



# AI and the Environment: Costs and Impact

*Prepared for the NWPA Executive Committee*

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Celenia Graves, Experimental Learning and Engagement Librarian  
Celeniag@illinois.edu



Emily Benton, PRI Librarian  
ebenton3@illinois.edu

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# Outline for Today's Session



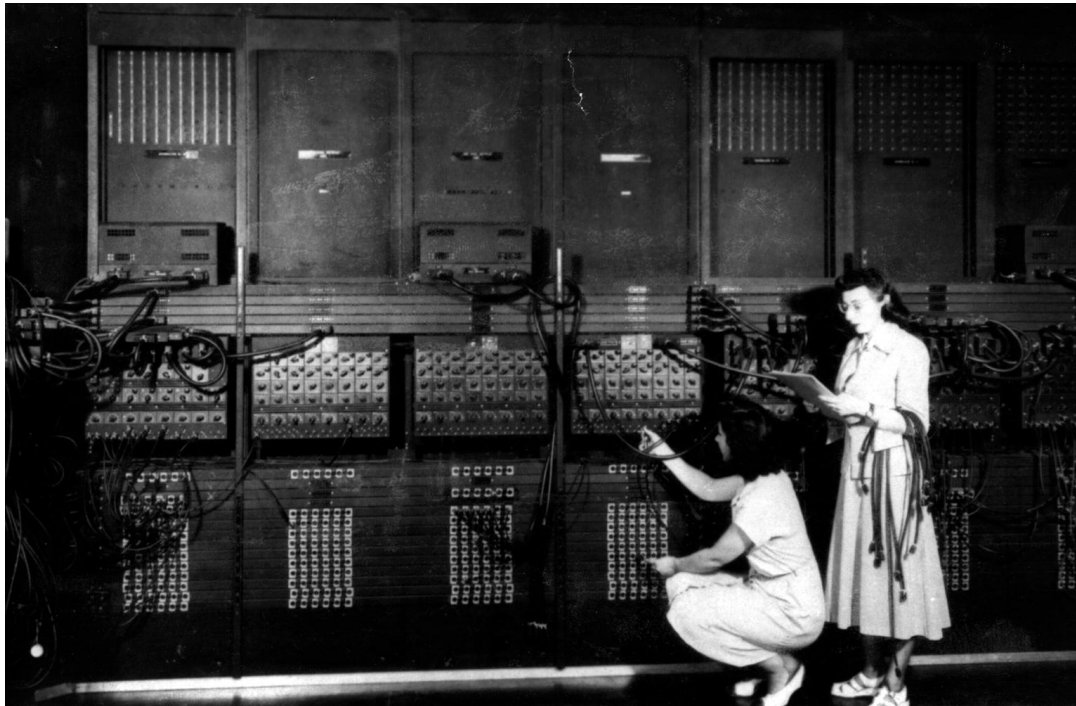
- Intro to AI & how data centers function
- The environmental impact of data centers
- Business, government, & community response



# Intro to AI & Data Centers



# Data Centers: Past and Present



Ruth Lichterman Teitelbaum (left) and Marlyn Wescoff Meltzer (right) in front of the Electronic Numerical Integrator and Computer (ENIAC).

Images from Penn University Archives, provided by Penn Today.

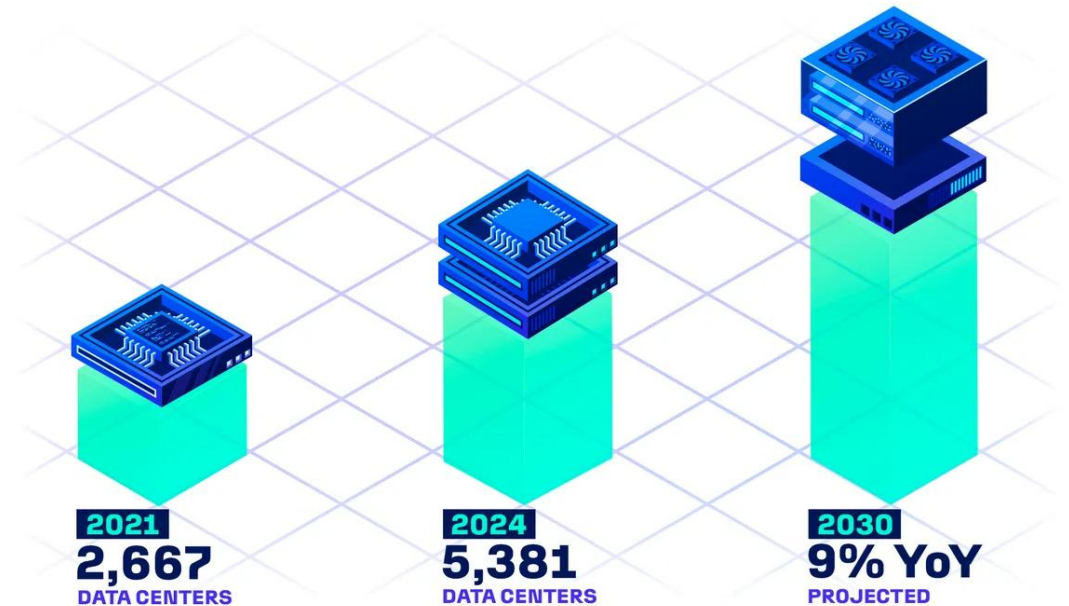
Aerial view of Microsoft's new AI datacenter campus in Mt. Pleasant, Wisconsin (September 2025).

Provided by Scott Guthrie, Executive Vice President, Cloud + AI.

# Overview of Data Centers & how they function



- Data centers are buildings that
  - consist of IT infrastructure (servers, generators, cooling systems, networking equipment, etc.)
  - support the development and maintenance of data storage and management for a range of services and applications
  - require access to an energy source and other resources, like land and local power grids for power and functionality
  - need a lot of maintenance and support
  - have a range including, but not limited to, Hyperscale, Enterprise/on-premise, and Colocation
  - also includes Edge Data Centers, Public Cloud (Computing, used in Hyperscale and Colocation), and Phantom Data Centers



Source: CNET | Creator: Tharon Green

Image based on a report from Frontier Group, the Environment America Research & Policy Center and the US PIRG Education Fund

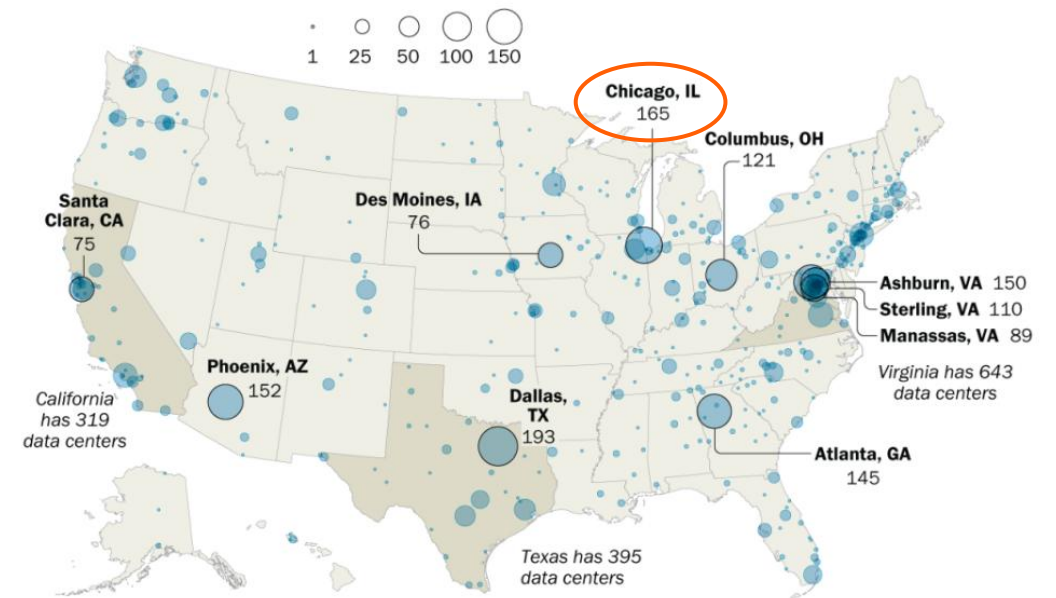
# AI Industry impact on Data Centers: Function and Investment



- Increase in data generation and consumption
- Critical to have quick access and scalability
- Data centers maintain and sustain AI training and inferencing
- High dependency on servers
  - Requires sophisticated maintenance and management
- Black Box in its data and prompt demands
  - Difficult to determine source and energy impact
- Colocation data centers are most popular due to its range of support and Hyperscale is popular for high-needs

