primarily due to motorists colliding with poles, resulting in downed power lines. She said ice on power lines also caused some damage and outage issues.

"Fortunately, east Alabama and Calhoun County had large amounts of snow on the lines but very little ice," Tucker said. "We were able to keep the power on for most of our customers and worked as quickly and safely as possible to restore power."

Other Alabama Power customers around the state were not quite as lucky. According to an Alabama Power press release, 13,600 of its customers were without power early Wednesday. However by late Thursday morning, all but 6,700 customers had their power restored. The company expected to have all power restored by the end of Thursday.

Sherri Goodman, spokeswoman for Alagasco, said her company has seen increased use of natural gas and expects the trend to continue this winter.

"We did see an increase in usage in December compared to a year ago," Goodman said. "I definitely expect we will see higher numbers in January as well."

Goodman was unable to provide specific details about demand for the state or Calhoun County by Thursday evening. However, she did note that Alagasco customers would likely not see their bills increase due to the recent high demand.

"In terms of natural gas prices, our underground natural gas storage and our liquid natural gas plants provide a cushion in high-usage times, which helps us mitigate price fluctuations," Goodman said.

**[Delay in flood insurance overhaul passes Senate despite "no" votes from Shelby and Sessions \(al.com\)](#)**

The U.S. Senate today passed a four-year delay in legislation, known as Biggert-Waters, which overhauled the federal flood insurance program and would have dramatically increased premiums for homeowners living in flood-prone areas.

The delaying legislation passed by a vote of 67-32, though both of Alabama's Republican senators, Richard Shelby and Jeff Sessions, voted against it. Shelby has argued that it is time for the Federal Flood Insurance Program, awash in red ink, to be fiscally sound, and for owners of flood-prone homes to bear the cost of that risk rather than taxpayers.

The bill delaying Biggert-Waters, called the Homeowner Flood Insurance Affordability Act, faces tougher opposition in the Republican-controlled House, where Speaker John Boehner and leaders of the influential Financial Services Committee have expressed opposition to a delay.

It puts freshmen Rep. Bradley Byrne in opposition to both the House leadership and the senators from his home state. Byrne seems poised to vote for the delay. When asked about Byrne's position on Thursday, his office released this statement:

"Congressman Byrne has said consistently that we need to slow down the implementation of flood insurance reform to make sure that any changes to insurance premiums are reasonable and affordable. He believes the science being used to implement Biggert-Waters is questionable and may result in poorly drawn or inaccurate mapping... He is interested in taking a look at this particular proposal to see how it will protect his constituents in affected areas while also bringing the program to solvency."

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