

Publication: Palm Beach Post; Date: Jul 5, 2012; Section: Business; Page: 5B

UTILITY BILL SCAM

FPL warns customers of online bill scam

Nationwide scheme promises to pay utility bills but really steals Social Security, bank account numbers.

By Jeff Ostrowski Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

Florida Power & Light officials are warning customers not to fall for a scam that promises to pay your utility bill if you provide your Social Security and bank account numbers.

The so-called phishing scheme has spread nationwide by email, phone, word of mouth and social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, said FPL spokesman Neil Nissan. The scammers give victims a phony routing number from a bank in New Hampshire and tell victims to use that account to pay their bill.

"Customers think they're paying it, and in reality they're not," Nissan said.

To make the pitch sound legit, swindlers tell utilities customers that the deal is part of a federal program to help Americans pay their utility bills. Turn over your financial information, and your electric bill will be covered, they say. But no such federal program exists.

"Sometimes when something sounds too good to be true, it is," Nissan said.

It's unclear exactly how many FPL customers have been victimized by the scam. Nissan said about 30,000 FPL customers have been "affected," meaning they tried to pay with the bogus bank account or they contacted FPL to find out if the offer was real.

Also unclear is whether victims have lost any money yet. Social Security numbers and banking information are prized by identity thieves.

To fight the scam, FPL has been sending alerts of its own on Twitter and by email. Only a fraction of FPL's 4.6 million customers have been hit by the scam, he said.

"It's a relatively small number for now," Nissan said. "We're trying to get the word out because we don't want our customers to fall for it."

The Fort Pierce Utilities Authority also is warning customers about the scam. jeff_ostrowski@pbpost.com