## Virginia, Texas and California lead in number of data centers

Number of data centers, by market



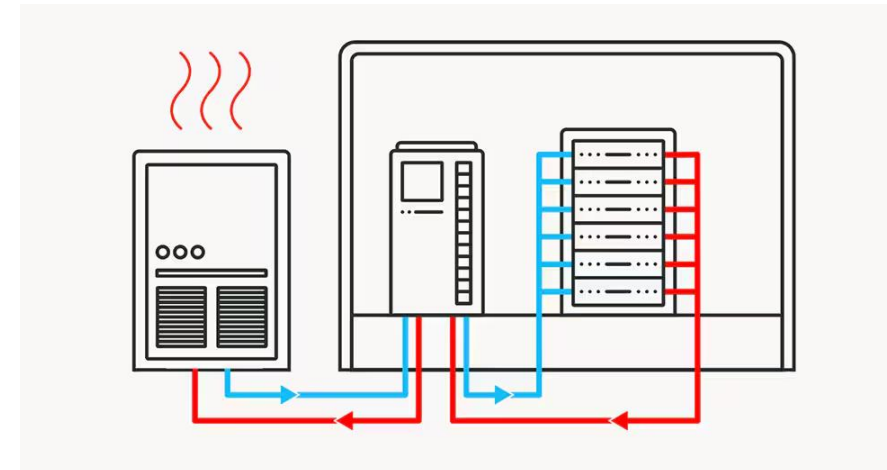
Note: Includes operational data centers and those in development. Refer to the Data Center Map methodology for more details.  
Source: Data Center Map, accessed Oct. 20, 2025.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER



# Cooling Systems: Handling Energy

- High temperatures affect equipment, which affects the process, clients, and equipment
- Physical environment can affect what cooling is used
- There are different types of cooling systems (how to transfer heat):
  - Computer Room Air Conditioning - refrigerant and compressors
  - Computer Room Air Handler - chilled water and valves
  - Liquid cooling
    - Direct-to-chip cooling - small tubes draw heat away
    - Single-phase/two-phase immersion cooling - sealed containers
  - Free cooling - natural air
- Other technologies include thermal wall units, airflow contaminants (hot or cold), etc.
- Department of Energy (DoE) specifies energy conservation standards and test procedures per the [Code of Federal Regulations](#) (CFR).



“In data centers, cool liquid absorbs heat at the source; then warm liquid is cooled and recirculates to repeat the cycle.”

Source - Oracle



# Environmental Impact of Data Centers





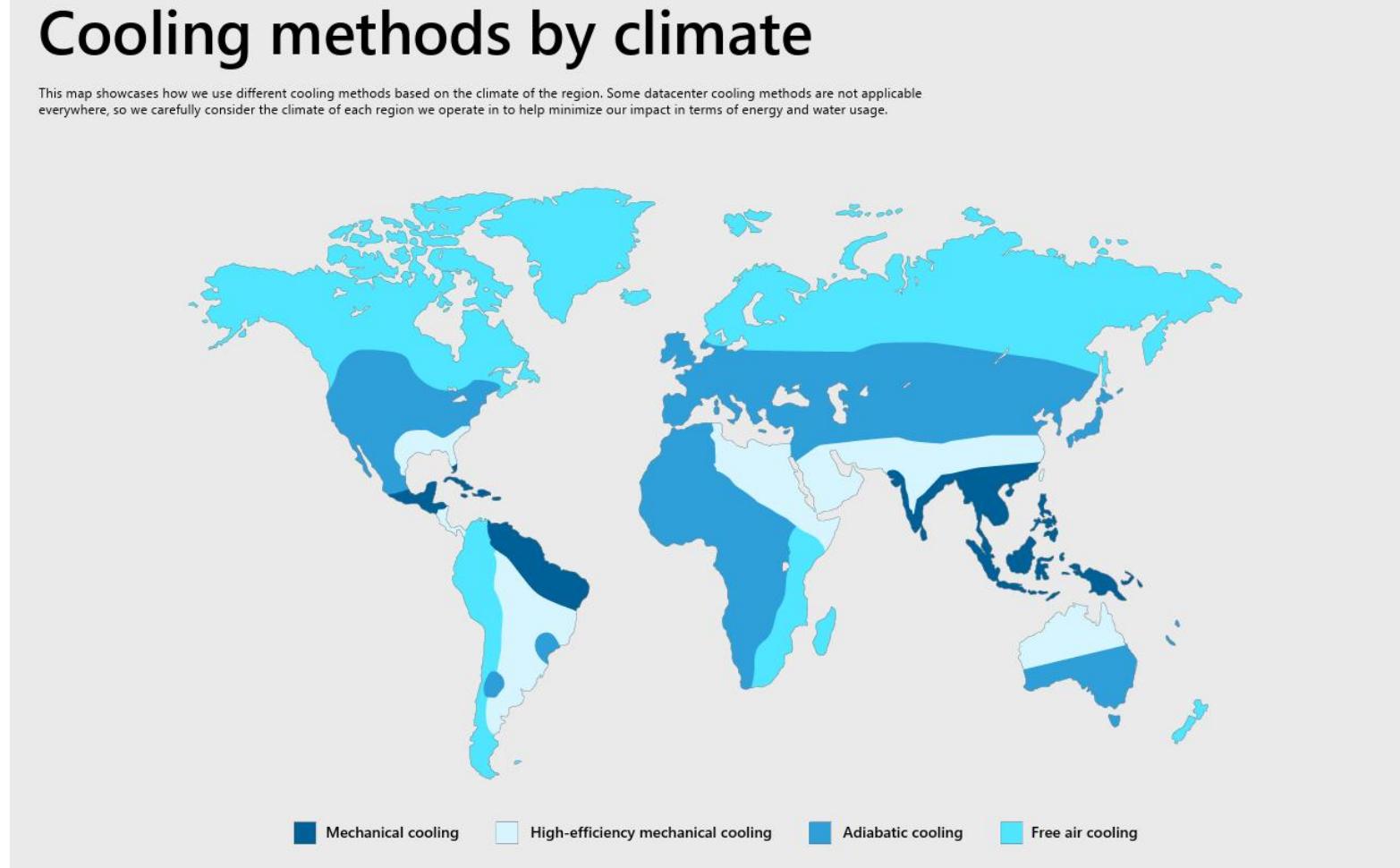
# How Data Centers Function: Climate factor

Source: Microsoft

Modern datacenter cooling

Simplified key terms

- Mechanical - machine
- Adiabatic - liquid





# The Impact on Water

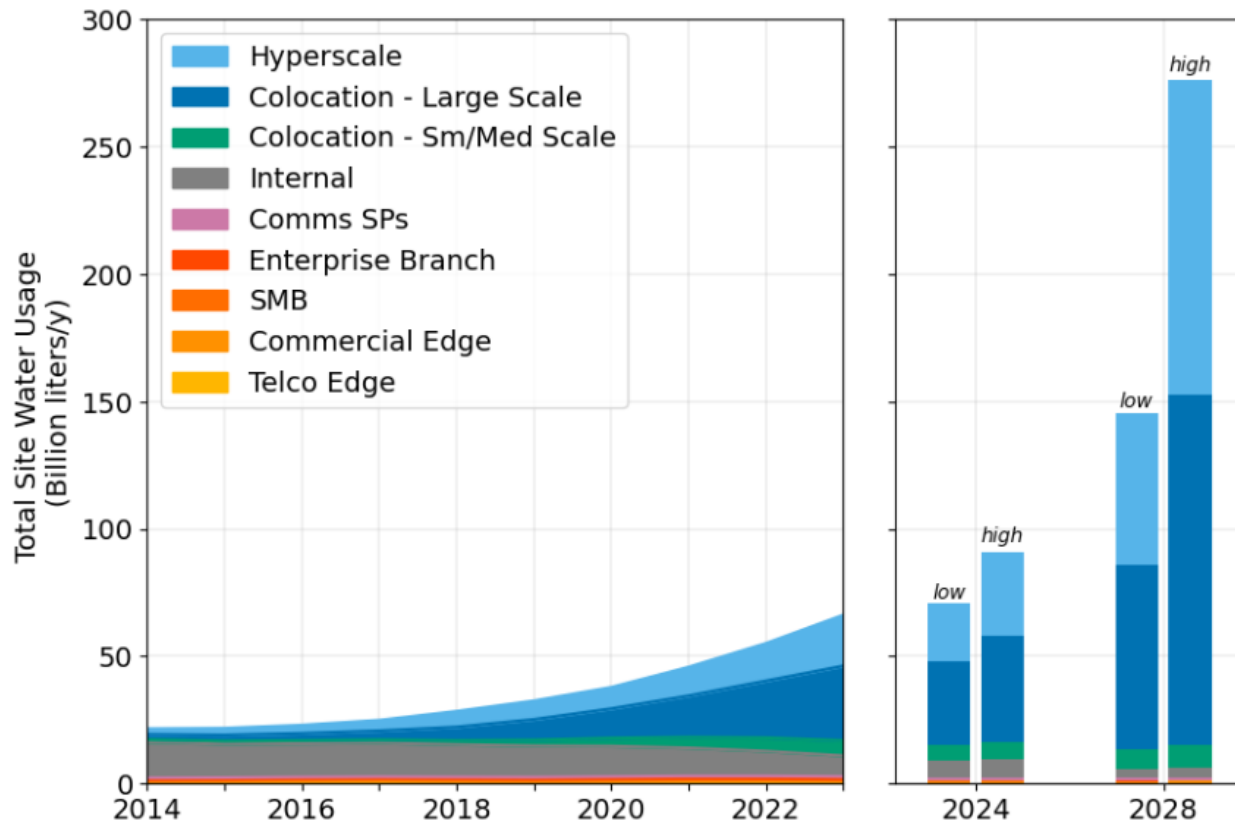
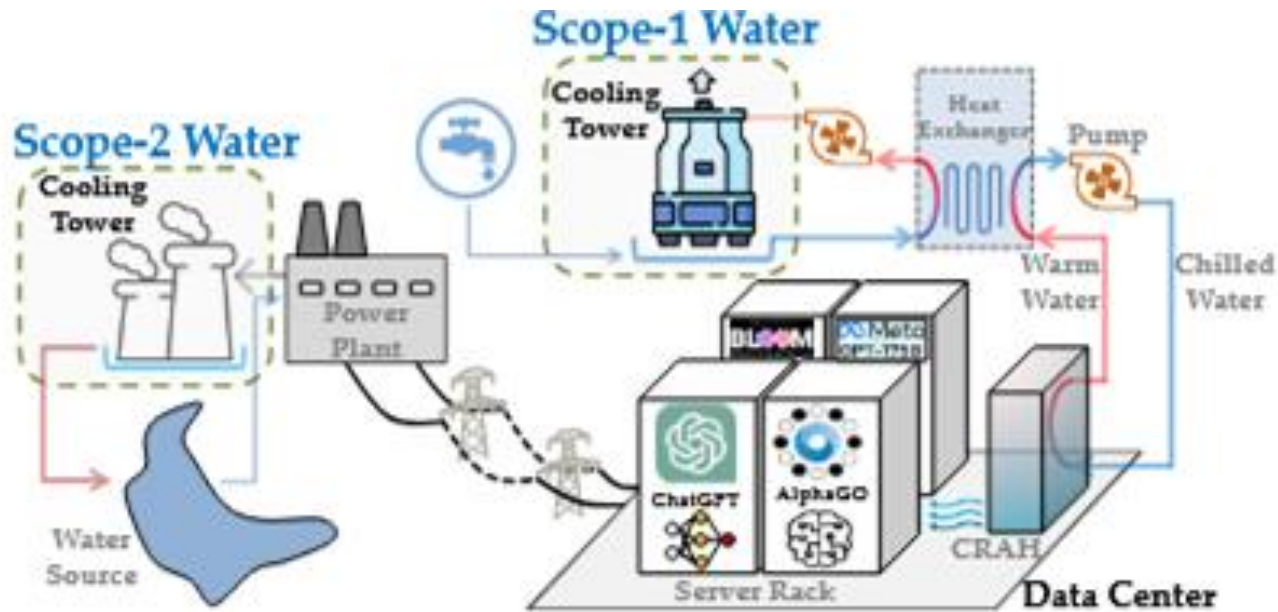


