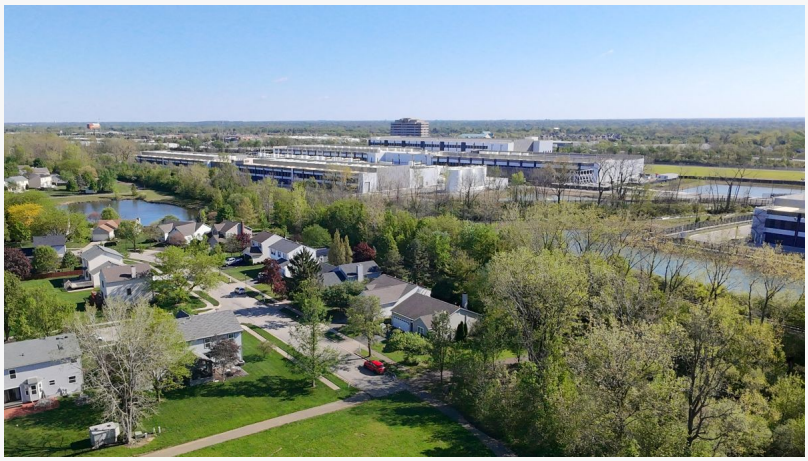
Save Ohio Parks research says AI data center buildout can work - if it runs on renewable energy

Statewide nonprofit has studied oil and gas fracking's health, environmental and public lands impacts since 2023



A 450 megawatt Amazon data center on Scioto-Darby Creek Road in Hilliard is 100 feet from homes in the Darby Glen neighborhood. Only some of the seven buildings planned for the site are pictured. (R. Kutzley photo)

COLUMBUS, OH, UNITED STATES, May 12, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Ohio has a unique opportunity to leverage the data center buildout to expand its leadership in carbon-free energy manufacturing, according to a new study, “From Demand Drivers to Development Partners: Data Centers that Work for Ohioans.” The research was conducted by Rachel Kutzley, a Save Ohio Parks governing board member.

“Ohio should capitalize on the economic opportunities of data centers while ensuring that their growth benefits local communities,” said Kutzley, who worked for a decade in U.S. foreign policy before returning to Ohio State University to earn a master’s degree in Environment and Natural Resources.

“Meeting the energy demand of data centers requires a more flexible and decentralized electric system. It will require massive investment – but with that investment comes an opportunity to modernize the grid and build a more resilient and sustainable energy system,” she said.

Among the study’s top findings are that restrictions on wind and solar energy projects for the past decade have cost Ohio more than 5.3 GW of generation capacity in projects denied or withdrawn, plus years of missed development as energy companies left for more favorable markets.

These include the nation’s most draconian wind-turbine setback law, passed as part of the 2014 budget bill, which drove 3.3 GW of wind development out of state, and Senate Bill 52 of 2021,

which so far has allowed 37 counties to ban wind and solar energy. Meanwhile, the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio (PUCO) has killed over 2,000 MW of solar projects outright.

American Electric Power (AEP) has reported 5.6 GW of data center interconnection requests as of March 2026. The data center energy crunch would not exist today had Ohio built out its renewable energy potential, Kutzley said.

“If data center investment can be channeled into tomorrow’s clean infrastructure and address ethical uses of artificial intelligence, the data center boom can benefit all Ohioans,” said Kutzley. “If data centers use fossil fuels for power generation, there are air pollution and health impacts from cradle to grave, including at the points of natural gas extraction, energy generation, and disposal of its toxic wastes.”

Recommendations

While the full report makes recommendations to Ohio local and rural governments considering approval and regulation of data center projects, many of its conclusions can be applied to communities nationwide. They include:

- Place a moratorium on data center approvals until comprehensive federal and state AI regulations are adopted. Prohibit the use of non-disclosure agreements and require public consultation in siting decisions.
- Require data centers to meet or offset their energy demand with 100 percent solar, wind, and energy storage, either co-located or off-site, by investing in utility-scale, community, or residential energy resources. Data centers building utility-scale gas-fired power plants on site will spew pollutants directly into neighborhoods throughout the 20- to 30-year life of the project.
- Ensure parity in state and local law among all sources of energy generation, with the same provisions for state control and local input for oil, gas, solar, wind, battery storage, geothermal, and biomass.
- Make tax benefits for data centers contingent upon the data center establishing energy and water efficiency measures; reporting publicly on energy and water use, including adherence to safe air emissions and water quality; or subsidizing residential energy efficiency upgrades, rooftop solar, and energy storage.
- Ensure large load users pay necessary grid modernization costs to support grid reliability.
- Require water efficiency measures and regular public reporting on water quality and use throughout the life of the data center.
- Require discharge water to be filtered and monitor discharge to ensure compliance.

Independent observers confirmed the recommendations of the Save Ohio Parks report.

“It’s well documented that toxic, radioactive wastewater remaining after extractive oil and natural gas fracking will never sparkle in the sun again,” said Lea Harper, director of Freshwater Accountability Project. “It can never be consumed by humans or livestock again. This study —

based on water quality concerns alone — provides energy solutions that will help maintain our drinking water quality and still participate in economic development efforts."

Ohio landscape

Ohio has over 200 data centers, the fifth-most in the country. Of that number, 137 data centers are concentrated in the Columbus region in Central Ohio, serving Amazon, Meta, Google, and other tech giants. An additional 77 data centers are planned or proposed in Ohio by 2030.

Data centers should be required to meet their energy needs with solar, wind, and battery storage, either by building large-scale plants or by investing in distributed energy resources like residential solar and batteries, according to the report.

Ohio is already a leading state in the carbon-free energy sector with First Solar in Perrysburg and Illuminate USA in Pataskala, two major solar manufacturers. It also has significant investments in battery cell manufacturing with General Motors, Honda and The Ohio State University.

In contrast, Ohio counties that have seen the most oil and gas extraction have experienced net employment and population loss since the fracking boom began in 2008. Every point in the fracking process entails significant environmental and social justice implications, from extraction to power generation to disposal of toxic, often radioactive gas and oil waste.

The data center buildout is creating a rush to plunder Ohio's public lands for gas to power them. So far in 2026, over 17,000 acres of Salt Fork State Park and Egypt Valley Wildlife Area have been nominated for fracking, with over half already approved. By contrast, only 1800 acres of public land were approved for fracking in all of 2025.

Growing opposition

House Bill 15, signed into law in 2025, allows data centers to fast-track state approval for major energy facilities – especially fracked gas plants – to provide power behind the meter, with no public notice, no public information session, no public hearing, and no consultation with local officials.

Shortly after the law went into effect, the state approved the largest fracked-gas fuel cell in North America to power an Amazon data center in Hilliard with no community consultation. The project will create 1.45 million pounds of carbon dioxide pollution per day, next to hundreds of homes, an elementary school, a park, and an animal shelter.

Growing public opposition to unrestricted data center growth has led to numerous local moratoriums on data center development, as well as a statewide constitutional ballot initiative that would ban data centers larger than 25 MW.

Save Ohio Parks is a statewide nonprofit organization dedicated to educating the public about the health, environmental and planet-warming harms of fracking Ohio state parks and public lands for natural gas. Kutzley joined its board in 2025.

Download the Save Ohio Parks white paper on data centers by visiting SaveOhioParks.org.

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