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Reducing Data Centers' Water Consumption in the Great Salt Lake Basin

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The increase in data center facilities within Utah's Great Salt Lake Basin is diverting millions of gallons from the region's dwindling fresh-water supply. This project recommends that the Office of the Great Salt Lake Commissioner set water efficiency targets for the tech sector and collaborate with local partners to collect new data on the centers' water usage. Further, the project argues that the Office should offer educational opportunities to help data centers secure financial support to enable water use efficiency. These actions could not only help protect the Great Salt Lake but also set an example for sustainable tech growth within other drought-prone regions.

PROBLEM

Despite the [Great Salt Lake's water level hitting a record low in 2022](#), the region is home to an increasing number of data centers. These data centers use water to cool down their servers during data processing. For example, in June 2022, the [NSA's Utah Data Center](#) used 23,532,000 gallons of water from the Great Salt Lake Basin. Though low-to-no-water-use cooling technology has emerged in recent decades, policies have not incentivized companies to make use of this efficient tech. Moreover, government bodies struggle with accessing data about facilities' baseline water use.

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SOLUTION

This project proposes that the Commissioner's Office partner with the University of Utah's Great Salt Lake Strike Team to 1) create a running database of centers' water usage and 2) use that information to draft specific water efficiency targets for its Strategic Plan or the Great Salt Lake Integrated Plan. The Commissioner's Office could set these targets using [Water Usage Effectiveness \(WUE\)](#), the ratio between a data center's water usage and its energy consumption, to align with industry leaders. The project also encourages the Office to invest in webinars and meetings with data center owners to discuss financial incentives that could help data centers meet those targets.

For more information about this proposal, see: [\(1\) a policy memo](#) recommending steps towards water efficiency for the Great Salt Lake region's tech sector; [\(2\) an operational plan](#) outlining a guide to implementing economic incentives to reduce water use; and [\(3\) a fact sheet](#) illustrating the water use of data centers in the Great Salt Lake region.

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