

Submission to the Government Administration Committee

Inquiry into AI Data Centres in Tasmania

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Inquire into and report upon the construction and operation of AI data centres in Tasmania, including recommending future legislation and regulations necessary to:

1. Protect public resources and the environment;

This is a huge concern for me, and there are many issues that need to be considered and regulated. AI data centres are resource hungry, using up land, water and energy. Things that need to be considered:

- a. Is this the best use of land that might otherwise be used for housing, agriculture or nature?
- b. There must NOT be any clearing of land for the purpose of building a data centre. Habitat loss is driving extinctions in Australia. We need to be concerned not only about threatened species, but all other species that will become threatened if habitat continues to be cleared (the “death of a thousand cuts”). Offsets do not help the current residents of areas that are cleared. Revegetation in itself is a good thing, but try telling the local wildlife to come back in 50 years when the plants are big enough to provide what they need.

- c. Where will the water come from? It should not be extracted from rivers and lakes, as this cannot fail to impact the environment.

Could closed loop systems be made mandatory?

- d. How will the wastewater be treated? Are there contamination issues? Where will it be discharged? How might this affect the environment, especially if the water temperature is elevated?
Who will regulate this?

e. AI data centres should pay for their water, at a rate that properly reflects the true value of drinking water.

f. Climate change is real, and future water supply cannot be guaranteed. We have to expect more droughts and lower rainfall. How will data centres take this into account?

With the possibility of future water shortages, should potable water be allocated to data centres?

g. Tasmania must not allow fossil fuel energy sources for data centres. Actual emissions are not falling in Tasmania – to brag about a net reduction in emissions is misleading, as it relies on land use accounting. Much more needs to be done to reduce *actual* emissions¹, so we cannot afford a new emission-producing industry.

h. The overall energy usage of AI data centres is shocking! There is always so much talk of how to meet our energy needs. One way of meeting our needs, that's usually overlooked, is reducing the demand! Yet here we are, faced with the prospect of new, extremely energy-hungry facilities.

How will supply to the rest of the community be guaranteed?

i. How much heat will these centres generate? Can we expect a rise in temperature in the vicinity? This is a real issue – consider how residents in western Sydney are being affected by rising temperatures.

j. Is there going to be constant background noise?
Should mitigation measures be mandated?

2. Ensure Tasmania's Resource Management and Planning System adequately recognises and addresses the specific impacts of the development and construction of AI and data facilities;

Super important!

This is a new industry for Tasmania, so all the specific impacts need to be identified and addressed, while still possible at this early stage.

3. Provide Parliamentary oversight and accountability for new facility construction and resource allocation;

Especially resource allocation. Any resource allocation should not be at the expense of other users or potential users, and not done without consideration of the wider potential impacts.

4. Ensure transparent public disclosure of resource consumption;

This is a must! If there is no transparency, people will naturally be suspicious and there will be an erosion of trust.

5. Provide the Tasmanian community with adequate opportunities for consultation;

Essential.

It seems that the Office of the Coordinator General have been working towards the establishment of data centres in Tasmania since 2018, yet, for most of the general public, we are only just hearing that there are already several centres in the pipeline. Some are well advanced in their planning.

At this stage I feel that AI data centres lack a social licence. They won't win this simply by sponsoring sport teams.

6. Ensures the Tasmanian community receive tangible benefits from all AI and data facilities constructed in the state;

I am yet to be convinced of the benefits

"Jobs and growth" are one thing, but this needs to be traded off against the huge cost in terms of energy and water usage.

I doubt that there will be a lot of ongoing jobs.

I can't think of any other benefits!

7. Any other matter incidental.

I feel that the Tasmanian government needs to “call the shots” - set the standards and parameters for new AI data centres, and ensure that the operators are compliant.

If this results in increased costs for the centre owners, so be it!

We should not let the operators dictate the terms.

If the data centres are to be involved in the construction of new renewable energy projects, these must be in appropriate locations.

As a wider issue - it is time for the government to develop a proper strategy and pro-actively identify suitable sites, or suitable zones, for future renewable energy projects.

To date, we’ve seen a lot of projects proposed (and built) in the wrong places, simply because of the interests of a landowner or energy company.

With a bit of planning we could put an end to divisive projects being established in inappropriate places.

A much bigger issue, beyond the scope of this review, is the need for an overall strategy around the expansion and use of AI, and tighter regulation of the tech companies.

To some extent, the industry is driving the need for more and more data centres – because it can!

If there was tighter regulation of the use of AI, the demand could be reduced. For example, there are so many situations where AI is forced upon us, even when we don’t need it, don’t want it, and didn’t ask for it.

A very simple example is in search engines.

If government would stand up to private interests, the use of “discretionary” and unwanted/unneeded AI could be cut dramatically, reducing the ongoing need for data centres.

1. <https://carbonzero.org.au/news/state-of-the-environment-report>