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STATE

Pa. GOP proposal would block farmers from selling land to data centers



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Key Points

Pennsylvania lawmakers are considering multiple proposals to regulate data centers.

One proposal aims to prohibit building data centers on farmland to protect the state's agricultural industry.

While Pennsylvania leads in farm preservation, it still lost about 220,000 acres of farmland between 2017 and 2022.

There is no shortage of proposals surrounding data centers in the Pennsylvania General Assembly, with attempts to regulate the supercomputer warehouses littered through bills and legislative memos.

One aims to define data centers within the state's [Municipalities Planning Code](#).

One would establish a new office under the governor's jurisdiction that would dictate how local land use laws can be written around data centers, among other forms of oversight.

More: [Could change to Pa.'s '60s-era planning code make building easier?](#)

One seeks to mandate community benefits agreements between local governments and developers to mitigate [impacts of rising electricity prices](#) caused by the behemoth tech facilities.

Some have cleared the House and await action in a Senate committee. [One proposal](#) that would prohibit building data centers on farmland has not yet been written into a bill but has garnered support from some GOP members.

Republican state Rep. Marla Brown, from Lawrence County, acknowledged her party's traditional reluctance to regulate businesses but stressed the need to preserve Pennsylvania's agricultural industry that is among the nation's leaders in organic livestock and poultry and overall food production.

Farming contributes \$132 billion annually to the state's economy and supports nearly 600,000 jobs here, according to the state's Department of Agriculture.

"With protecting our farmland in particular, I don't think we could be too protective or cautious," Brown told USA TODAY Network Pennsylvania.

More: [Study: Droughts, demand from AI, farming, pose risks for Great Lakes region water supplies](#)

[Pennsylvania is America's leader](#) in farm preservation, with more than 650,000 acres preserved across at least 6,600 farms as of 2025.

[Still, ag space is finite](#), and Pennsylvania lost around 220,000 acres between 2017 and 2022, roughly 3%, according to data from the state's latest ag census. The total number of farms decreased by 8% in that period.

Data centers required to fuel the artificial intelligence boom need expanses of rural land close to utilities, namely electricity, making the Keystone State an attractive target for developers.

Agriculture, too, increasingly needs artificial intelligence as the industry evolves. AI models let farmers use advanced algorithms to measure soil health instead of sending samples away to labs, according to [Analytics Insight](#). Known as precision agriculture, the technology allows farmers to use less fertilizer based on a specific space's productivity.

AI-based infrastructure fosters better irrigation systems, which can help save water. The cutting-edge technology can even plant a seed and direct a vehicle to come back to its exact spot months later to determine its productivity.

More: [Can tech companies bring electricity to power data centers in Pa.?](#)

Data centers need farmland as much as farmers need the AI technology to innovate, requiring a balance Brown hopes to achieve with her legislation.

“Pennsylvania must not fall behind in the data center race, but we have to move forward responsibly to protect the state’s agricultural resources,” she said.

While farms are generally private property and can serve as nest eggs for families planning to sell their land to developers, Brown sees her proposal as a means of looking out for the greater whole of Pennsylvania.

“Protecting our food source, I think, is my responsibility for future generations,” she said. “I’m pro-business, pro-economic growth. We need these data centers, it’s just that there are appropriate places to put them.”

More: [Farmland preservation gives York County 'something we can pass on'](#)

Data center siting comes down to land use laws managed at the local level by boroughs and townships. Brown said her proposal would help local boards, many of which are floundering as they try to consider drafting ordinances to allow the sprawling tech campuses in their communities.

An official with the state’s agriculture department said it would be premature to comment on a proposal before legislation is formally introduced.

The Pennsylvania Farm Bureau “opposes the building of data centers on prime farmland,” according to William Whisler, communications director for the farming advocacy group. Officials there said they look forward to seeing Brown’s proposal formalized.

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