Figure 5.9. Direct water consumption by data center type.

*It is important to note that the methodology used here to calculate indirect water and emission impacts does not incorporate any power purchase agreements between individual data center facilities and their electricity providers or on-site “behind the meter” generation, which could significantly affect water consumption and emissions estimates, depending on the electricity source.*

- **Less than a third** of data centre operators actively track water usage metrics
  - Non-disclosure agreements that companies ask municipalities to sign when they propose a data center further obscure water usage
- Hyperscale facilities alone are projected to consume between **16 billion and 33 billion gallons annually by 2028**. (Shehabi et al., 2024)
- In total about **0.3% of the total public water supply** for the contiguous U.S. is used by data centers (Ren & Luers, 2025)
- Average WUE for data centers is just over **0.36 L/kWh in 2023** (Shehabi et al., 2024)
- A majority of AI’s water footprint is blue water extracted from rivers, lakes, or groundwater, which is directly accessible for human use but often more limited in availability. (Li et al., 2025)



**Figure 1:** An example of data center’s operational water usage: on-site scope-1 water usage for data center cooling (via cooling towers in the example), and off-site scope-2 water usage for electricity generation. The icons for AI models are only for illustration purposes.

- **AI Water usage scopes:**

- Scope 1
  - server-level cooling
  - facility-level cooling
- Scope 2
  - water use by power plant facilities that supply power to data centers
- Scope 3
  - water consumption during the manufacturing process of processor chips

# Local Impact Concerns

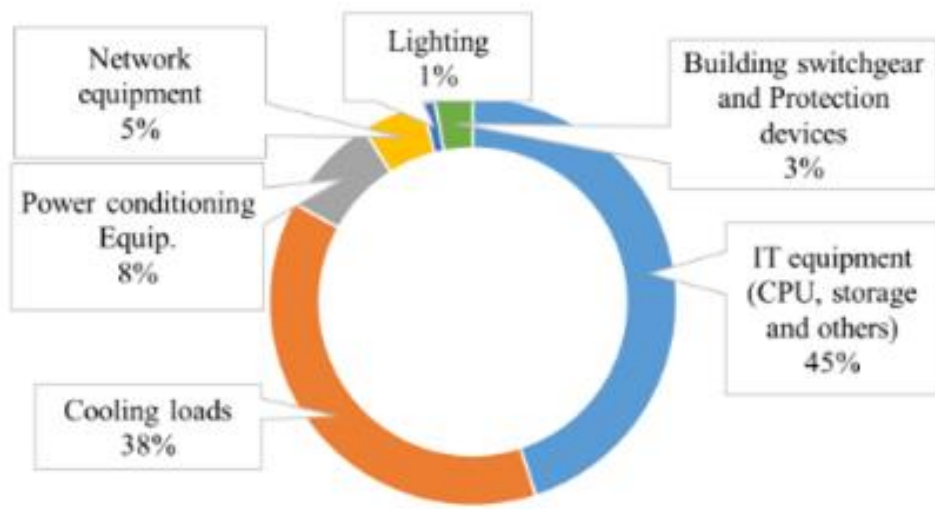


- Without transparent and accurate data about the water supply demand of data center local communities and governments are at a disadvantage when building resilience in the local and regional water systems.
- Since 2022, nearly two-thirds of new U.S. data centers have been built in high water-stress areas(Skidmore, 2025).
- Aquifer Protection Act
  - Provides that, beginning January 1, 2027, no data center operating within the State shall use water from the Mahomet Aquifer. Prohibits State agencies from issuing or renewing a permit authorizing a data center to withdraw groundwater from the Mahomet Aquifer. Requires existing data centers to transition to alternative water sources and cease all groundwater withdrawals from the Mahomet Aquifer by no later than January 1, 2028
- [Data Centers in the Great Lakes Region](#)
- ISWS's Overview of Illinois's Recurring Supply and Demand Challenges in Water Supply
  - Drought
  - Aging Infrastructure
  - Unexpected Demands

