

Pushing Data Centers To Be Transparent and Accountable to Communities

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[The Aspen Institute's Policy Academy](#) turns citizens into changemakers. We offer innovative training programs to equip leaders across sectors – from tech to environment, science to civic engagement – with the practical policy skills to craft solutions for society’s most pressing challenges. Based in the Bay Area, the Policy Academy is the first comprehensive nonpartisan and non-university training program in the United States offering a step-by-step process to learn practical strategies for policymaking. The Academy's predecessor, the Aspen Tech Policy Hub, has helped more than 500 alumni and staff gain government experience and seek policy impact.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

[Rebecca Kilberg](#), [Jonathan Gilmour](#), and [Mary-Clare Bosco](#)’s Science and Technology Policy Fellowship project successfully influenced the State of Utah to pass new legislation regulating data center water use. During the Fellowship, the team developed recommendations for the [Office of the Great Salt Lake Commissioner](#) to set water use effectiveness targets for the growing data center presence in the State. Leaning on their Fellowship lessons on advocating to stakeholders and scoping a policy problem, they successfully pitched their policy proposal to Utah government officials, penned a [persuasive op-ed in the Salt Lake City Tribune](#), and ultimately helped inform a 2026 Utah [state law requiring data centers to report their water use](#).

BACKGROUND

In 2024, Rebecca, Jonathan, and Mary-Clare joined the Policy Academy Fellowship with a shared interest in holding data centers accountable to the communities and ecosystems they impact. With backgrounds spanning government software and infrastructure engineering, data science and public health data tracking, and climate tech product management, the 3 technologists met during the Academy program and decided to jointly develop the policy project “[Reducing Data Centers’ Water Consumption](#).” Given Mary-Clare’s personal connection to Utah, the team looked into focusing their project on reducing data centers’ water use in Utah’s Great Salt Lake Basin.

To learn more about this project, please visit aspenpolicyacademy.org.

Their decision solidified when they learned that despite Utah’s Great Salt Lake hitting a record low water level in 2022, the water-stressed area was positioning itself to attract new artificial intelligence (AI) data centers, which consume high levels of water to cool data servers.

The team’s project recommended that the State require data centers to disclose water use to the public and that the Commissioner’s Office set water use effectiveness targets for the data center industry. Since Utah data centers were not required to disclose their water usage, regulators could not effectively set conservation targets. To address this issue, the team submitted a series of government records requests to obtain new water use data from the State, [published the compiled data as a fact sheet](#), shared the resulting database with local government and academic bodies, and used this information to develop their specific water use targets and metrics. In 2024, the Office accepted the team’s recommendations to include their water use data and effectiveness targets in the Office’s next strategic plan.

“We each came to the Aspen Policy Academy seeking to transform our expertise in technology delivery into the ability to facilitate change on an infrastructural level. The program trained us how to devise and express a compelling solution to a very timely environmental policy issue taking the state of Utah by storm.”

Rebecca Kilberg, Jonathan Gilmour, and Mary-Clare Bosco

IMPACT

Rebecca, Jonathan, and Mary-Clare continued to use the Academy’s policy advocacy techniques to successfully gain traction on their call for water use transparency and ultimately inform state law. In December of 2024, the team [published an op-ed in the Salt Lake City Tribune](#) that called on the State to require data centers to disclose water usage and propelled their policy project forward. With added momentum from their op-ed, their investigation, data analysis, and proposed solutions ultimately set the foundation for [H.B. 76 Data Center Water Transparency Amendments](#), which requires new data centers to report water use and reduction efforts to the Utah Division of Water Rights and the Division to post some of that data on their public website. Representative Jill Koford, who sponsored the bill, cited the team’s research in her statements to [Fox 13](#), [Utah News Dispatch](#), and [KSL](#) when the bill was proposed. The bill was officially signed into law by Utah Governor Spencer J. Cox in March 2026 and came into effect May 2026.

The law is having ripple effects beyond Utah, as states including [New Jersey](#) and [Illinois](#) are now considering laws that mandate that data centers disclose water and energy usage prior to permitting decisions. The team members have also become key expert sources and speakers on sustainable tech growth and data center water regulation, with features in the [New York Post](#), speaking engagements at the [National Academy of Medicine Climate and Health Summit](#) and [DC Climate Week](#), and publications in the [Federation of American Scientists](#).