

An open letter to Microsoft: Do this the right way for Wisconsin

Environmental and health advocates call on Microsoft to power its data center with local clean energy

Welcome to Wisconsin, Microsoft. Your highly anticipated artificial intelligence data center in Mount Pleasant is quickly becoming a reality, and many in our state have welcomed the project. But AI technology comes with enormous energy demands, and your data center is on the verge of being used to push Wisconsin backwards in the fight for clean energy and safe, healthy air.

Right now, We Energies is planning to meet energy demand for the Microsoft data center by spending billions of dollars to build new methane gas power plants and pipelines. It's a massive buildout that will push our state's climate goals out of reach, locking us into 30 more years of fossil fuels at a time when we all know we must rapidly transition to clean energy.

It will also harm the same communities who have been suffering with coal plant air pollution and dangerous ozone for decades. According to We Energies' construction approval application with the Public Service Commission, the planned gas projects will pollute our air with hundreds of tons of ozone-causing nitrogen oxides and deadly particulate matter every year. That's in addition to releases of lead, carbon monoxide, volatile organic compounds, and of course greenhouse gases. It's time for Wisconsin to leave these dangerous ways to produce energy behind, not double-down on dirty fuels in the name of new technology.

We are calling on Microsoft to commit to powering its data center with clean, renewable solar and wind developed right here in Wisconsin.

Microsoft's recently-announced plan to help fund a currently unspecified 250-megawatt solar project in Wisconsin is a good start, but this represents just a fraction of the data center's energy needs. There must be more. Other plans to buy out-of-state carbon credits to offset energy use in Wisconsin may technically meet your company's climate goals, but they do nothing to support the badly needed transition to clean energy here in your new home. Investing in clean energy out of state also fails to protect Wisconsin communities that will be harmed by the air pollution from continued burning of fossil fuels.

We know Microsoft has long touted ambitious climate goals and is well aware of the awful climate and health impacts of burning methane gas. This data center project represents a critical opportunity to help drive change in Wisconsin and put us on a path to clean wind and solar. Microsoft knows what we all know, that the window to make meaningful progress in the fight against climate change is closing, and the decisions we make right now matter. Do this the right way, Microsoft, and make this a project we can be proud of.

In Wisconsin, we care that any new energy needed to power the data center will benefit, not harm, our communities. We deserve, and can have, both good jobs and clean air. Building more solar, wind and storage projects right here in Wisconsin will create more local jobs, help farmers diversify their income with long-term lease payments to host renewable projects, and bring sizeable annual payments to local governments where projects are located. We're pleased about jobs the data center could bring, but we're leaving too much on the table unless Microsoft prioritizes clean, homegrown energy right here in Wisconsin.

We know Microsoft does not want to worsen the already dire energy burdens that many people in the We Energies territory face. However, if the data center results in the utility spending billions of dollars on a dirty fuel that, in the best-case scenario, only operates in a limited fashion and retires before the end of its useful life, We Energies will pass on the costs of its shortsighted boondoggle directly to its customers. An investment in affordable, clean, renewable energy is in line with Microsoft's stated values and the needs of the local community, and it must be a priority.

Unfortunately, We Energies is using the Microsoft data center as an excuse to build more dirty infrastructure which will harm the local community. We support Microsoft's stated commitment to a just, healthy future, but that commitment cannot just be words. Now is the time for meaningful action. We call on you to use all your power to make sure that future is realized here in Wisconsin.

Sincerely,

Action for the Climate Emergency

Union of Concerned Scientists

Clean Wisconsin

Walnut Way

Environmental Justice & Infrastructure Initiative

Wisconsin Green Muslims

Faith in Place

Healthy Climate Wisconsin

RENEW Wisconsin

Sierra Club Wisconsin

The Nature Conservancy

350 Wisconsin