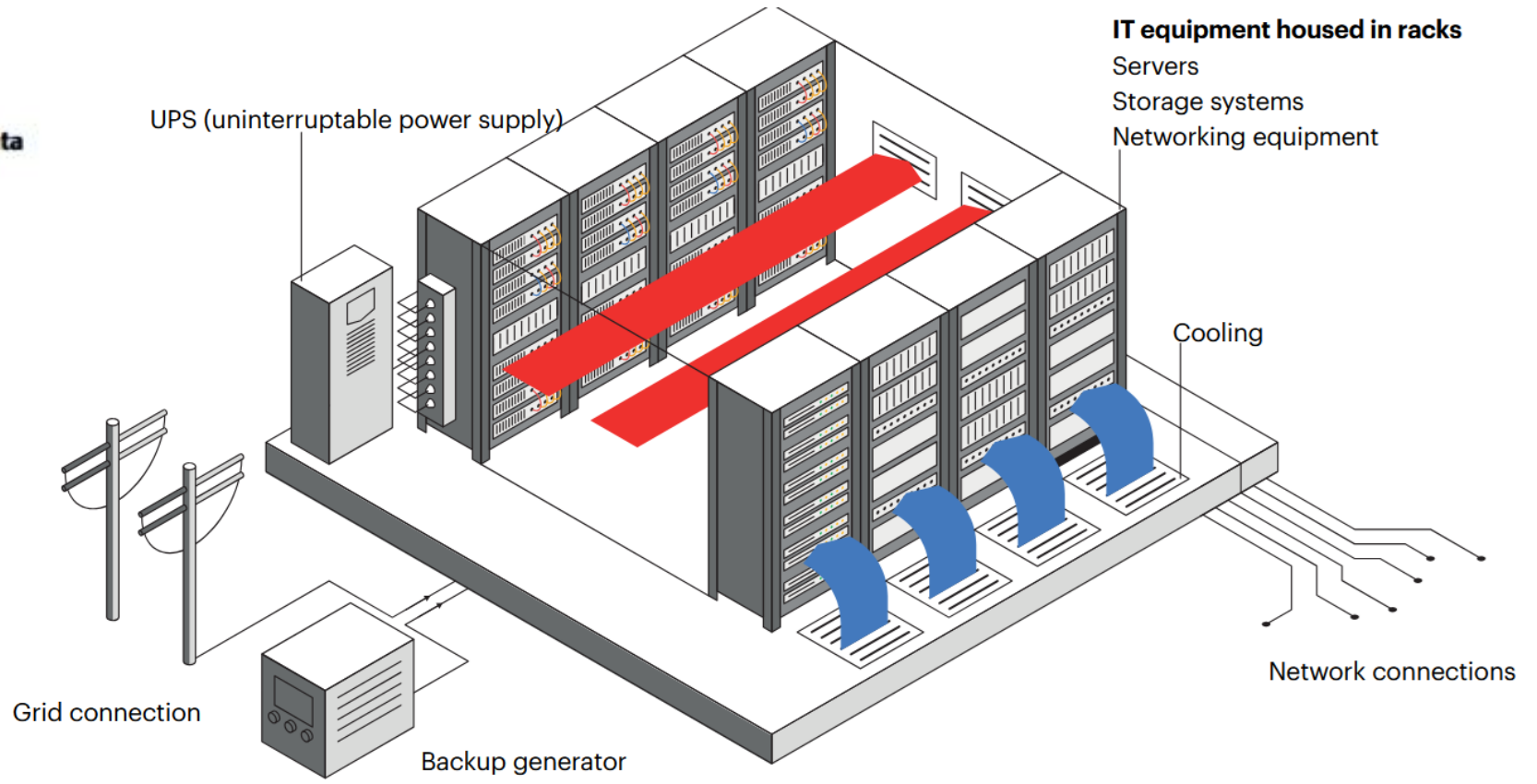
# Energy Consumption



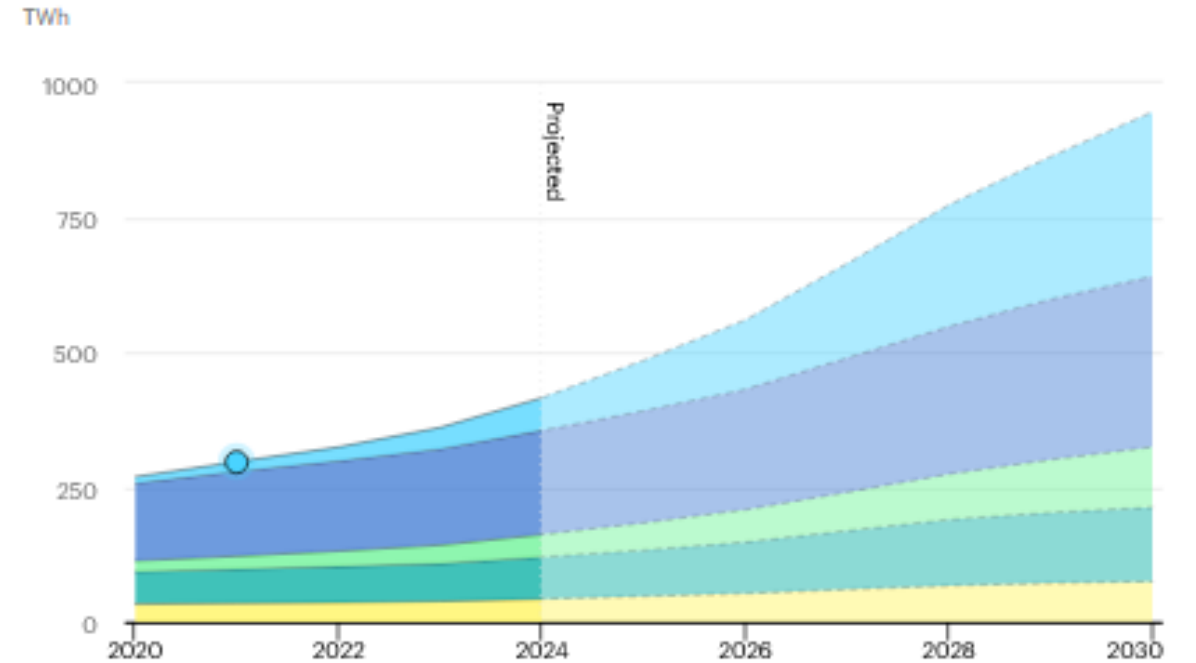
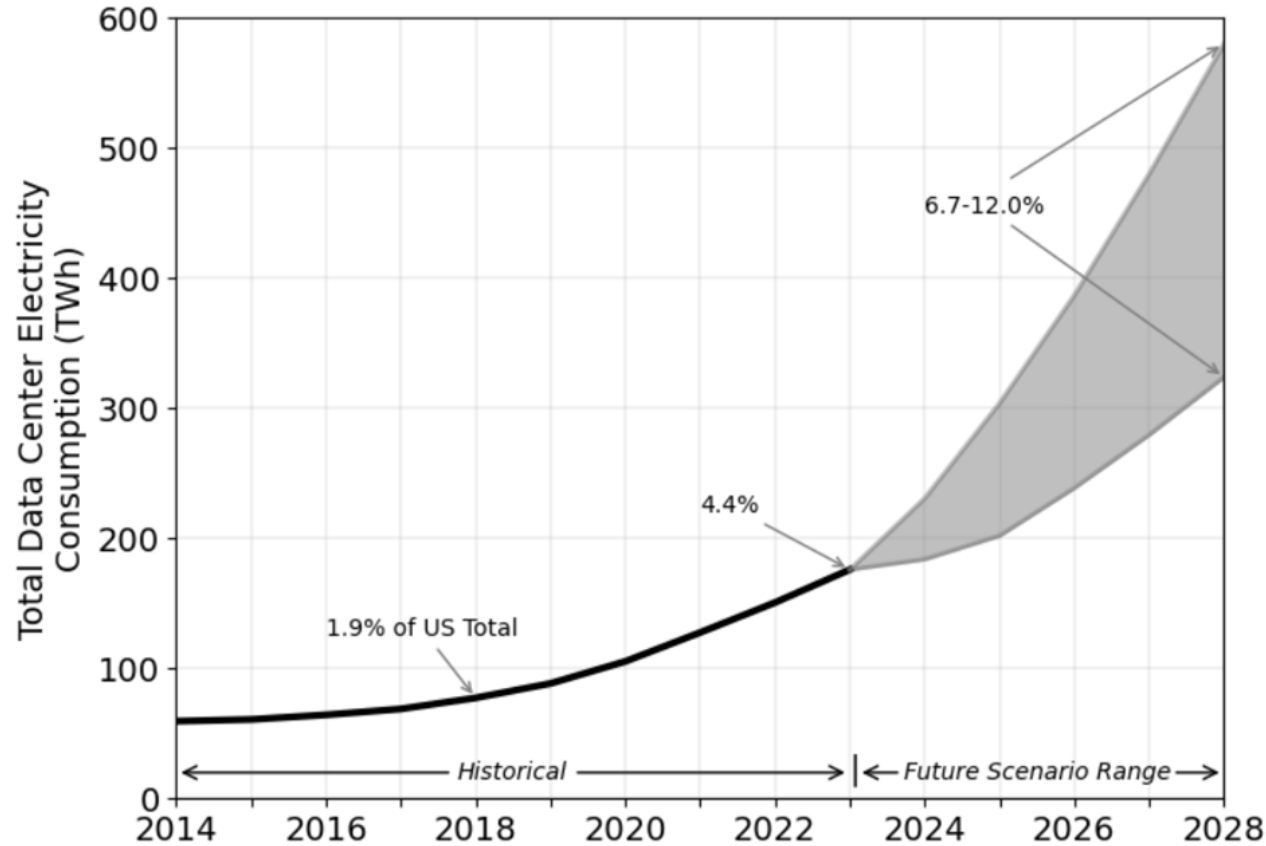
- U.S. data center annual energy use in 2023 was approximately 176 terawatt-hours (TWh), **approximately 4.4% of U.S. annual electricity consumption**
  - About half of this goes to operation of IT equipment and the rest to cooling
  - AI applications are estimated to use 10%–20% of data center electricity in 2024
- Globally this number is between **1-2%**, but is predicted to rise to **3-4%** by end end of the decade based a study by Goldman Sachs
- Dramatic gains in efficiency for data centers in recent years. Power Usage Effectiveness (**PUE**) **has gone from 2.50 to 1.58** according to the Electric Power Research Institute.



**FIGURE 4. Analysis of power consumption proportionality in data center. [8], [24].**



# Energy use & Predictions:



IEA, Licence: CC BY 4.0

- Accelerated servers
- Conventional servers
- Other IT equipment
- Cooling
- Other infrastructure

Figure ES-1. Total U.S. data center electricity use from 2014 through 2028.

