The Alaska Center
OUR HOME, OUR FUTURE

DATA CENTERS ON OUR TERMS: IMPACTS AND POLICY CONSIDERATIONS FOR DEVELOPMENT IN ALASKA

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This whitepaper was prepared by staff of The Alaska Center with input from partner organizations and experts. The Alaska Center is a nonprofit organization working to engage, empower, and elect Alaskans to stand up for our clean air and water, healthy communities, and a strong democracy. While this document lays out potential areas of concern and policies to consider, this is not comprehensive of all issues with data centers, and The Alaska Center retains the right to oppose any data center proposal on a case-by-case basis.

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Executive Summary

While data centers have existed for decades, the recent boom in Artificial Intelligence (AI) has resulted in an exponential increase in development. Government officials in Alaska have actively been courting data centers from large tech companies like Meta, Amazon, and Microsoft.

Communities across the country are asking hard questions about the impacts of data centers on local residents. **AI data centers can put significant strain on local resources**: from depleting water supplies to increasing electric bills. These harms are often borne by residents and local governments - not by the tech industry. In Alaska, data center development may offer an opportunity to balance the setbacks of load decline. Warmer winters, out-migration, and other factors have left our largest grid with excess energy capacity and fewer consumers to share system costs. A right-sized data center could provide opportunities to strengthen grid infrastructure and reliability in a best-case scenario.

This whitepaper lays out some of the potential impacts of data center development, with a focus on the environment, public health, and economics. It then covers a number of policy opportunities for mitigating risks and maximizing benefits for Alaskans. We hope that this document can be a resource in understanding and asking important questions as data center proposals are presented in Alaska.

Key Questions to Ask about Data Center Proposals:

- What amount of energy will this data center require? What generation source will it come from?
- Will this data center be connected to an existing grid or create a new microgrid?
- Will the data center developer pay for new generation sources or transmission upgrades?
- How much onsite energy storage will the data center build and maintain itself?
- How much water is required for cooling or other uses, and what water source(s) will be used?
- What percentage of the water does the developer expect to discharge back to the water source?
- How often will water testing occur and be reported to local governments and communities?
- Are there any water intensive industries (like agriculture) in the development area, and if so, how will water be allocated?
- How will increased water demand impact local wildlife (i.e. salmon) and their habitats?
- How close to a residential area is the proposed development?
- Who will receive energy first in the event of a power outage or shortfall?
- Does energy prioritization apply the same way during emergency events?
- Can current infrastructure contend with a new peak demand load?
- Is the developer prepared to walk away from a proposal if the community does not consent?
- How can we ensure that new jobs developed by data centers employ Alaskans?
- How can we ensure that new jobs from data centers offer fair compensation and economic benefits for our local economies?

Key Resources:

- Examples of Additional Data Center Laws and Regulations
- Additional Questions for Lawmakers
- Water Usage Calculator

I. Environmental and Health Impacts of Data Centers

A. Data Centers Use Significant Energy - Primarily Relying on Fossil Fuels

In 2024, data centers accounted for four percent of total electricity consumption in the United States. This level of demand is expected to double, if not triple, by 2030. The majority of energy consumed by data centers is used to power servers and store information, but significant energy is also required to regulate the temperature of data centers to prevent overheating.

The total amount of energy required for a single data center can vary significantly depending on its type and size. Hyperscale data centers, which power artificial intelligence, are similar to a warehouse in size and can consume roughly the same amount of electricity as 100,000 households annually. Newer data centers under construction may use 20 times that much.

To put these numbers in local context, the Railbelt grid serves the vast majority of households in Alaska with a peak load of approximately 750 MW. Hyperscale data centers require a minimum of 100 MW of energy.

Currently, about 40 percent of data center energy nationwide is provided by natural gas, and about 56 percent comes from fossil fuels more broadly. Burning fossil fuels is a key driver of air pollution. Said pollution is linked with serious health risks, including asthma, cancer, heart disease, and premature death. Fossil fuels are also the largest contributor to climate change. The impacts on health and climate-related catastrophes from fossil fuel use disproportionately impact low-income communities and communities of color.

Supporting industries, like data centers, that rely on fossil fuels is not without cost to public welfare. These externalities must be factored into decision making processes.

