

DATA CENTERS & WISCONSIN'S RURAL COMMUNITIES

The Next Land Rush: What Farmers and Rural Communities Need to Know About Data Centers

Tech giants are moving fast into rural Wisconsin — buying farmland, competing for water, and driving up electricity bills. Here's what's happening, what's at risk, and what communities can do.

\$57B+

Data center projects pending in Wisconsin (Wisconsin Watch, 2026)

Source: Wisconsin Watch, 2026

4.2 GW

Electricity from just 3 WI projects — more than all WI households combined

Source: PSC Strategic Energy Assessment, 2026

1–5M gal

Water per day a single hyperscale facility can consume

Source: Alliance for the Great Lakes, A *Finite Resource*

70%

Of Wisconsinites say data centers are more trouble than they're worth

Source: Marquette Law School Poll, 2026

⚠ In 2025 alone, **at least 8 major data center projects** were approved or proposed across Wisconsin — on hundreds to thousands of acres of **rural farmland**, often before communities knew anything was happening.

Major Wisconsin projects — approved, under construction & proposed

Mount Pleasant Microsoft \$7.3B / 1,575 acres Open and online	Port Washington OpenAI / Oracle / Vantage \$15B / 672 acres Under construction	Beaver Dam Meta \$1B / 520 acres Under construction	Janesville / Beloit area Multiple (incl. Meta) \$8B+ / 3 proposals Under consideration
Menomonie Undisclosed (NDA) \$1.6B / 320 acres Blocked by community	DeForest / Vienna QTS Data Centers \$12B / 1,600 acres Defeated Feb. 2026	Grant County (Driftless) Undisclosed ~\$1B / 500+ acres Town of Cassville blocked	Manitowoc County Cloverleaf Infrastructure Undisclosed 3 towns passed moratorium

1 The Land — farmland is the target

- Data center sites run from hundreds to thousands of acres. Developers **consistently target prime farmland** — flat, accessible, close to power infrastructure. Unlike a warehouse, a data center is a decades-long commitment. **Once farmland is paved over, it cannot go back.**
- Developers are paying **well above agricultural market value** — pricing out farmers and inflating land costs in surrounding areas. The Wisconsin Farm Bureau has formally raised this concern.
- The **Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Fund** — Wisconsin's primary mechanism for protecting farmland from development — **has expired**. Developers are buying land right now, and farmers considering conservation easements may soon have no state program to turn to.

SPEED IS THE WEAPON

Proposals are coming “fast and furious.” Community members are “caught off guard, not given much time, and really scrambling.” NDAs mean local officials often work with developers for months before the public knows anything. In Menomonie, the city administrator signed an NDA **18 months** before residents heard about the \$1.6B proposal. (Source: Healthy Climate Wisconsin; Wisconsin Watch)

OPERATIONAL IMPACTS ARE JUST THE BEGINNING

Microsoft’s Mount Pleasant campus is Wisconsin’s first fully operational hyperscale data center. Within days of coming online, nearby residents **filed a class-action lawsuit** alleging “unreasonable and excessive noise” from the facility — the first concrete evidence that community harm doesn’t end at groundbreaking. Expect noise, light, and traffic complaints as more projects go live. (Source: PC Gamer; court filing, July 2026)

2 The Energy Bill — who pays?

- Wisconsin electricity bills are **already rising sharply**. We Energies customers pay about **\$15 more per month** than two years ago (cumulative 12.38% increase). Wisconsin Public Service customers in the northeast saw an **11.52% increase**. We Energies projects another **\$13/month increase in 2027**. (Source: Wausau Pilot & Review, June 2026)
- Wisconsin’s peak electricity demand is rising from **14.2 GW to 20 GW** over five years — driven primarily by data centers. **1,200 MW of fossil fuel power** is already being built in southeastern Wisconsin to meet demand from a single project. (Source: Wisconsin Policy Forum)
- American Transmission Company has requested approval to build **\$2.63B–\$2.98B in new transmission lines** to serve data centers. Federal cost-sharing formulas spread those costs **across all Wisconsin utility customers** — including areas hosting no data centers. (Source: WisBusiness, April 2026)
- Wisconsin ratepayers already owe **nearly \$1 billion on coal plants** being shut down. The data center boom risks **another generation of “stranded assets”** — infrastructure built for data centers that never fully materialize, with costs passed to ratepayers for decades. (Source: Wisconsin Watch, Dec. 2025)
- In markets near major data centers, wholesale electricity prices rose **267%** over five years. A new study projects data center demand could increase costs **6–29% nationally** and up to **57% in certain regions** by 2030. (Source: Bloomberg; IOP Science)
- New gas plants built to power data centers carry a health cost, not just a price tag. Two plants now before the PSC — Foundry Ridge (Darien) and Red Oak Ridge (Paris) — would power Microsoft, OpenAI, and Oracle data centers. UW–Madison researchers estimate the plants’ particulate pollution could cause **\$1.38 billion in health harms and 118+ premature deaths** over their 30-year lifespan. (Source: Union of Concerned Scientists, July 2026)

WISCONSIN TAXPAYER SUBSIDY

Wisconsin taxpayers spent **\$70 million in 2024–25** subsidizing data center construction through a sales and use tax exemption —
with no sunset provision, no job quality floor, and no requirement to disclose subsidy costs to the public.