## Illinois

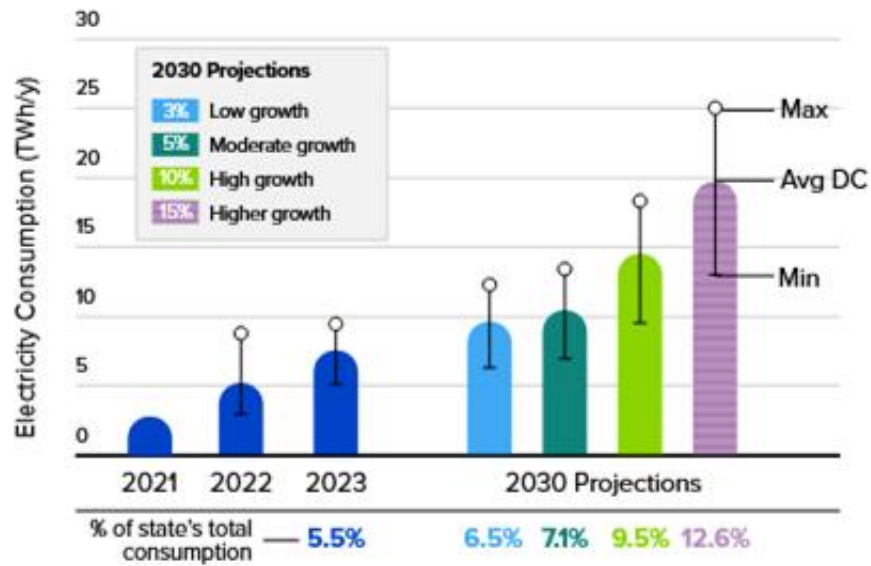


Figure A4.

Projected electricity consumption in Illinois data centers

**“Illinois has strategic location; significant tax incentives; nuclear generation and increasing renewable energy investments to address sustainability, but also challenges around transmission constraints and rapidity of development”** - EPRI’s 2024 White Paper on

analyzing artificial Intelligence and data center energy consumption

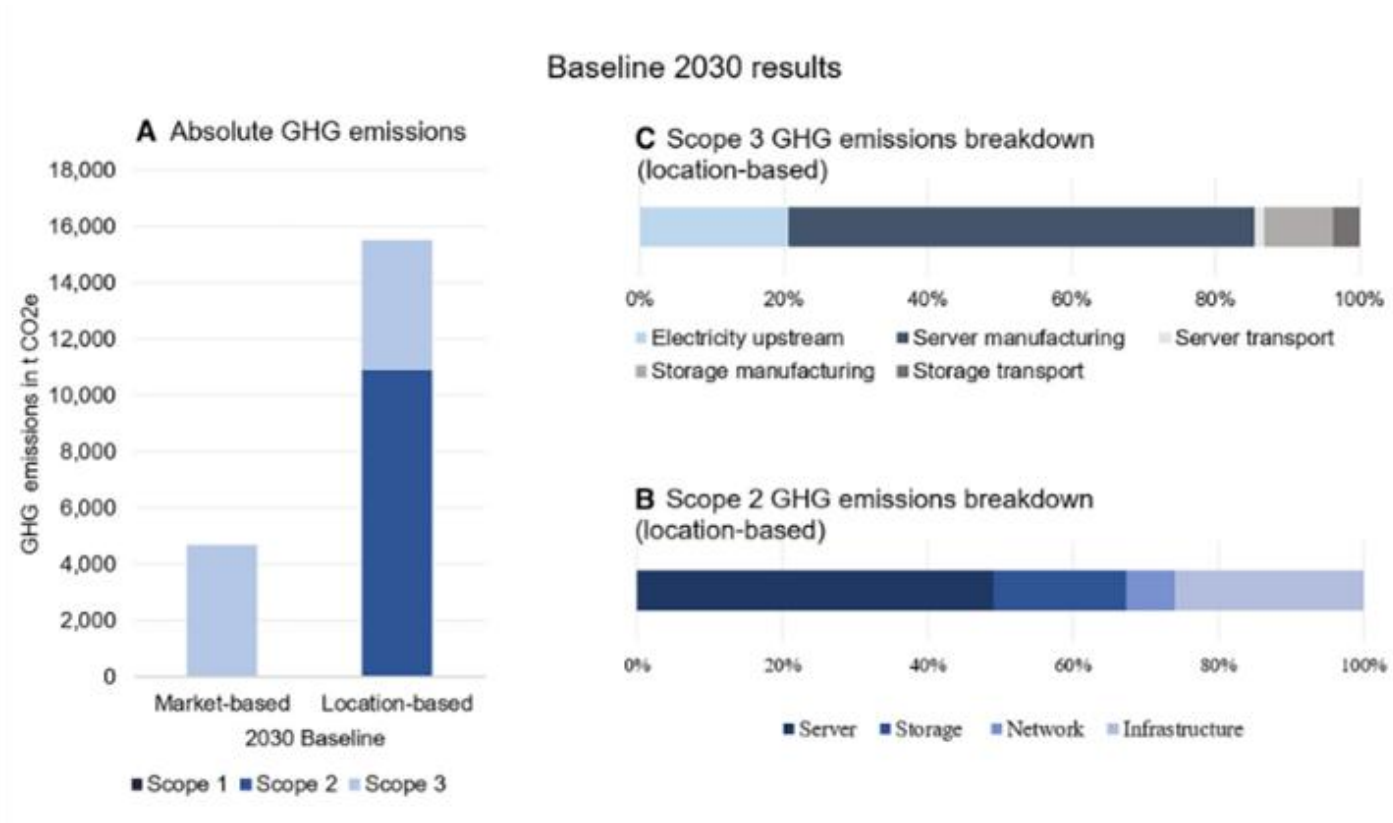
Table A1. Projections to 2030 of potential power consumption for states with significant data center load in 2023 [4, 8, 9]

FORECASTED SCENARIOS: PROJECTIONS OF POTENTIAL POWER CONSUMPTION BY STATE (2023–2030)										
STATE	2023 Load		Low-growth Scenario (3.71%)		Moderate-growth Scenario (5%)		High-growth Scenario (10%)		Higher-growth Scenario (15%)	
	MWh/y	% of Total State Electricity Consumed (%EC)	MWh/y	% of Total State Electricity Consumed (%EC)	MWh/y	% of Total State Electricity Consumed (%EC)	MWh/y	% of Total State Electricity Consumed (%EC)	MWh/y	% of Total State Electricity Consumed (%EC)
Illinois	7,450,176	5.48%	9,614,151	6.53%	10,483,145	7.08%	14,518,285	9.54%	19,781,455	12.56%

# Pollution & Health



- About 1.4% of global greenhouse gas emissions in 2020 originate from the information and communication technology sector, of which 16% are attributable to data centers. (Aslan et al., 2025)
- The current administration is proposing as part of the “Winning the Race: America’s AI Action Plan” to:
  - “Expedite environmental permitting by streamlining or reducing regulations promulgated under the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act, and other relevant related laws.”
- EPA: Rescission of the Greenhouse Gas Endangerment Finding and Motor Vehicle Greenhouse Gas Emission Standards Under the Clean Air Act