B. Data Centers Require Large Amounts of Fresh Water

In addition to energy, data centers require large amounts of fresh water in order to cool computers and prevent servers from overheating. Depending on the size and scope of each data center, the amount of water pumped into each facility on a daily basis can highly vary. A medium data center can consume 300,000 gallons of water a day - the equivalent of about 1,000 households in the United States.

Proposals for data centers should clearly define where water will be drawn from, and any and all potential impacts to residents as well as the environment. If groundwater or local bodies of water are being utilized for the purpose of maintaining a data center, it is important that the government has a plan in place for how these resources will be managed and restored.

Without proper consideration for resource allocation, other communities in the U.S. have experienced significant water stress. After Meta constructed a massive data center in Georgia, locals found their taps empty and their water filled with sediment. Homeowners were stuck purchasing bottled water or paying to have wells replaced.

In many cases, data centers fail to disclose how much water they use. It's estimated that less than one-third of data centers track their water usage because there is no requirement to do so. Without this transparent information it is difficult to plan for future economic developments, or address potential droughts or water shortages.

In addition to air pollution, data centers also pose a threat to Alaska's waters. Data centers that utilize evaporative cooling systems have been linked to the introduction of harmful chemicals in surrounding water systems. These cooling systems release tremendous amounts of water vapor treated with chemicals including biocide, corrosion inhibitors, and heavy metals. While some of these risks can be mitigated through technology, it is very important that prospective data centers are held to a high standard when it comes to safeguarding our water and environment. In some cases, data centers do not discharge wastewater to public utilities for treatment, but rather, release wastewater into nearby bodies of water where pollution and impacts may go unchecked.

Depending on which waters are involved in a given proposal, there may be local, state, or federal regulations to navigate. Transparency, proper planning, and the ability to monitor water quality, can mitigate localized impacts, and offer communities some assurance.

C. Additional Environmental and Health Concerns

Data centers are well-known to generate high levels of electronic waste, or e-waste. The routine replacement and upgrading of equipment generates high levels of refuse. If e-waste is improperly recycled or disposed of, it can leach a number of chemicals hazardous to both people and wildlife. While some population-dense areas in Alaska are able to dispose of e-waste locally, ultimately, these waste products must be consolidated, and shipped to the lower 48 for processing. This system of removal is costly and carbon intensive.

Additionally, data centers generate constant noise pollution. Neighbors in one Chicago community with a data center sought to fine their local data center for constantly breaking a noise ordinance. Constant noise pollution can have serious adverse health effects. According to Net Zero Insights, "chronic exposure causes sleep disturbance, headache, hearing loss, elevated stress hormone levels, hypertension, anxiety, and even cardiovascular risks." Noise pollution can also impact communication systems between local wildlife and disrupt migration patterns. This could present serious implications for communities in Alaska dependent on subsistence hunting or wildlife tourism.

II. Economic and Consumer Impacts

A. Increasing Costs of Electricity

Hyperscale data centers have increased the cost of wholesale electricity significantly, with costs up as much as 267% over five years in regions where they are developed. That increase in cost is a result of new transmission and generation being built to power and connect data centers.

Developers have paid for some upgrades, but much of that financial burden is being passed on to local consumers who are facing one rate hike after another. PJM Interconnection's own CEO confirmed this connection, stating that "Prices are up because of tightening supply and demand driven by generator retirements and data center growth," in a market where electricity rates have already increased 23-40% over five years. Electric bills in the PJM region may see an increase of an additional 60% by 2030.

One less discussed but important consideration in managing cost increases is the threat of overbuilding (i.e., stranded assets). Overbuilding occurs when anticipated demand does not materialize, and utilities are left with excess energy. This can be incredibly costly for communities and utilities that pour resources into upgrades needed for data center development. Georgia Power Co., for example, has proposed $15 billion in upgrades over the next six years in order to meet demands for data center growth in the state. If the utility has overestimated demand, and overbuilds infrastructure, ratepayers will be stuck with high bills for years to come.

Given Alaska's short construction season and significant cost of transportation, our state has higher costs when it comes to building the infrastructure necessary to bring data centers online. Our largest grid already has a need for upgraded transmission without any massive new energy draws connecting to it.

It is also critical to consider the limited supplies of cheap natural gas in Alaska, and the implications of bringing a new major energy consumer online. Cook Inlet is facing an imminent natural gas shortage. If a prospective data center were to draw down what limited local energy supplies we have left at our disposal, Alaskans would be forced to import expensive gas on an accelerated timeline - raising costs for most residents.

