



Topic Starter Brief

RESOLVED: The United States federal government should enact a moratorium on hyperscale data center construction.

BACKGROUND

The Controversy: Over the past decade, cloud providers have clustered enormous facilities (like 50 to 100 megawatts) near cheap land where local government is permissive. States like Virginia, Wyoming, Oregon, and Utah encouraged this growth because data centers promised tax revenue and construction jobs.

But as AI-driven computation demand accelerated after 2020, utilities began warning that these loads were arriving faster than transmission upgrades could be built. Several jurisdictions have already paused or denied projects because they could not guarantee grid reliability or water availability. Other local communities have large anti-data center movements, often crossing party and other boundaries.

A federal moratorium would remove the option of companies simply finding the most willing and accommodating states or local jurisdictions and doubling down. It would give time for state and local regulations, and company self-regulation, to develop. Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez have proposed a legislative federal moratorium, but in the current political climate it's unlikely to get very far.

Supporters of a moratorium argue that the pace of construction has outstripped the capacity of public infrastructure. They point to concrete cases: Oregon's 2022 cooling-water disputes, Virginia's 2023 transmission bottlenecks, and the rising cost of grid expansions borne by ratepayers rather than tech firms. Moratorium advocates see the drive for ubiquitous data center placement as reckless, given the state of the U.S. power grid system. [Harvard's Electricity Law Initiative](#) Director Ari Peskoe has frequently asserted across energy analyses and expert commentary that "progress shouldn't outpace our grid's capacity" and that the nation's electrical networks face extreme strain and cannot easily sustain the rapid, uncontrolled load growth of data centers without systematic reform.

Moratorium advocates also see unchecked AI expansion as a driver of wealth inequality and environmental degradation. Dayvon Love, former high school and college debater and currently Director of Public Policy for the Baltimore advocacy group Leaders of a Beautiful Struggle, [described](#) the political battle over data centers this way: "The political contestation over data centers is not just a battle over the role of artificial intelligence (AI) in modern society, environmental regulations and local zoning. It's a manifestation of the next iteration of the global domination of white monopoly capital. The tech industry is pushing forward an agenda that centers the discourse of technological innovation as a guise for unprecedented wealth accumulation for tech billionaires. Similar to the robber barons of the late 19th



and early 20th century, industries like steel and the railroads became essential elements of a new highly industrialized world.”

Opponents of a moratorium emphasize that hyperscale facilities are now central to national competitiveness. Large-model training, logistics optimization, and biotech simulation all depend on abundant compute. They argue that a federal moratorium would disrupt private investment and push development to countries that are aggressively expanding capacity. This would not only hurt U.S. economic growth, but also surrender U.S. leadership in tech innovation and the shaping of standards around AI energy use. Exowatt Chief Data Center Officer Nic Bustamante [published](#) this exact sentiment in a company commentary addressing proposed federal/blanket data center construction bans, writing that a freeze “would not protect American workers, communities, or the environment. It would surrender American AI leadership”.

Opponents of a federal moratorium can also argue that states are enacting bans and are better equipped to do so. New York Governor Kathy Hochul enacted the nation's first statewide moratorium/pause on new large-scale/hyperscale data centers using 50 megawatts or more in July 2026. At the time, [she said](#): “I refuse to let those costs be passed on to New Yorkers who already pay too much for their utility bills.” State-by-state moratoria might be a better strategy to get to sustainability in data centers rather than forcing companies to decide whether to stay in the United States or relocate to any number of countries in the [geopolitical competition for data center development](#).

Researching the Main Clash Points: Students will get the clearest understanding of this topic by organizing their research around four areas: fiscal impacts, infrastructure burdens, environmental pressures, and long-term planning.

Media reporting is the fastest way to see how these issues show up in practice: national business and technology outlets cover industry expansion, while energy and climate desks report on grid strain, water use, and siting pressures.

Academics are also really important. Scholarly journals in energy systems, environmental science, and regional economics provide data on electricity demand, transmission congestion, cooling-water requirements, and emissions. Scholars also provide statistics and long-term trend analysis of impacts like poverty and climate change.

This is also a topic that gives students a rare and important opportunity to delve into legal literature. Law reviews explain federal–state authority, preemption, and how permitting frameworks work, and a lot more. Law review articles often read like debate cases and can provide powerful, well-warranted arguments on both sides of this domestic environmental issue.

Additionally, don't ignore advocacy groups, or think tanks. Sure, they're paid to make the arguments they make, but they're typically qualified to be doing so, and if your opponent wants to debate about bias, that's fine. Think-tank reports from groups like the Bipartisan Policy Center, Brookings, the Energy Policy Institute, and so on, publish extensively on the grid, climate, and calls for moratoria. Climate-focused



research, as well as groups concerned with water and drought, will help you understand how data centers fit into broader environmental issues and impact scenarios.

Finally, it's a rare opportunity to debate a topic so well-grounded in literature while also being an ongoing, high-profile controversy. This means debaters ought to regularly read the news around moratoria, AI development, water scarcity, small-town economies, and the other intersecting parts of this topic. Have fun and debate smart!



