

Data Centers

Impacts on Water



Photo credit: Paloma Ayala

COLUMBIA

RIVERKEEPER®



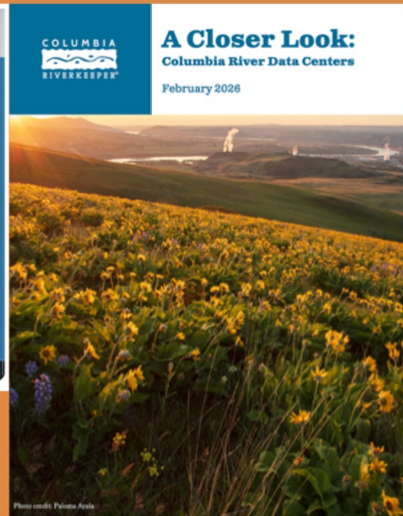
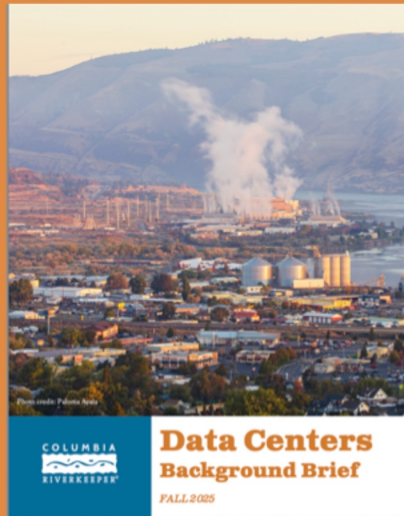
March 27, 2026
Kelly Campbell, Policy Director

Columbia Riverkeeper

2000 - present

Protecting and restoring the water quality of the Columbia River and all life connected to it, from the headwaters to the Pacific Ocean.

Columbia Riverkeeper's Data Centers Resources



columbiariverkeeper.org

Data centers use a tremendous amount of water

Every year, a 100MW data center will consume 100 million gallons of water, enough for 2,500 people's domestic use





- Data centers' water use—from groundwater to streams and rivers that feed municipal water supply—drains water supply in drought-prone areas and endangers fish and wildlife
- Case in point: water use by data centers in The Dalles

Water Quality Issues



The Facts

- Technologies for keeping data centers cool contain pollutants not normally targeted for removal by municipal wastewater treatment plants.
- Wastewater discharged from data centers can contain various contaminants, including PFAS chemicals, biocides, anti-scaling agents, corrosion inhibitors, heavy metals, and other pollutants.
- Data Centers water use is exacerbating issues of nitrate contamination in Umatilla and Morrow Counties

Big Tech's data centers refuse to share their water data

Data center companies have long resisted efforts to make public water use and impact data.

- **Only half of data centers track water use**
- **Questions about the impact of discharged water and thermal pollution on watersheds.**
- **Data centers don't share precise figures on water use, contaminants, keeping regulators and the public in the dark.**
- **Transparency and reporting is a baseline, needed in any policy, floor not the ceiling.**



Data Center Secrecy



Photo credit: Paloma Ayala

Examples:

- In 2023, The Dalles sued the Oregonian to prevent it from obtaining basic info on water usage by Google's data centers, claiming that water use is a "trade secret."
- In Washington state, 2026 legislation would have included water and energy use reporting, Amazon and Microsoft fought hard to stop even basic transparency provisions and they won.

Environmental Injustice on the Columbia River



- **The waters of the Columbia River have been used to create energy and wealth at the expense of salmon and Tribal Nations who depend on them.**
- **Data centers refuse to “curtail” their energy use in an emergency, which can lead to dam practices that in the past emergencies have killed millions of juvenile salmon.**
- **Yakama Nation report details how data centers impact strains river systems relied on by Tribal Nations, fish, and wildlife.**
- **Data centers energy use threatens progress towards Lower Snake River Dam removal.**
- **Data centers want to bring on new nuclear or fossil fuels, = more water.**

Tension between water and energy conservation



- Direct relationship between water usage and energy efficiency at data centers because the most efficient cooling technologies use more water than other options.
- Should we support a reduction in energy at the expense of higher water usage, or should we allow for higher energy usage to preserve water for surrounding communities?

Water Reporting Policy Concepts

Water Reporting and Transparency

Require data centers to report to state agencies and the public water use including (but not limited) to:

- **daily water quantities, total and peak uses**
- **effluents discharged outside the facility**
- **annual water consumption and water quality**
- **server cooling technology, use of regulated refrigerants and substitutes**
- **evidence of access to adequate water supply and source of water**
- **sustainability report demonstrating how it will address balancing energy, water, computing performance to maximize energy and water efficiency**
- **projected annual water consumption for three years and source**
- **treatment and discharge plan**

Need to combine these with other regulations, water reporting is necessary but not enough



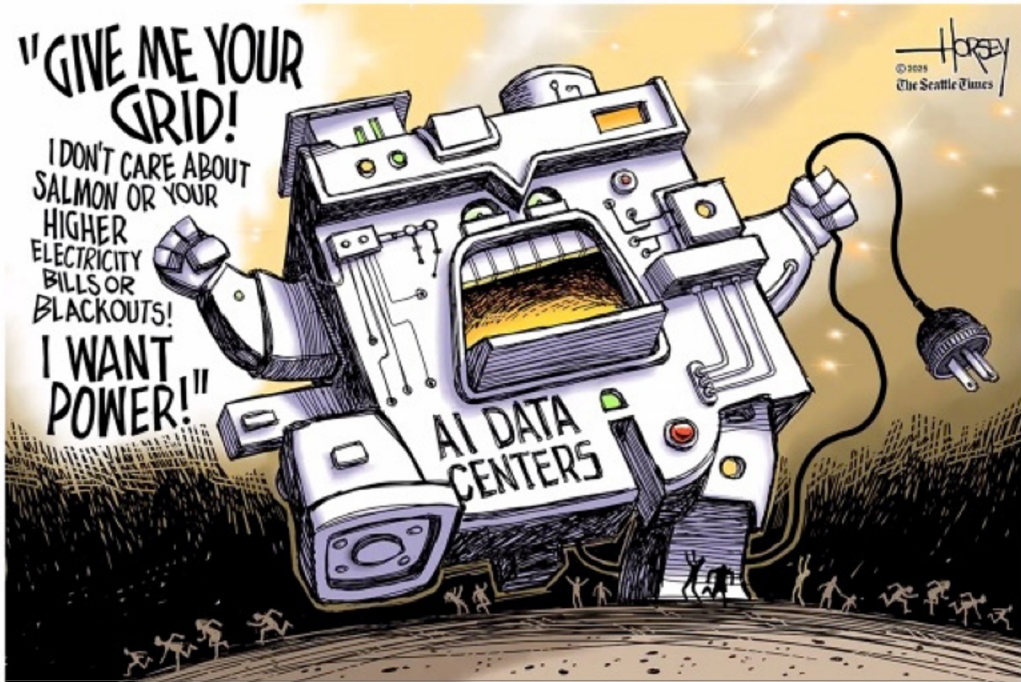
Take a Pause?

A pause, or short term moratorium on new data centers would allow regulations to catch up to protect our waters, climate, and communities



Photo credit: David Moskowitz

Who is in charge?



<https://www.seattletimes.com/opinion/the-ai-energy-monster-is-coming-for-our-salmon-and-electricity/>

Thank you!

**Sign Up to Stay
Informed**



Kelly Campbell
Policy Director

kelly@columbiariverkeeper.org



COLUMBIA

RIVERKEEPER®

Photo credit: David Moskowitz