(Source: Wisconsin Policy Forum)

WHY OVERSIGHT KEEPS MISSING THE FULL PICTURE

Wisconsin’s Public Service Commission reviews energy proposals case-by-case rather than holistically — a single gas plant’s **need**, its **cost allocation**, and its **health and environmental impact** can each be evaluated in separate, disconnected proceedings. No single review has to weigh the full picture before approval — the same fragmentation that makes the cumulative water and energy footprint of Wisconsin’s data center boom so hard for the public to track. (Source: Union of Concerned Scientists, July 2026)

3 The Water — volume, competition with farms, and pollution

VOLUME

A hyperscale facility can use 1–5 million gallons per day — more than a town of 10,000–50,000 people. More than half evaporates and is not returned to the watershed.

Projected Great Lakes region data center withdrawals 2025–2030: 150.4 billion gallons — equal to the annual use of 4.6 million U.S. households.

Data centers buy from local utilities and don't appear in public databases. Their true water footprint is invisible to regulators.

Source: Alliance for the Great Lakes, *A Finite Resource*

COMPETITION WITH FARMS

Peak cooling demand and peak farm irrigation demand both occur in summer — straining the same groundwater simultaneously. Wisconsin has no legal tools to prevent this collision.

In New Carlisle, Indiana, residents' wells ran dry near Amazon data centers — a warning for Wisconsin communities.

40–75% of Great Lakes state residents rely on groundwater for drinking water. When pumped faster than it recharges, aquifers cannot recover.

Source: Alliance for the Great Lakes, *A Finite Resource*

WATER POLLUTION

Data centers use PFAS (“forever chemicals”) in cooling systems, linked to cancer, reproductive harm, and liver and thyroid problems.

Conventional wastewater plants cannot remove PFAS — so these chemicals can reach rivers, lakes, and drinking water. Many facilities classify cooling fluids as proprietary.

Data center discharge also contains biocides, corrosion inhibitors, scale chemicals, and trace heavy metals. A single hyperscale facility can discharge millions of gallons of treated wastewater daily. (Source: EESI)

INDIRECT WATER USE — THE HIDDEN ENERGY LINK

Cooling water isn't the whole story. The power plants that supply data centers — especially natural gas plants — are themselves major water users, withdrawing water for steam generation and cooling. Wisconsin utilities are building new gas capacity specifically to serve data centers. Every megawatt-hour a data center draws carries a water footprint at the power plant that produced it, on top of what's used on-site for server cooling — a cost currently **invisible in Wisconsin's water accounting**. (Source: Alliance for the Great Lakes, *A Finite Resource*, 2025)

THE DISCLOSURE GAP

Wisconsin requires water withdrawals over 100,000 gallons/day in the Great Lakes Basin to be registered — but that may not apply to data centers buying from municipal systems. Microsoft has declined to confirm whether its cooling chemicals contain PFAS, calling them proprietary. Communities currently have **no legal right to that information** unless the facility is classified as a “significant industrial user.” (Source: Wisconsin Watch; Clean Wisconsin)

4 The Jobs Promise — read the fine print

Permanent jobs

A typical hyperscale facility employs **10–100 permanent staff** despite a billion-dollar footprint. Data centers produce **100x fewer jobs** per unit of electricity than other industries. (Source: Good Jobs First)

Wisconsin workforce

The state's entire data center workforce is projected to grow from **360 to 1,143 jobs statewide** — a fraction of 1% of Wisconsin's labor market. (Source: UVA / Joyce Foundation)

Taxpayer cost per job

The taxpayer cost per data center job ranges from **\$1M to \$6.4M**. Construction jobs are real and valued — but they are **not permanent**. (Source: Good Jobs First Data)

A note on competing numbers: Industry-funded studies — including a PwC analysis commissioned by the Wisconsin Data Center Coalition — report far higher totals (13,720 direct jobs; 84,950 total jobs including supply-chain multipliers, in 2024). These figures count temporary construction jobs and indirect/induced economic activity. The figures above reflect ongoing, permanent operational employment only — the jobs still there after construction ends. (Source: Wisconsin Data Center Coalition/PwC study, cited July 2026)

5 What Communities Can Do — and have done

Act early — before a vote

The best outcomes happen before approvals are in motion. By the time Menomonie residents learned of the 320-acre proposal, it was weeks from a vote. “The playing field isn’t horizontal — it’s almost vertical,” said organizer Blaine Halverson. Start asking questions the moment a proposal surfaces.

