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Texas can't keep giving a free ride to water-thirsty data centers | Editorial

Experts say we need needs tens of billions of dollars in new infrastructure to shore up our water supply. So why can't data centers just fill out a water-use survey?

By **The Editorial Board**, *Opinions from the Houston Chronicle Editorial Board*

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Agriculture Commissioner Sid Miller and Clayton Tucker, Democratic candidate for Agriculture Commissioner, speak during a forum hosted by Matagorda County Against Data Centers on the impact of data center construction in the state, Thursday, June 11, 2026.
Jason Fochtman/Houston Chronicle

Corpus Christi is in danger of running out of water. Groundwater across the state is dwindling. Experts say Texas needs tens of billions of dollars in new infrastructure to stave off losing critical water supply in the next 50 years.

Water shortages present a serious threat to our state's continued growth and economic success.

So it is flabbergasting that the owners of data centers can't even bring themselves to fill out a survey about their water consumption.

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This stunning revelation came to light during a legislative hearing held by the House Natural Resources Committee last week. The Texas Water Development Board's water supply director told lawmakers that the agency sent surveys to the state's 341 data centers to account for their water usage.

But most of the data centers are hitting the “unsubscribe” button. Only 17% of the data centers responded to the TWDB survey. The state Public Utility Commission also sent a survey to 92 data centers and cryptomining facilities regarding their water usage, but their response rate wasn't much better. Only 28 participated.



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Texas has a long history of allowing industries to police themselves, with state regulatory agencies either underfunded and understaffed or serving mostly as a rubber stamp. The Railroad Commission is notorious for allowing the oil and gas sector to pollute the air and groundwater. The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality takes nearly a year and a half to investigate and complete enforcement actions on potential environmental violations.

But the proliferation of data centers has sparked concerns that transcend the usual partisan divides in Texas.

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Some of those concerns are driven by uninformed fearmongering or a “not in my backyard” mind-set that simply doesn’t want anything new added to a community. But there are very real questions about whether these data centers could harm Texas water systems. That’s because most data centers need to run servers 24/7 in order to provide uninterrupted access for AI applications or other computing systems. They consume vast amounts of water — estimated at 25 billion gallons per year in Texas — in order to keep the servers cool and prevent equipment from overheating and could be using well over seven times as much water within the next five years.

Texas has long allowed industries to use vast quantities of water. Oil and gas producers in the Permian Basin, for instance, lift 22 million barrels of water from the ground per day for drilling operations. One energy expert told the Chronicle’s Amanda Drane and Rebekah Ward that water demand from data centers and agriculture in the coming years could be 10 times higher than the projected volumes of oilfield wastewater. A recent University of Texas study predicted that data centers could account for as much as 9% of the state’s water consumption by 2040.

That the state has no reliable record of data centers’ water usage is a failure of political leadership. It’s impossible to plan for a future with a sizable population increase if we don’t know how much water the state’s industries are gobbling up. And advocates for building data centers should want to have their own reliable data on hand in order to rebut some of the dissenters’ more outrageous claims.

So where is the enforcement? As state Rep. Cody Harris (R-Palestine) noted during the hearing, the attorney general’s office could, at minimum, legally compel every data center to respond to the water development board

survey.

Last we checked, however, Paxton was on vacation in Iceland with his latest paramour while he continues to settle a divorce filed by his wife “on biblical grounds.”

Paxton has no problem investigating Lululemon for putting plastic in yoga pants or threatening children's toothpaste manufacturers for not making it super-duper clear that you should only use a pea-sized dollop of bubblegum-flavored gel. But when it comes to enforcing regulations passed by his fellow Texas Republicans, well, apparently Reykjavík is more appealing this time of year.

Other politicians are taking the concerns more seriously.

Sid Miller, the outgoing agriculture commissioner, recently called for a statewide moratorium on data centers. He has been joined in that call by Clayton Tucker, the Democrat vying to fill his seat. That’s overreach, even if it is politically popular.

Gov. Greg Abbott is charting a more reasonable path, calling on state regulators to ensure new data centers don’t pass on costs of electrical infrastructure to ratepayers and asking lawmakers to require data centers to use water more efficiently. He even suggested repealing data center companies’ sales tax exemptions. That’s quite a change from just seven months ago when the governor bragged that Texas will be the “centerpiece for AI data centers.”

While election year backlash is surely driving Abbott’s repositioning, we hope the Legislature acts. It’s a useful framework for sensible policymaking that mirrors what other red and blue states have done to regulate the

burden data centers put on communities. The tech companies building and managing these facilities also have a responsibility to be good neighbors and friendly corporate stewards. Just as when this editorial board opposed local efforts to ban fracking, we think a little compromise would go a long way. And that starts with filling out surveys about water usage without the state needing to file a lawsuit. As many of those skeptical rural Texans know: Pigs get fat, hogs get slaughtered.

We want Texas to continue to prosper economically and be a business-friendly state. But we can't roll out the red carpet without some reasonable guardrails in place to protect precious natural resources.

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The Editorial Board

OPINIONS FROM THE HOUSTON CHRONICLE EDITORIAL BOARD



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