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Texans talking about data centers should talk about groundwater,

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Derek Emadi works in June on his farm near Lockhart, where five data centers are planned nearby. In rural Texas, groundwater is often the only water supply available, Vanessa Puig-Williams writes.

Jay Janner/Austin American-Statesman



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Texans talking about data centers should talk about groundwater, too

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Communities across Texas are weighing how a wave of proposed data centers could affect their roads, power grid and water supplies — especially in rural areas, where most projects are planned.

Of those issues, water supplies may be the most important. In Texas, just about every debate about data centers is also a debate about groundwater.

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Gov. Greg Abbott recently acknowledged Texas needs a closer look at the rapid expansion of data centers. He [ordered a comprehensive audit](#) of proposed projects, and he has called for requiring data centers to pay the full cost of the electric infrastructure they need rather than shifting those costs to residential ratepayers. He also wants legislation requiring water-efficient cooling systems and better reporting of water and electricity use.

Before Texas takes on a new generation of large industrial facilities, it needs a clear understanding of their impacts. That includes groundwater.

In rural Texas, groundwater is often the only water supply available. Developers say they'll buy water from a local utility, but those utilities often draw from the same groundwater that supplies families, farms and ranches and keeps local springs and creeks flowing.

Those aquifers are already under increasing strain, with groundwater being pumped faster than it can be naturally replenished in many areas. Groundwater supplies [more than half of the water used in Texas](#), providing nearly all of the drinking water for rural Texans. It also supplies 80% of the water used in Texas agriculture. At the same time, the state's population keeps growing while agriculture, manufacturing, energy production and prolonged drought continue to place greater demands on the same underground reserves.

The recent debate over a proposed data center in East Texas showed why these questions matter. Residents raised concerns about what additional water demand could mean during drought, and the developer ultimately withdrew the project.

Communities and policymakers will decide whether to welcome any particular data center. Texas still needs the tools to understand how new data centers, power plants, manufacturing facilities and other large water users will affect shared groundwater supplies.

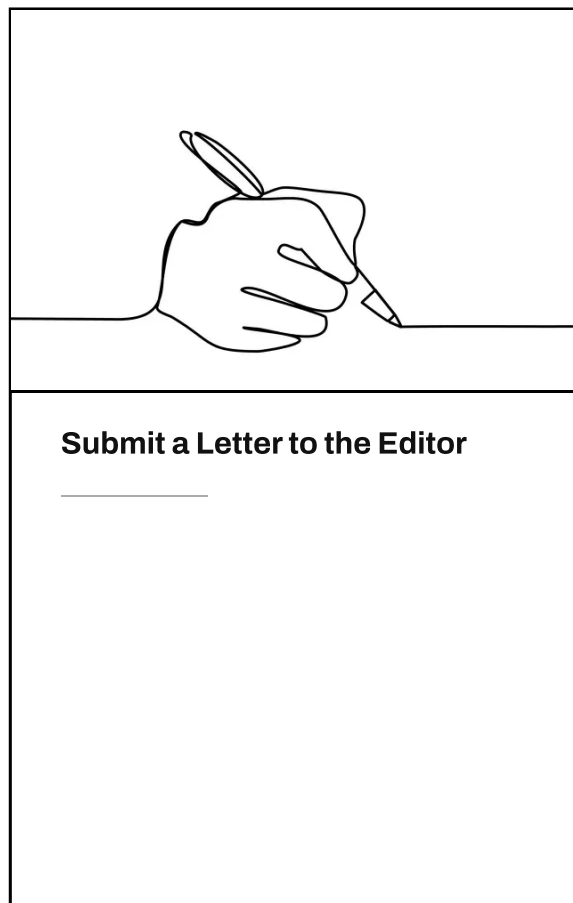
Groundwater may be privately owned under Texas law, but aquifers are shared resources. Pumping in one place can affect neighboring landowners, nearby communities and future water supplies. Yet Texas still relies on a patchwork of local groundwater conservation districts with uneven authority, funding and access to scientific data. Nearly one-third of the state has no groundwater district at all, and most districts operate under long-term management goals that allow aquifer levels to decline over time.

Our groundwater management system wasn't built for the Texas of today. Whether Texas should welcome or reject any particular data center is a decision for communities and policymakers. But Texas needs the tools to understand how new large water users — including data centers, the new power plants serving them, manufacturing facilities or other industrial projects — will affect shared groundwater supplies.

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Understanding the potential impacts to local groundwater supplies starts with better information. Texas can expand groundwater data collection and improve aquifer modeling, which would give local leaders the science they need to make informed decisions.



Lawmakers can ensure groundwater conservation districts have the authority and resources to plan and proactively manage instead of reacting after problems emerge. And as Abbott has proposed, major water users should accurately report their use so communities and state officials can better plan for the future.

Data center proposals have brought new attention to Texas' infrastructure needs. They should also prompt a broader conversation about groundwater.

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Vanessa Puig-Williams is the senior director of the Texas Water Program at Environmental Defense Fund.

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Vanessa Puig-Williams

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