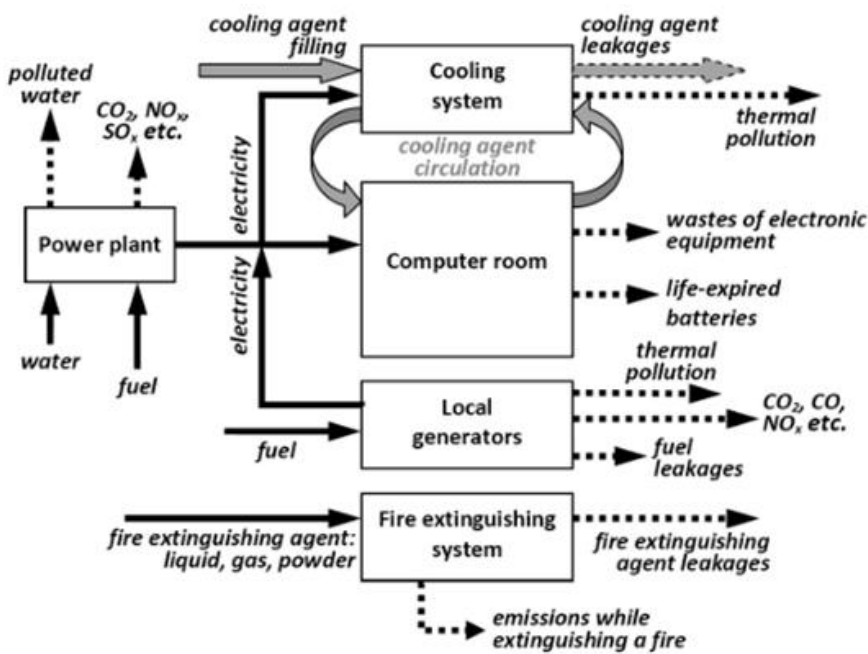
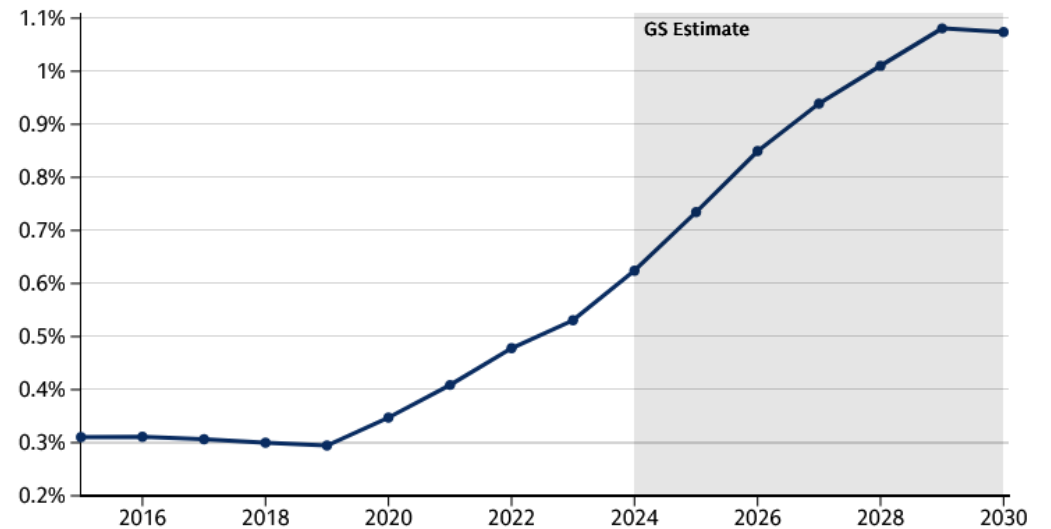
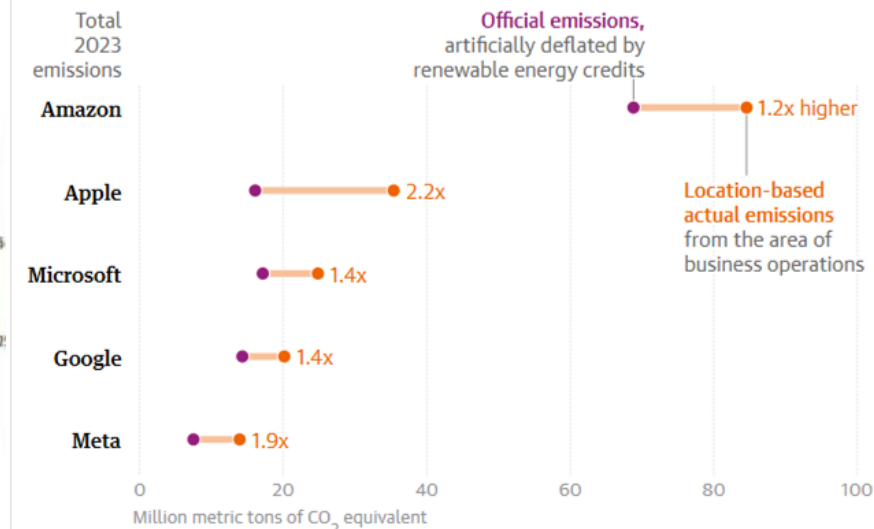


Fig. 1. Data center main resources, emissions and wastes.

DATA CENTER EMISSIONS AS % of 2022 GLOBAL ENERGY EMISSIONS

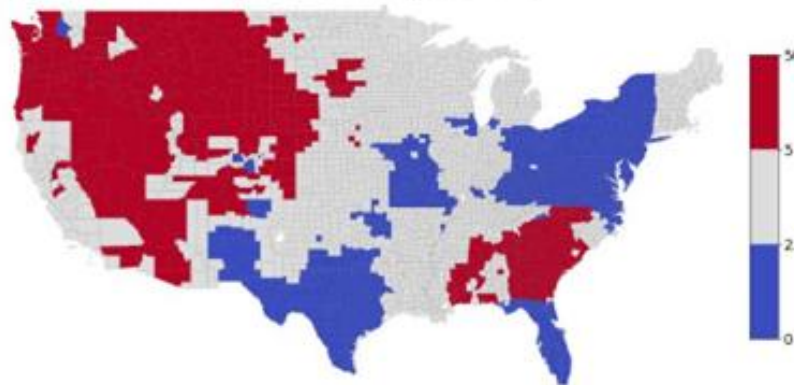


The gap between tech companies' official and actual emissions



Guardian graphic. Source: Various company reports. Note: Google and Microsoft do not make their location-based scope 3 figures available – their official numbers were used instead. Apple only provides a partial location-based scope 3 number. All three firms' total emissions are likely understated.

(A) Water consumption intensity (L/kWh)



(B) GHG emission intensity (kg/kWh)



Figure 5.10. Water consumption and GHG emission intensity factors of electricity use by county.

Semenov, A., & Oganessian, E. (2021). Data centers environmental impact assessment features. *E3S Web of Conferences*, 311, 04007. <https://doi.org/10.1051/e3sconf/202131104007>

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Shehabi, A.; Newkirk, A.; Smith, S.; Hubbard, A.; Lei, N.; Siddik, M., et al. (2024). 2024 United States Data Center Energy Usage Report. Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory. Report #: LBNL-2001637.

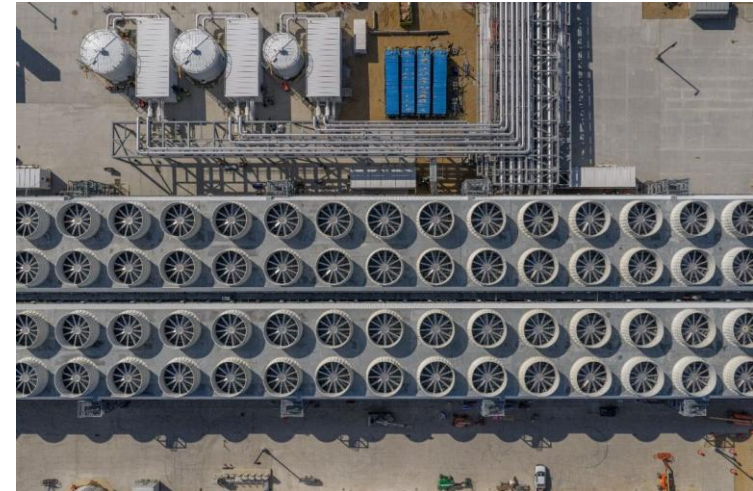
<http://dx.doi.org/10.71468/P1WC7Q> Retrieved from <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/32d6m0d1>

# Industry- What is being done to mitigate the impact?

## Companies have

- Stayed committed to climate pledges - Invest in AI to get a chance at better outputs and long-term environmental impact by 2030 (Google, Microsoft, and Meta)
- Implemented unique contracts and funding models
  - OpenAI Stargate, “commit to paying our own way on energy,” working with utilities and contributing to grid upgrades
- Invested in research on infrastructure and technical equipment
  - Chips, Racks, etc.
  - Innovative water cooling

There are concerns about potential greenwashing and lack of transparency. Additionally, community voices are rising in opposition as questions about the expected value of the data centers and this technology start impacting policies and policy makers.



Aerial view of part of the closed loop liquid cooling system at the Microsoft Fairwater datacenter in Wisconsin.

Source: Microsoft

# What is being done to mitigate the impact? Technical Side of things



- As of right now, clean energy cannot meet all the needs of data centers. They rely heavily on fossil fuels power plants.
  - Interest in small modular reactors (SMRs). However, these SMRs remain largely theoretical, with no commercially viable models yet in operation. (Green & Nguyen, 2025)
- Heat Waste Recoveries
  - Produces power by utilizing the heat energy lost to the surroundings from thermal processes, at no additional fuel input
  - Over 70 data centers worldwide, with an additional 12+ under construction. (Latif et al., 2025)
- Sustainable Manufacturing & E-waste Management
  - 6R concept for promoting green manufacturing technologies which is reduce, reuse, recover, redesign, remanufacture and recycle
- Sustainable Computing
  - Field Programmable Gate Arrays (FPGAs)
- Closed-loop Cooling Systems
  - Enable the reuse of both recycled wastewater and freshwater, allowing water supplies to be used multiple times.

