



GETUP SUBMISSION:

Artificial intelligence and data centres

To: Environment and Communications References Committee

Re: Inquiry into Artificial intelligence and data centres

Submitted by: GetUp Ltd (ABN 99 114 027 986)

Summary of our position

GetUp urges the committee to recommend a pause on new data centre approvals until enforceable national standards are in place, and for the Federal Government to introduce a binding national framework that ensures the boom is built on Australia's terms and for Australia's benefit.

Australia is the world's second most sought-after destination for data centre investment, yet there are no enforceable national rules governing how these facilities are built, who pays, or what they take from us. The opportunities are significant – but the scale of the rollout is staggering, and so are the risks to our energy prices, water supply and communities.

The Labor Government has acknowledged the risks and warned Australia must not repeat the mistakes of the gas boom. But its approach, repackaged as the "triple lock," is a set of voluntary expectations Big Tech is free to ignore. We need enforceable rules they have to follow.

GetUp is not opposed to data centres. Done right, this boom could work for Australians – but only if we set the terms now. We urge the committee to recommend the government pause new approvals until there are rules that mandate renewables, cap water usage, guarantee community consultation, and make big tech pay its fair share of tax.

GetUp members on data centres

Over 13,000 GetUp members have signed our petition calling on the government to pause new data centre approvals, introduce national regulations and make Big Tech pay its fair share. This submission is made on behalf of the **[MEMBER SIGN ON NUMBERS TO BE INSERTED]** members who signed on. Selected individual comments from members appear at the end of this submission.

About GetUp

GetUp is an independent community advocacy organisation with over one million members across Australia. Our members come from all walks of life and live in every electorate in the country, united by our vision for a fair, flourishing and just Australia.

For twenty years, GetUp members have campaigned to hold powerful interests accountable and to ensure that ordinary people, not corporations, shape our future. The campaign to regulate Australia's data centre rollout is squarely within that mission: it is a question of who this country is run for, and whether our land, energy and water are used on Australians' terms or captured by multinational corporations.

This submission is made on behalf of the GetUp members whose names are attached as a separate document. Each person listed has individually added their name to call on the government to pause new data centre approvals, introduce national regulations and make Big Tech pay its fair share.

Why Australia needs a National Approach

1. The unprecedented scale and pace of the data centre rollout

Australia is one of the world's most sought-after destinations for data centre investment, second only to the United States.¹ There are already at least 162 data centres operating here, with around 90 more in the pipeline, some among the largest in the world.² The defining problem for this inquiry is that development is now moving faster than any framework to govern it.

The trajectory is steep. The Australian Energy Market Operator expects data centre energy demand in the National Electricity Market to triple to nearly 12 TWh by 2030, equivalent to about 6% of the market, and to reach around 12% by 2049-50.³ Individual projects are enormous: the proposed 1.2 GW Mamre Road facility in Western Sydney would be one of the biggest data centres in the world and Australia's single largest energy user, exceeding the Tomago aluminium smelter by more than 25%.⁴

The deals are being struck at the same pace. The Government signed a memorandum of understanding with Anthropic, and weeks later Microsoft announced a \$25 billion investment, welcomed without binding conditions attached.⁵ Approvals are being locked in now, before any national rules exist to shape them. Australia is being asked to host a build-out of this scale and speed without the national rules that comparable

¹ Climate Council, Data centre boom risks 26% jump in power prices and more pollution, 2026. <https://www.climatecouncil.org.au/resources/data-centre-boom-risks-26-jump-in-power-prices-more-pollution/>

² Climate Council, Seizing the opportunity to do data centres right, 2026. <https://www.climatecouncil.org.au/what-does-the-data-centre-boom-mean-for-australias-switch-to-renewables/>

³ See reference 2.

⁴ See reference 2.

⁵ ABC Four Corners, The AI Race, 8 June 2026. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2026-06-08/federal-government-ai-policy-retreat-data-centres-four-corners/106753596>

economies are now moving to put in place. The question for the committee is not whether data centres should be built, but on whose terms.

The scale of the build-out

There are already at least 162 data centres operating in Australia, with around 90 more in the pipeline. The proposed Mamre Road facility in Western Sydney alone would draw up to 1.2 GW, making it Australia's single largest energy user, larger than the nation's biggest aluminium smelter.⁶

2. Data centres are straining Australia's water and energy resources

The energy implications are profound. Industry sources told ABC Four Corners that one company alone is pursuing up to 20 GW of compute capacity; former Chief Scientist Alan Finkel estimated this would represent roughly a 60% increase in Australia's electricity output and would be "extremely difficult" to achieve in five years. Anthropic declined to confirm the figure.⁷

That demand carries a direct cost for households. Round-the-clock data centre load could push wholesale electricity prices in NSW up by as much as 26% by 2035 if it is met with gas, while driving a surge in new fossil fuel generation that threatens years of emissions progress.⁸

