



**RIVER ALLIANCE**  
of WISCONSIN

February 17, 2026

Chair Bradley and the members of the Committee on Utilities, Technology, and Tourism,

Thank you for holding this hearing for several bills on the emerging issues related to data center development in Wisconsin. River Alliance of Wisconsin has registered neutral on SB 729 and opposed on both SB 843 and AB 840 as written. River Alliance is a statewide nonprofit, nonpartisan advocacy organization that empowers people to protect and restore Wisconsin's waters at a local level. The organization's supporters include more than 5,000 individuals and businesses and nearly a hundred local watershed organizations.

All of these bills recognize that we must thoughtfully confront the sudden construction pressure from a rapidly evolving technology. Our concern is that we do not allow Wisconsin's water, among our most valuable public assets, to be mortgaged for unproven benefits and without adequate protection. A medium-sized data center consumes as much water as 1000 households per year for cooling (110 million gallons).<sup>1</sup> Rapid and improperly regulated data center construction poses a potentially serious threat to our natural water resources. The benefits to Wisconsin of data center construction are unproven, but the hazards to our water are quite clear. Data centers directly use water to cool servers that generate heat either through evaporative cooling or through the addition of contaminants that can be discharged in wastewater and enter the environment. Further, these facilities may invite the construction of new hydropower facilities on already taxed river systems and cause aging, outdated, facilities to stay online. Often touted as "green", hydropower operations can cause myriad negative environmental impacts, from preventing fish migrations to reducing water quality and water quantity at critical times of the year, affecting aquatic life and recreation.

Our preference in this moment of uncertainty would be to **pause all new data center construction** until we can develop appropriate legislative mechanisms for managing its downsides. Legislators' recently proposed moratorium on data center construction should be used to give the Legislature time to create thoughtful controls that ensure new data centers actually benefit Wisconsinites and do not cause problems we could avoid if we took the time to prepare for them. Our abundant natural water and land resources are an obvious attraction for companies that want to build projects in Wisconsin, but we should be very careful to make sure the benefits are not simply handed to companies to export from the state for their own profit at the cost of damage to an irreplaceable public good and, at best, uncertain employment or tax benefits.

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<sup>1</sup> [Copley, Michael. "Data Centers, Backbone of the Digital Economy, Face Water Scarcity and Climate Risk" NPR 8/30/22.](#)

## **SB 729**

River Alliance has registered neutral on SB 729. We are supportive of the bill's emphasis on making sure that data centers pay for the energy that they use and that their usage does not drive up the cost of energy for Wisconsin homeowners. Similarly, it is common sense that such large water users should be required to report on their usage when it accounts for 25 percent or more of the total water usage of all customers for a water utility. Enforcing transparency about usage will help communities, utilities, and municipalities respond appropriately to water demand increases that could have very negative effects on local water sources, ecosystem health, and the costs of water provision.

We support the idea of encouraging data centers to rely on renewable wind and solar energy sources. SB 729 would require that at least 70 percent of the total annual electric energy used by the buildings be derived from renewable resources, as defined under s.16.75(12)(a)4. The definition of "renewable energy" referenced, however, includes hydropower, and we do not support the construction of new hydroelectric generation facilities to power data centers.

Many people believe that hydropower, which uses dams and gravity to spin electricity generating turbines, is a clean, climate-smart, energy source. This is a misconception. While wind and solar power offer renewable low-carbon energy and are generally cheaper than fossil fuels, hydropower can cause environmental damage. Dams and reservoirs alter river flows, raise water temperature, degrade water quality, increase sedimentation in reservoirs, and prevent migrations of fish and native mussels harming aquatic ecosystems and Wisconsin communities. Reservoirs are a significant source of greenhouse gas emissions, predominantly methane, an especially potent greenhouse gas, that results from eutrophication and harmful algal blooms.

Again, River Alliance supports the approach that SB 729 takes to create water usage transparency and accountability, to ensure that the costs of new energy and water demand are borne by the data centers and not by other customers, and to encourage the use of renewable energy like wind and solar as power sources. We are concerned that, in its current form, the bill will encourage expansions of hydropower generation that will extensively damage aquatic ecosystems and may be more destructive to the climate than fossil fuel use in some cases.

## **SB 843 and AB 840**

The above reasons also underwrite our opposition to both of these bills as written. The bills require that "any renewable energy facility that primarily serves the load of a data center must be located at the site of the data center." (Section 2. 196.492(2), lines 16-17). Again, using the definition of renewable energy from s. 196.378 (1)(fg), we are concerned this will encourage the construction of new, environmentally damaging, hydropower facilities. Limiting the use of renewable energy to sources constructed on site is unnecessarily restrictive and would likely have the effect of discouraging renewable energy use entirely. Because the bills do not explicitly require that data center owners pay the full cost of their energy use, this will drive up the cost of energy for Wisconsin residents while increasing pollution.

However, the requirements to require reporting to the DNR about annual water usage and to ensure that the costs of reclamation and failure of the facility are borne by the data center owners are sensible.

We are encouraged by the serious interest the Legislature is taking in managing the environmental consequences of data center construction. Given the likelihood that the industry will expand rapidly in the coming years, we hope this is the beginning of a sustained conversation about how to ensure that the benefits of data centers accrue to Wisconsinites and that these do not come with irreparable harm to our land and water resources.

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