POSSIBLE AFFIRMATIVE/PRO ARGUMENTS

1. **Electrical Grid:** Hyperscale data centers add large, continuous loads to transmission systems already strained by electrification and aging infrastructure. A moratorium prevents new demand from outpacing grid upgrades, reducing congestion and preventing blackout and grid collapse impacts that verge on the apocalyptic..
2. **Water Shortages:** Many hyperscale facilities rely on evaporative cooling that consumes millions of gallons per day. In drought-prone regions, additional industrial withdrawals can accelerate aquifer depletion and force municipalities to tighten allocations. Hurting water supplies drives up food prices globally, causing a cacophony of price spike impact scenarios.
3. **Inequality:** Large data centers often cluster in lower-income or rural areas where land is cheaper and permitting is faster. Residents may face higher utility bills, increased noise, and land disruption while receiving few long-term jobs. A moratorium gives regulators time to evaluate whether siting patterns and cost burdens fall disproportionately on vulnerable communities.
4. **Environmental Harms:** Rapid hyperscale expansion increases electricity demand, often requiring additional fossil-fuel generation until renewable capacity and storage scale. Facilities also create heat islands, noise, and land-use impacts. A moratorium slows growth long enough for emissions planning, environmental review and cleaner grid integration.

POSSIBLE NEGATIVE/CON ARGUMENTS

1. **Regional Economies:** A moratorium would halt billions in planned investment tied to hyperscale projects, affecting construction employment, tax revenue, and local development agreements. Many regions have built budgets and infrastructure plans around expected data-center growth; pausing construction could disrupt those timelines and leave states without the economic activity they anticipated.
2. **Competitiveness, Research & Development:** Hyperscale facilities supply the computation needed for AI training, biotech modeling, logistics optimization, and advanced research. A moratorium slows expansion of national compute capacity, potentially limiting innovation and weakening U.S. positioning in global technology races where countries are rapidly scaling their own data-center infrastructure.
3. **State and Local Better:** States and municipalities already manage siting, permitting, and utility coordination for large industrial loads. A federal moratorium overrides these existing processes and may not reflect regional differences in grid capacity, water availability, or economic priorities. Local regulators often argue they are better positioned to evaluate project-specific impacts.
4. **Companies Go Abroad:** If U.S. construction pauses, firms may shift hyperscale development to countries with more permissive permitting and faster infrastructure build-outs. This relocation could move jobs, investment, and research activity overseas while leaving the U.S. with slower growth in compute capacity and reduced influence over emerging global AI infrastructure standards. The countries that data centers will relocate to will suffer disproportionate harm.



RESOLUTIONAL DEFINITIONS

Moratorium: Merriam-Webster defines moratorium as: 1. a waiting period set by an authority, and 2. a suspension of activity.

Hyperscale Data Center: IBM defines hyperscale data center as "a massive data center that provides extreme scalability capabilities and is engineered for large-scale workloads with an optimized network infrastructure, streamlined network connectivity and minimized latency. Due to the ever-increasing demand for data storage, hyperscale data centers are in wide use globally for numerous providers and a wide variety of purposes that include artificial intelligence (AI), automation, data analytics, data storage, data processing and other big data computing pursuits."

OTHER KEY TERMS

Artificial Intelligence: NASA defines Artificial Intelligence like this: "Artificial intelligence refers to computer systems that can perform complex tasks normally done by human-reasoning, decision making, creating, etc. There is no single, simple definition of artificial intelligence because AI tools are capable of a wide range of tasks and outputs, but NASA follows the definition of AI found within EO 13960, which references Section 238(g) of the National Defense Authorization Act of 2019:

- Any artificial system that performs tasks under varying and unpredictable circumstances without significant human oversight, or that can learn from experience and improve performance when exposed to data sets.
- An artificial system developed in computer software, physical hardware, or other context that solves tasks requiring human-like perception, cognition, planning, learning, communication, or physical action. An artificial system designed to think or act like a human, including cognitive architectures and neural networks.
- A set of techniques, including machine learning that is designed to approximate a cognitive task.
- An artificial system designed to act rationally, including an intelligent software agent or embodied robot that achieves goals using perception, planning, reasoning, learning, communicating, decision-making, and acting."



VIDEOS TO WATCH

[Why communities are revolting against data centers](#)

Artificial intelligence data centers are popping up across America, spurring fierce backlash because of their need for huge amounts of water and power. Is the AI revolution worth the price communities are paying? Horizons moderator William Brangham explores the impact of data centers with Michael Webber, author of "Power Trip: The Story of Energy," which was also made into a series on PBS.

[Data Centers, AI, and the Future of U.S. Strategic Competitiveness](#)

The conversation will examine the growing tensions surrounding data center expansion, including questions around grid reliability, local community impacts, permitting and zoning, clean energy goals, and national security. Panelists will also explore how policymakers should weigh the local costs of data centers against their broader economic and strategic benefits, and what role the United States' data center capacity will play in the global race for AI leadership.

[AI data centers spark power debate](#)

NBC's Alice Barr reports on President Trump's proposal to make companies pay rising energy costs tied to AI data centers.

[How much electricity does AI actually use?](#)

Thomas Spencer sat down to walk us through some of the key findings from the IEA's comprehensive first-of-its kind analysis of AI's implications for the energy sector.