Lawmakers must consider the true cost of data centers for Alaskans, and ensure that developers are held accountable.

B. Energy Prioritization

Data centers must be kept running 24 hours a day in order to serve their intended purpose, and disruptions to service can result in costly losses for tech companies. In many states, serious concerns have been raised over limited capacity to keep the power on for local communities when data center power is prioritized. The limits of flexibility are of particular concern during days when utilities experience peak load demand (typically, the hottest and coldest days of the year). In a best-case scenario, data centers could provide stability by using power when demand is at its lowest, flattening the curve and avoiding putting new strain on the grid.

PJM Interconnection, the nation's largest grid operator, has warned that communities may face blackouts due to energy shortfalls. PJM attempted to address this issue by requiring data centers to provide their own energy or face shutoffs, but just a few weeks later the plan was walked back significantly.

While PJM's attempt to integrate flexible solutions failed, finding answers to grid stress, including back up generation is an essential process. Data centers should be encouraged to offset emissions from gas-fueled options whenever possible. In San Jose, California, for example, one of [Microsoft's data centers] has committed to buying "renewable natural gas" from rotting food waste to offset their fossil fuel usage.

Energy access is a public health issue, particularly during cold winter months in Alaska. If data centers, medical institutions, and residential households receive their energy from the same grid, contingency plans must be established that prioritize the safety and health of Alaskans over big tech.

C. Data Centers May Not Create Long-Term Jobs

Data centers represent large investments by tech companies in both construction costs and time and labor costs, but that does not inherently translate to economic benefit for local communities. Over the last several years, many states have sought to attract data centers with the hope of generating jobs and tax revenue - primarily from property taxes. Alaskan leadership should be realistic about the size of these benefits, and their impact on local economies in both the short and long-term.

Initially, the construction of a new data center creates a number of temporary jobs. In Alaska, these jobs may also be seasonal, depending on the location of a potential future data center, and the ability to work outdoors during the winter season.

Unfortunately, data centers may not create a high number of long-term jobs. Apple built a $1 Billion data center in North Carolina that resulted in less than a hundred permanent jobs. While data centers are labor intensive to build, they are not as labor intensive to operate.

We can and should ensure that any new jobs created by the tech industry prioritize hiring Alaskans. Moreover, these jobs should receive fair wages compatible with the high cost of living in-state. These provisions will help ensure that some economic growth stays within Alaska's communities where it is critically needed.

Any public benefits from new jobs must be balanced with the significant resource consumption of data centers. Both the construction phase and operation phase can put significant pressure on local resources and infrastructure.

III. Policy Opportunities for Data Center Development in Alaska

A. Energy Tariffs as a Mechanism for Protecting Ratepayers & the Environment

Energy tariffs are pricing structures set by utility companies and filed with the Regulatory Commission of Alaska for approval. One way of preemptively addressing infrastructure challenges brought on by increased load demand and upgrade requirements is to establish specific pricing requirements for large energy users. By requiring that data centers pay their fair share of costs, we can help protect ratepayers from increases in utility bills.

In 2025, Oregon passed the POWER Act, which created a new classification of user for data centers and other users that required more than 20MW of power. This initial classification then allowed them to set new standards for these large scale users, including a 10-year contract for minimum purchases which will protect ratepayers from footing the bill for any overestimation of power needs.

The design of tariffs can also include exit fees, economic development payments to benefit low and moderate income communities, and co-location of clean energy. Tariff design is also an opportunity to require that data centers supply their own backup generation in order to prevent blackouts for household consumers. For example, Ohio's Data Center Tariff settlement agreement created a requirement that data centers installed and maintained sufficient generation to instantly curtail load in order to prevent reliability or safety concerns. Accounting for backup power generation is a particular point of concern for data centers given that they are required to run around the clock.

In some cases, energy tariffs have been used to encourage the deployment of renewable energy. Shifting some responsibility for the construction and upkeep of renewable energy generation onto data centers helps control their carbon footprint and increases local generation capacity. In Wisconsin, for example, a 2025 Data Center Bill would both set rates for large-scale customers and require large consumers to fund proportional costs of adding new renewable energy sources to the grid.

Energy tariffs are also an appropriate mechanism for setting prioritization standards to ensure that residential households do not face blackouts in a crisis. This can come in the form of curtailment plans and/or through flexibility requirements that data centers bring their own energy storage to use when capacity is limited, rather than drawing from the grid.