Water is under equal pressure. On Sydney Water's own projection, data centres in Sydney alone are on track to draw up to a quarter of the city's available water supply by 2035, even as households face the prospect of restrictions in the next drought.⁹

The data centre industry's water demand across Australia is projected to roughly triple by 2030, and utilities have already received single-site connection requests for up to 40 million litres a day, equivalent to 16 Olympic swimming pools, with Sydney and Melbourne the most exposed hotspots.¹⁰ On Sydney Water's own projection, data centres in Sydney alone are on track to draw up to a quarter of the city's available water supply by 2035, even as households face the prospect of restrictions in the next drought.¹¹

Yet there are no binding rules requiring data centres to source their energy from renewables, no caps on the water they consume, and no mandatory water-efficiency standards.

⁶ See reference 4.

⁷ See reference 5.

⁸ See reference 1.

⁹ AI to take up one quarter of Sydney water in a decade", ABC News, 27 August 2025.

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-08-27/ai-to-take-up-one-quarter-of-sydney-water-in-a-decade/105700928>

¹⁰ See reference 2.

¹¹ Sydney Water projection, reported via CNBC, In Australia, a data center boom is built on vague water plans, 16 September 2025.

<https://www.cnbc.com/2025/09/16/in-australia-a-data-center-boom-is-built-on-vague-water-plans.html>

3. The costs land on Australians while the benefits flow offshore

For all the strain they place on shared resources, data centres return remarkably little to the Australian public.

The profits flow to multinational shareholders. The facilities create comparatively few ongoing jobs, and operators pay relatively little tax on very large Australian revenues, using arrangements that shift value offshore.¹² Microsoft's local data centre business paid no tax in 2022-23 on \$1.1 billion of income.¹³

The costs, by contrast, stay local. Australia absorbs higher power bills, pressure on local water, and the noise, traffic and amenity impacts of industrial-scale facilities on communities.¹⁴

The public is also left to underwrite the grid and water infrastructure these facilities require. The upgrades needed to service them are funded by all of us, while the returns are captured by a handful of global corporations.

This is the same pattern Australia has seen with its resources before: public assets accessed cheaply, profits exported, and costs socialised. The net return to Australians from access to our land, energy and water is negligible.

4. The current approach is voluntary and has failed

There is no national framework governing the data centre rollout. Approvals are made state by state, with no consistent standards on energy, water or community impact, and the Commonwealth has left the field to voluntary measures.¹⁵

The federal government's framework, repackaged as the "triple lock," is a set of voluntary expectations operators are free to ignore. The Government's own framework states it does not create new legal obligations, and that the expectations do not replace existing laws or create new regulatory obligations, operating only as a policy lens through which Commonwealth assessments are prioritised.^{16 17} The deals underpinning recent investment are non-binding and kept "commercial in confidence".¹⁸

Existing Commonwealth regimes do not fill the gap, because they were not built for it. Foreign investment screening through FIRB examines ownership and national security,

¹² ACS Information Age, citing ATO Corporate Tax Transparency 2022-23, 2024.

<https://ia.acs.org.au/article/2024/the-tech-companies-avoiding-tax-in-australia.html>

¹³ "The tech companies avoiding tax in Australia," Information Age (ACS), citing ATO Corporate Tax Transparency 2022-23, 5 November 2024.

<https://ia.acs.org.au/article/2024/the-tech-companies-avoiding-tax-in-australia.html>

¹⁴ Greenpeace Australia, Energy Vampires: the AI data centres draining Australia, 2026.

<https://www.greenpeace.org.au/greenpeace-reports/ai-data-centres-draining-energy-australia/>

¹⁵ Friends of the Earth, NSW data centre inquiry. https://www.foe.org.au/nsw_data_centre_inquiry

¹⁶ Pinsent Masons, Australian government unveils prioritised support for national interest data centres, 2026. <https://www.pinsentmasons.com/out-law/news/data-centre-framework-australia>

¹⁷ HSF Kramer, National Expectations for the development of data centres and AI infrastructure, March 2026.

<https://www.hsfkramer.com/insights/2026-03/national-expectations-for-the-development-of-data-centre-s-and-ai-infrastructure-have-been-released-what-you-need-to-know>

¹⁸ See reference 5.

not energy or water use. The EPBC Act engages only where a project is likely to significantly affect a matter of national environmental significance, which many industrial-zoned data centre sites will not trigger.¹⁹ The National Greenhouse and Energy Reporting scheme captures large operators, but only as a reporting obligation with no power to cap or condition; the Climate Council's own analysis of operators such as AirTrunk, NextDC and Equinix draws on that NGER data.²⁰ No Commonwealth regime sets binding energy, water or community standards, and at the state level fast-track planning routinely shuts residents out of decisions about what is built in their communities.²¹

5. Broad public concern

Community concern about this issue is growing as rapidly as data centre expansion. The Senate established this inquiry amid growing community concern about the rapid expansion of energy-intensive AI infrastructure and the lack of federal oversight, with the committee expressly intended to hear from people fighting to protect their land, water, wildlife and biodiversity.