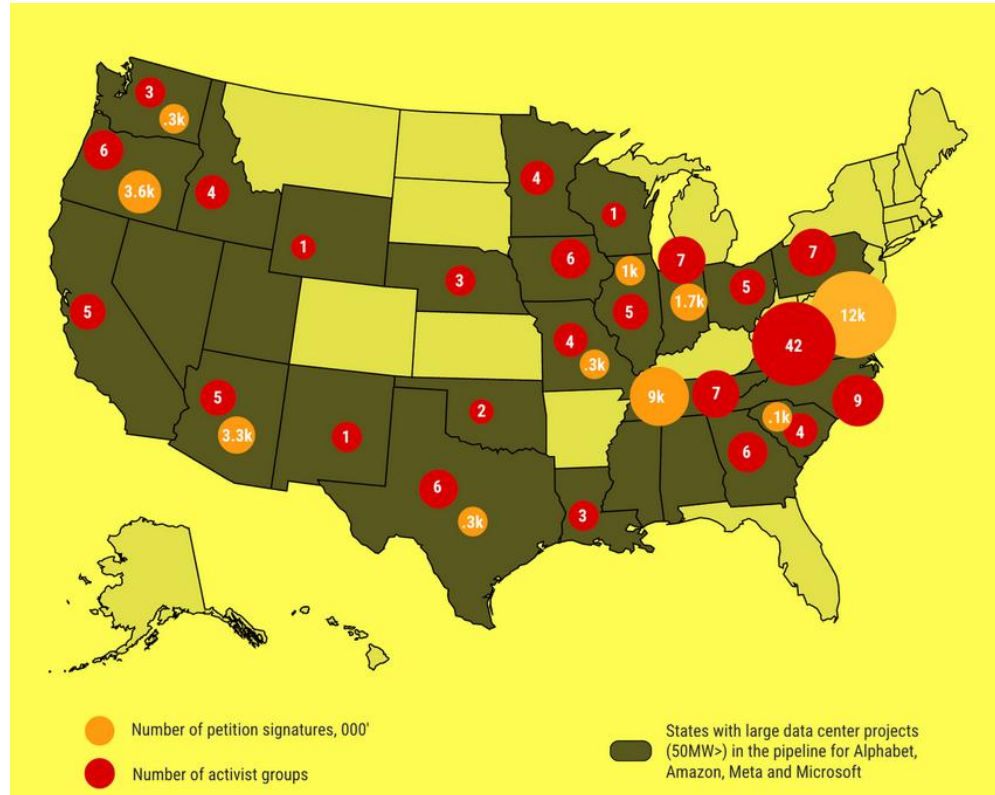


# Business, Government, & Community Response

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# Community Response Across the US



- Communities in Indiana have pushed back on two different Data Center development project and have them either blocked or delayed.
  - Burns Harbor, Indiana (delay)
  - Chesterton, Indiana (blocked)

Politics

**Data center building boom stirs pushback in state and local politics**

By Natalie Brand

February 11, 2026 / 11:14 AM EST / CBS News

AP

U.S. NEWS

**Big Tech's fast-expanding plans for data centers are running into stiff community opposition**

**Massive data center plans in Van Buren Township move forward, despite pushback**

By Scott Wolchek and David Komer | Published February 12, 2026 7:14pm EST | Wayne County | FOX 2 Detroit |

FIRST ON NBC NEWS

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

**Gov. JB Pritzker to propose suspending tax incentives for data centers in Illinois**

Pritzker, seen as a potential Democratic presidential candidate, is set to call for a two-year pause on the incentives in his State of the State address Wednesday.

# Data Center Incentives: United States AI Action Plan



- **Executive Order 14141** (January 14, 2025)
- **DOE selected 4 sites** (July 24, 2025)
  - Idaho National Laboratory, Oak Ridge Reservation (TN), Paducah Gaseous Diffusion Plant (KY) and Savannah River Site (DC)
- **Pillar 1: Accelerate AI Innovation**
  - **Removing Red Tape and Onerous Regulation**
  - Ensure that Frontier AI Protects Free Speech and American Values
  - Encourage Open-Source and Open-Weight AI
  - **Enable AI Adoption**
  - Empower American Workers in the Age of AI
  - Support Next-Generation Manufacturing
  - **Invest in AI-Enabled Science**
  - Build World-Class Scientific Datasets
  - **Advance the Science of AI**
  - **Invest in AI Interpretability, Control, and Robustness Breakthroughs**
  - **Build an AI Evaluations Ecosystem**
  - Accelerate AI Adoption in Government
  - Drive Adoption of AI within the Department of Defense
  - **Protect Commercial and Government AI Innovations**
  - Combat Synthetic Media in the Legal System





# In the Business of Data Centers: Funding Aids

- **Accelerating Federal Permitting of Data Center Infrastructure | July 23, 2025**
  - **Policy and Purpose** - “...facilitate the rapid and efficient buildout of this infrastructure by **easing Federal regulatory burdens.**”
  - **Definition of “Data Center Project”** - a facility that requires greater than 100 megawatts (MW) of new load dedicated to AI inference, training, simulation, or synthetic data generation.
  - **Encouraging Qualifying Projects** - Secretary of Commerce, Director of the Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) and others, “shall launch an initiative to provide financial support for Qualifying Projects, which could include **loans and loan guarantees, grants, tax incentives, and offtake agreements.**”
  - **Revocation of Executive Order 14141** - Advancing United States Leadership in Artificial Intelligence Infrastructure



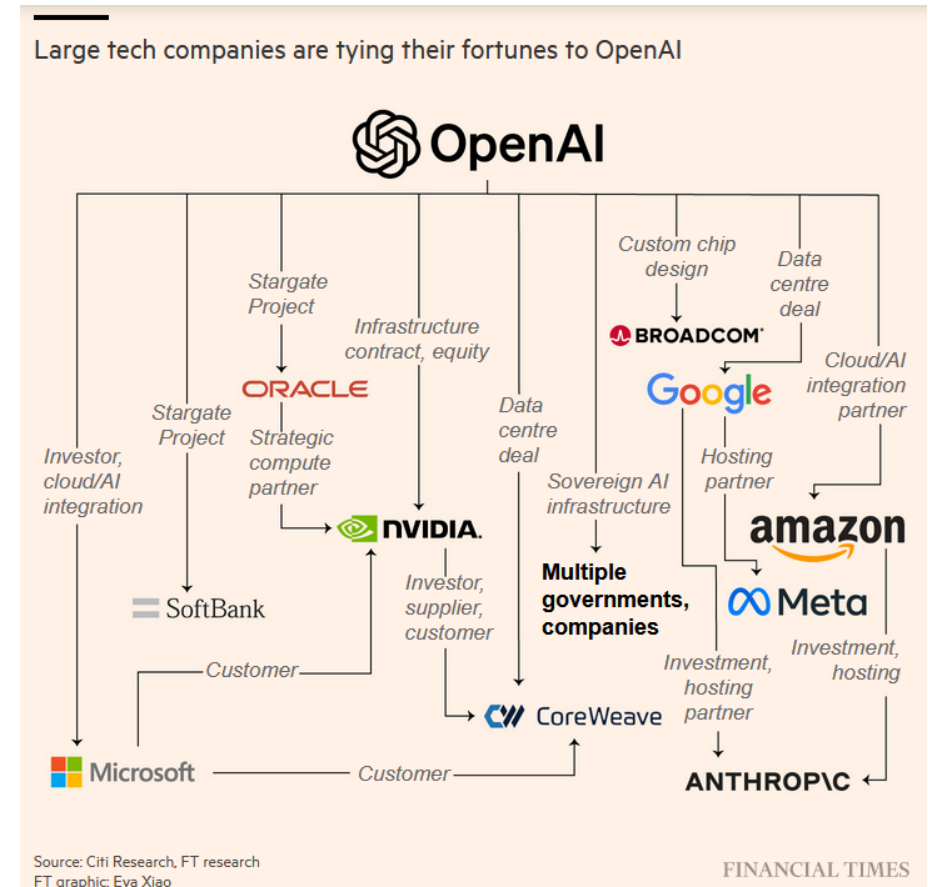
Source: Tax Foundation

Graphic: Rob Wile, Melinda Yao and Joe Murphy / NBC News



# In the Business of Data Centers: Investors

- Magnificent 7
  - Alphabet (Google), Amazon, Apple, Tesla, Meta, Microsoft, and Nvidia
- AI Interconnected Investment / Circularity
  - Microsoft, OpenAI, Anthropic, Google, Nvidia, Oracle, xAI, AMD, CoreWeave, Intel, SoftBank, Broadcom, Scale, and more!
  - Open AI \$1 trillion of AI deals (October 15, 2025)
  - Chips, equity, infrastructure, rentals, revenue sharing
- Technology
  - Meta, 30 data centers, Prometheus, 1-gigawatt site, in Ohio and Hyperion, 5-gigawatt site, in Louisiana
  - Meta and Nvidia bigger partnership deal - CPUs, GPUs, and Vera Rubin rack-scale systems (Meta already sources chips from AMD and Google)
  - Consumer technology prices rising as investment turns to AI and results in shortages