Smart Electric Power Alliance (SEPA) maintains a database of emerging large-load tariffs.

B. Public Input & Community Benefit Agreements as Mechanisms

Community participation is a key resource when it comes to identifying and addressing potential problems related to data centers. Community members must be consulted early and often, and have a meaningful opportunity to consent. Developers must remain willing to walk away from a site if the community does not consent to a project.

First and foremost, Tribal consultation and consent must be a priority for any development in Alaska. Proposals that go through the FERC permitting process have specific requirements for consultation of Tribal governments around proposed projects. However, Alaska has an opportunity to further commit to not move any projects forward without free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) from Tribes in the region. Consent is only valid if the community has a meaningful right to say no to the project.

> At the heart of FPIC is good-faith consultation, which includes: "(i) willingness to engage in a process and availability to meet at reasonable times and frequency on the part of all parties; (ii) sharing of information that is accessible and understandable to the Indigenous Peoples, disseminated in a culturally-appropriate manner and in the local language(s)/dialect(s); (ii) commitment that Indigenous Peoples have been fully informed of project impacts affecting their rights; (iv) use of mutually acceptable procedures for negotiation; (v) willingness to change initial positions and modify offers where possible; and (vi) provision of sufficient time for the Indigenous Peoples to consider information using their customary internal processes."

As soon as any specific locations of a proposal are identified,d a strong community engagement plan should be established. There are a number of formal agreements communities can enter with data centers including: Community Benefit Agreements, Good Neighbor Agreements, Host Community Agreements, and Development or Franchise Agreements. **States can set requirements for developers to engage in specific community outreach, or go as far as requiring a Community Benefit Agreement (CBA).**

A CBA is a legally binding contract between a community group and a developer. These agreements can be used to generate community support for projects while ensuring that important protections are followed. In respect to data centers, communities have entered into CBAs to address concerns previously outlined, and to increase community equitability, as well as ensure basic levels of transparency into future operations. CBAs are successful when multiple and diverse community stakeholders are able to participate in negotiations.

In its CBA guide, Headwaters Economics mentions different kinds of benefits communities can receive and endowment funds for long-term benefits. Columbia University's CBA database is categorized into different types of projects, and Rewiring America outlines how data centers could invest in electrification to benefit entire communities and help balance increasing energy costs.

One example of a provision in a CBA could be a requirement for data centers to provide neighboring or nearby homes with weatherization improvements, or home-efficiency upgrades. These upgrades can make a critical difference on bills during winter months, and can take many forms including heat pump installation, window and door repairs, and added insulation among others. Energy efficient homes are an asset to the grid. Reducing demand from lost energy generation creates capacity, and this adds up if several homes are receiving investments. This potential scenario happens to create a win-win scenario for residents and tech companies.

Several states require a CBA process for certain energy projects, and this could be another mechanism to ensure communities get the maximum benefit for any development taking place in Alaska.

C. Water Restrictions and Monitoring Requirements

In order to ensure that the impacts from data centers on local water sources are controlled, the state of Michigan currently encourages the formation of a Water Users Committee (WUC). This committee, composed of registered water users and government officials, is used to inform long-term planning when large scale users, like a data center, make large-quantity water withdrawals. This type of public involvement can help improve transparency, buy-in, and act as a signaling tool for potential negative impacts.

Guardrails on water impacts to residents and the environment are particularly important as the Clean Water Act is currently being dismantled federally. At the moment, wetlands and seasonal riverways are at risk of losing long-standing protections. For communities in Alaska, particularly rural communities that rely on natural water resources, the inability to access clean water from streams, for example, may put demand on other potable water supplies. This may create undue stress on drinking water sources, and consequently raise rates on potable water.

It is possible for data centers to curtail some of the problems associated with high water demand through technological innovation. By utilizing closed loop systems, air cooling, and other methods, data centers can significantly decrease their need for water. Both rainwater and recycled wastewater (aka "purple pipe" water), and non-potable water use can also help limit reliance on fresh water sources. Before considering these alternatives, feasibility assessments based on location must be performed.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is important that future data center development in our state meets the needs of Alaskans. Knowledge is power, and other states' experiences can help us understand what potential risks we are taking on by inviting data centers to set up shop in our communities. These risks can be mitigated through strong laws and regulations, but developers must ultimately answer to the communities in regions where they seek to build.

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