RACHEL CARSON COUNCIL

Fact Sheet

Data Center Expansion: What Does It Mean for Communities?

BACKGROUND

In 2025, data centers cost the United States about **$25 billion in pollution and health costs**.[1] They used approximately 5% of the nation's total energy output, mainly for Artificial Intelligence activities, with a forecast to increase by 12% every year. In some states, the air pollution damage outweighed the data centers' regional GDP contributions. The construction and operation of these growing data centers are causing significant harm to surrounding communities with lasting impacts on the environment.

This issue is further compounded by President Trump's 2025 Executive Order "Accelerating Federal Permitting of Data Center Infrastructure," which directs various national agencies to support rapid buildout and ease federal regulatory burdens by providing financial support, streamlining permitting, and expediting environmental reviews. The Trump Administration's continued backing for construction has made it difficult for lawmakers to successfully implement state or national legislation pausing new builds.

STATE-LEVEL POLICY LANDSCAPE

As of May 2026, at least **11 states** have proposed legislation to "restrict or ban data center development" in an effort to quell dangers and conduct further research into the true impacts to water usage, air quality, and energy consumption.[2] In Maine, state lawmakers passed an 18-month moratorium on large data centers that was vetoed by Governor Janet Mills. A similar bill was proposed in the Georgia General Assembly by Representative Ruwa Romman.

In Mississippi, the NAACP, Southern Environmental Law Center, and Earth Justice are suing Elon Musk's xAI for adding additional unpermitted gas turbines to an illegal powerplant that is considered a "major source of pollution" by the EPA. This violation of Clean Air Act regulations are increasing health risks for families in the majority-Black and rural regions of North Mississippi and Memphis. The American Lung Association gave DeSoto and Shelby counties an "F" for ozone pollution that is contributing to cases of asthma, respiratory disease, heart problems, and certain cancers.

7 IN 10

Americans oppose local construction of data centers[4].

46%

of Americans are highly worried about the environmental impacts of AI Data centers, citing multiple concerns.

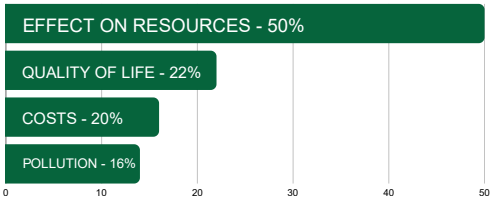

FIGURE 1:
The majority of American voters oppose the construction of AI data centers in their communities.

Voters across the United States are expressing opposition towards the construction of AI data centers in their communities. A poll conducted in March 2026 by the Washington Post found that only 35% of Virginian voters would be comfortable with the construction of new data centers in their community and 59% of voters said the projects were negatively affecting the local environment.[3] Additionally, a national survey by Gallup in March 2026 revealed that **"7 in 10 Americans oppose local construction of AI data centers"**.[4] Forty-six percent of respondents indicated high levels of worry about the environmental impact of data centers, listing concerns on resource usage, quality-of-life disruptance, and pollution/contamination (**Figure 1**).

FEDERAL-LEVEL POLICY LANDSCAPE

Federal legislation will be an important next step to regulating the unprecedented impacts of data centers on the environment and national health. In the Senate, Senator Bernie Sanders proposed a moratorium on data center construction in March 2026 to create time for lawmakers to create strong, federal guardrails for AI.[5] The goal is to ensure the protection of the environment and disadvantaged communities from the AI boom, as well as curb data centers' harmful effects to the climate and job displacement.

INITIAL LEGISLATION AS OF THE 119TH CONGRESS

In the House, 3 bills sent to the Energy and Commerce Committee stand out as models for early AI guardrails at the national level.

- **H.R. 7858: Data Center Community Impact Act**
  - Proposed by Rep. Watson Coleman out of New Jersey, this bill requires the Secretary of Energy to conduct a federal study on the effect of data centers pollution on often overlooked communities. Communities of color and low-income are disproportionately impacted by large-scale infrastructure projects, so this bill aims to act as a step toward ensuring the federal government is safeguarding public health in all communities.
- **H.R. 6983: PRICE Act**
  - The Preventing Rate Inflation on Consumer Energy, proposed by Rep. Rob Menendez (NJ) and Rep. Greg Casar (TX), will require all US data centers to generate their own electricity, with 75-100% of the electricity generated from clean energy sources (solar, wind, battery, green hydrogen, hydropower, geothermal). The PRICE Act aims to reduce that impact and reduce pressures on local water systems.
- **H.R. 6984: Data Center Transparency Act**
  - Proposed by Rep. Rob Menendez (NJ) and Rep. Greg Casar (TX), this act requires the Administrator of the Energy Information Administration to conduct bi-annual reports on energy consumption, air quality, and water quality of data centers. Much of the electricity used to power data centers comes from fossil fuels which increase emissions and worsen air quality in neighboring communities. The Data Transparency Act works to measure those effects to inform future legislative guardrails on data center production.

ENDNOTES

1. Muller, Nicholas (2026), [Measuring the Impact of Data Centers in the United States Economy: Monetary Damage from Air Pollution and Greenhouse Gas Emissions] (https://www.nber.org/papers/w35100)
2. Daher and Gold (2026), [These states don't want data centers in their backyards] (https://www.axios.com/2026/04/05/data-centers-midterms-state-bans-bills-ai)
3. Halper, et al. (2026), [In this U.S. hot spot for data centers, voters have turned against them] (https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2026/04/15/data-centers-poll-virginia/)
4. Jones, Jeffrey M. (2026), [Americans Oppose AI Data Centers in Their Area] (https://news.gallup.com/poll/709772/americans-oppose-data-centers-area.aspx)
5. Noor, Dharna (2026), [Bernie Sanders and AOC introduce bill to pause building of new datacenters] (https://www.sanders.senate.gov/in-the-news/bernie-sanders-and-aoc-introduce-bill-to-pause-building-of-new-datacenters/)