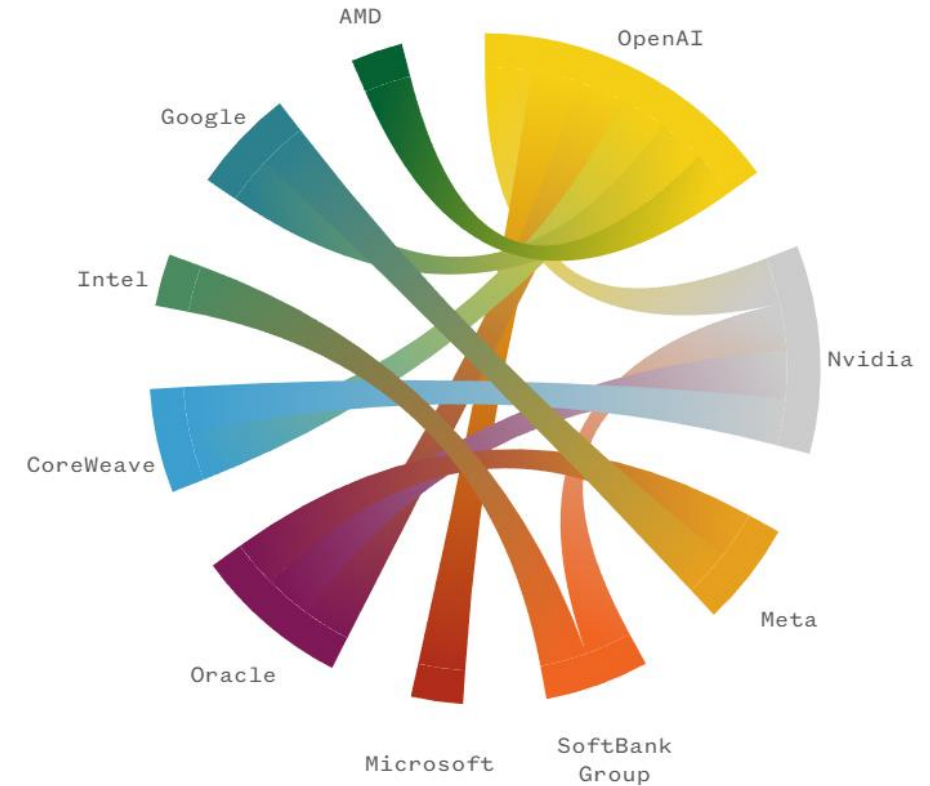
Source: CM Research, Financial Times Research | Creator: Eva Xiao

Deal list is not exhaustive

# In the Business of Data Centers: Stargate Project



- **The Stargate Project (January 2025)**
  - A network of data centers or “a factory of factories” led by OpenAI, Oracle, and SoftBank.
  - \$500 billion (\$100 billion so far)
  - 10 gigawatt investment
- **Who’s involved?**
  - U.S. Government (announcement) and private sector investment.
  - Equity funders include SoftBank, OpenAI, Oracle, and MGX.
  - Technology partners include Arm, Microsoft, and NVIDIA.
  - Crusoe Energy and CoreWeave for infrastructure (facility and cloud-computing)



Source: NBC News reports

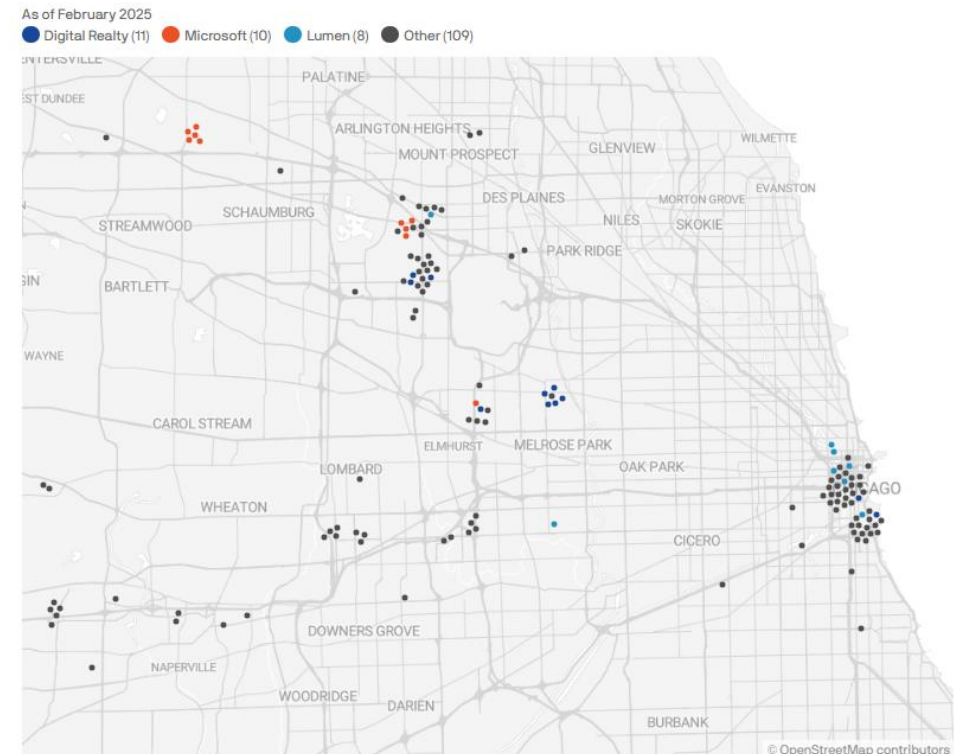
Graphic: Rob Wile, Melinda Yao and Joe Murphy / NBC News



# In the Business of Data Centers: Illinois

- Chicago is the 3rd largest data center location with ~164 operating data centers (228 data centers exist)
  - Grid concerns- Illinois Environmental Protection Agency, Illinois Power Agency, and Illinois Commerce Commission report energy shortfalls will begin in northern Illinois by 2029
- **Clean and Reliable Grid Affordability Act (CRGA)** address utility bills and power grid
  - Pressure to continue fossil fuel plants
- Illinois Department of Commerce & Economic Opportunity **Data Center Investment Tax Exemptions and Credits**
  - “Only Illinois, Nevada, Missouri and Washington itemize how much companies are getting by recipient...one Microsoft data center in Illinois received more than \$38 million in data center sales tax exemptions but created just 20 permanent jobs.”

Data centers in the Chicago metro area



Source: AXIOS Chicago | Map: Erin Davis/Axios Visuals

Data: Data Center Map; Note: Dots have been shifted to avoid overlaps and locations are approximate;

# Microsoft's Chicago Data Center



Microsoft's Chicago Data Center | Photographer: Ina Fried

# A few AI Industry influences on Illinois

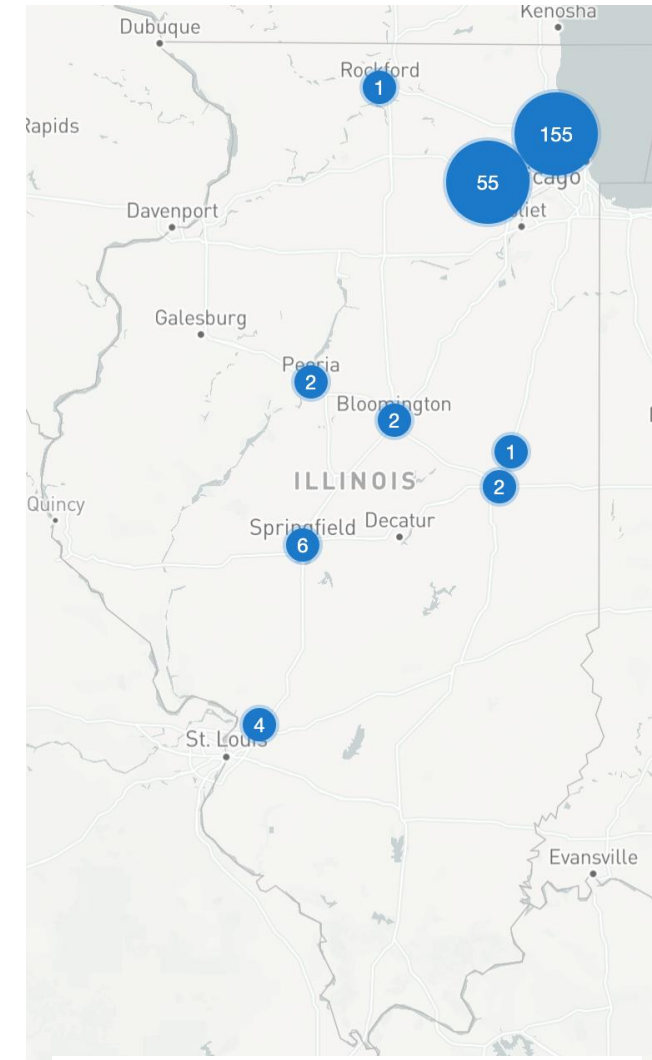


Environment and financial investments, expectations, and concerns:

- Regulations - [Illinois Protecting Our Water, Energy and Ratepayers Act \(POWER\) Act, SB4016](#), and [Executive Order 2026-01 Executive Order to Accelerate New Safe Power Generation in Illinois](#) (Bill)
- Critical resources- Great Lakes and Pennsylvania-New Jersey-Maryland (PJM) Interconnection (ComEd).
- In the news - Aurora, IL and Joliet, IL

Other considerations:

- Construction Industry
- Data Center Moratoriums
- Patterns in the data center industry's rising interest of access to power grids, different types of energy, and rural land
- What are the short-term and long-term earnings and costs?



**Illinois Data Centers**



# Library Resources

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## LibGuides

- [Generative AI for Research](#): This guide for researchers contains guidance over how and when to responsibly engage with AI during the research process.
- [Introduction to Generative AI](#): This guide is a general overview and introduction to generative AI technology for instructional, professional, and personal learning.
- [Illinois Water Supply Information](#): This guide includes information resources from the state and federal government, news sources, and library holdings, including digital collections.



# Thank You



Any Questions?

Access slides at <https://go.illinois.edu/AINWPA>

Contact info:

Celenia - [celeniag@illinois.edu](mailto:celeniag@illinois.edu)

Emily Benton - [ebenton3@illinois.edu](mailto:ebenton3@illinois.edu)

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