Demand transparency

In four of seven major Wisconsin proposals, officials signed NDAs before the public knew anything. If your local officials have signed an NDA, ask what it covers and when it expires. The DeForest board voted unanimously against a \$12B proposal the day after Wisconsin Watch revealed months of secret planning.

Use local zoning

The town of Cassville passed a zoning ordinance blocking a data center at a meeting held in their garage next to a snowplow. Three Manitowoc County towns passed moratorium resolutions in 2026. After sustained opposition, Menomonie’s City Council revised its zoning to bar the developer.

Build a broad coalition

Nationally, 55% of officials opposing data centers are Republican, 45% Democrat. In Caledonia, one neighbor photocopied a notice and put it in mailboxes. 40 of 49 speakers at the hearing opposed the project. Microsoft withdrew. Clean Wisconsin has documented the Caledonia model as a national organizing guide.

PSC OVERSIGHT IS ACTIVE — HERE’S HOW TO ENGAGE

Two new gas plants built specifically to serve data centers — Invenergy’s Foundry Ridge (Darien) and Red Oak Ridge (Paris), which would power Microsoft, OpenAI, and Oracle data centers — are currently under Public Service Commission review.

Proceedings like these include public comment periods and hearings. Check psc.wi.gov for the current docket and how to submit comment on this and future proposals. (Source: Union of Concerned Scientists, July 2026)

QUESTIONS EVERY COMMUNITY SHOULD DEMAND ANSWERS TO

? How many acres of farmland will this consume?
? How many gallons of water per day, and from where?
? Does the facility use PFAS or other chemicals in cooling?

? Who pays for grid and transmission upgrades?
? How many permanent jobs, at what wages?
? What are the decommissioning plans if the company leaves?

Wisconsin communities that won — and what made the difference

DeForest — Feb. 2026

QTS proposed a \$12B, 1,600-acre campus. Village staff worked with developers seven months before any public disclosure. The board voted unanimously against the day after Wisconsin Watch published its investigation.

Key: investigative journalism

Caledonia — Oct. 2025

Microsoft sought to rezone 244 acres next to a coal plant. One neighbor photocopied a notice. A Facebook group formed. 40 of 49 speakers opposed. Microsoft withdrew. Now a national organizing model.

Key: neighbor-to-neighbor organizing

Menomonie — Jan. 2026

After an NDA and 18 months of secret planning, sustained public pressure over months led the city council to reverse its zoning ordinance in January 2026.

Key: sustained pressure over months

Organizations that can help

Clean Wisconsin

Science, legal tools, and the documented Caledonia organizing model.
cleanwisconsin.org

Midwest Environmental Advocates

Public records and PSC litigation. Sued Racine to obtain Microsoft’s water data.
midwestadvocates.org

Wisconsin Watch

Investigative journalism that directly produced the DeForest rejection.
wisconsinwatch.org

River Alliance of Wisconsin

Water advocacy and legislative testimony on data center impacts.
wisconsinrivers.org

THE BOTTOM LINE

Data centers are not inherently bad. But they are large, fast-moving, and permanent — and the decisions communities make in the coming months will shape their land, water, and energy bills for decades. Wisconsin farmers and rural residents have already shown that **asking the right questions, early and loudly, changes outcomes**. The communities that fared best didn't wait to be informed — they demanded information, organized their neighbors, and used the tools already available to them. You can too.

Tell Your Story. Protect Wisconsin's Future.

Wisconsin Futures is a network of neighbors, farmers, and local organizations documenting how these policy decisions affect real people. Add your voice: wisconsinfutures.com/tell-your-story

Sources

Wisconsin Watch, NDA Investigation & DeForest reporting, Jan.–Apr. 2026 · Wausau Pilot & Review, Wisconsin Data Center Guide, June 2026 · Wisconsin Policy Forum, Data Centers & Utility Landscape, Jan. 2026 · Alliance for the Great Lakes, A Finite Resource, Aug. 2025 · Clean Wisconsin, Caledonia Organizing Model; Water Analysis, 2025–2026 · WisBusiness / WPR, ATC Transmission reporting, Apr. 2026 · EESI, Data Centers & PFAS, Apr. 2026 · Marquette Law School poll · Good Jobs First · Bloomberg; IOP Science · Midwest Environmental Advocates · PBS Wisconsin; Wisconsin Examiner, community reporting 2025–2026

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