Communities around the country are already organising in response to specific developments, raising concerns about water, power, noise and the absence of any genuine say in what is approved near their homes.

More than 13,000 GetUp members have added their names to our "Stop the Data Drain" petition, calling on the Government to pause new approvals, introduce binding national rules and make Big Tech pay its fair share. A selection of their comments, de-identified, is included at the end of this submission. The consistent thread is a demand that the public, not global corporations, set the terms.

6. A better approach is possible, but the window is closing

GetUp is not opposed to data centres. Done right, the boom could work for Australians: we have the land, the renewable resources and the strategic position to capture real economic benefit, keep power bills down, protect our water, and give communities a genuine say.

But that outcome depends on setting the terms now, before approvals lock in infrastructure, water draw and grid demand on operators' terms rather than the public's. International experience shows that clear conditions need not deter investment. Singapore paused all new data centre approvals in 2019, then reopened growth only under binding conditions: operators must compete for capped capacity allocations, meet strict energy-efficiency standards (a power usage effectiveness of 1.3 or better, tightened to 1.25 in the most recent allocation round), source at least half their power from low-carbon sources, and meet water-efficiency requirements. Far

¹⁹ Mallesons, AI data centres in Australia: breaking down barriers to investment, April 2026. <https://www.mallesons.com/au/en/insights/latest-thinking/ai-data-centres-in-australia-breaking-down-barriers-to-investment.html>

²⁰ See reference 2.

²¹ See reference 15.

from driving investment away, Singapore remains one of the densest and most sought-after data centre hubs in the world.^{22 23}

The leverage exists today, and every approval rubber-stamped under the current voluntary settings narrows it. The committee has the opportunity to recommend a framework that lets the build-out proceed while protecting the resources and communities that bear its costs. The recommendations below set out how.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Pause new approvals. The Australian Government should work with states and territories to halt new data centre approvals until enforceable national standards are in place. No further large-scale projects should be approved under the current patchwork of voluntary expectations and inconsistent state planning rules.

Recommendation 2: Power it with new renewables. All new data centres should be required to bring 100% new renewable generation to the grid, additional to existing supply, with no new gas generation built to meet their demand.

Recommendation 3: Protect our water. The Government should cap the water allocated to data centres and impose binding water-efficiency standards, so that operators cannot keep drawing down supply while communities face restrictions.

Recommendation 4: Give communities a real say. The Government should guarantee genuine community consultation over data centre developments, ending the fast-track planning processes that shut out the residents who carry the impacts.

Recommendation 5: Make them pay their fair share. The Government should introduce a binding minimum tax on data centre revenue, ensuring operators that profit from Australian land, energy and water contribute fairly rather than passing infrastructure costs to the public.

Consistency with government commitments

Acting on data centres is consistent with the Government's own stated position. The Government has acknowledged the risks of an unmanaged build-out and warned that Australia must not repeat the mistakes of the gas boom, calling on operators to bring their own clean energy, use water sustainably and invest in Australian jobs and skills.

The problem is not the ambition but the mechanism. The Government has set out what it expects of data centres; it has simply declined to make those expectations binding. Turning the existing expectations into enforceable national standards would deliver the Government's own objectives on cost-of-living, the energy transition and the national interest, rather than leaving them to the goodwill of global corporations.

²² Singapore Economic Development Board, Singapore pilots sustainable way to grow data centre capacity, 2024.

<https://www.edb.gov.sg/en/business-insights/insights/singapore-pilots-sustainable-way-to-grow-data-centre-capacity.html>

²³ Announces Data Center Capacity Allocation Call, March 2026.

<https://www.morganlewis.com/pubs/2026/03/singapore-announces-data-center-capacity-allocation-call>

This inquiry, and the community concern behind it, provides the mandate to act. The test is whether the principles the Government has already articulated are matched by rules with force. Australia's land, energy and water belong to Australians; it is time the rules reflected that.

Individual member comments

When adding their name to this submission, we invited GetUp members to share their own comments in support. Here is a selection of the comments submitted.

[MEMBERS COMMENTS TO BE ATTACHED HERE]

Conclusion

GetUp members urge the committee to recommend a pause on new data centre approvals until enforceable national standards are in place, and a binding national framework covering renewable energy, water, community consultation and a fair public return.

The evidence is clear: the rollout is moving faster than the rules, the costs are landing on Australians while the benefits flow offshore, and the Government's voluntary approach does not create a binding framework to adequately regulate this data centre boom. Other jurisdictions have shown a better approach is possible, and the window to set the terms is closing with every new approval.

Australians expect their government to ensure that their land, energy and water are used on the public's terms and for the public's benefit. This submission calls on the committee to recommend exactly that.

This submission is lodged on behalf of all GetUp members who have added their names.