

# The Land Beneath Artificial Intelligence

*Why Pennsylvania Must Protect Farmland While Building the AI Future*

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## Executive Summary

Artificial intelligence is no longer only a digital issue. As AI expands, it requires physical infrastructure: land for data centers, electric transmission to serve those data centers, and water for cooling systems. In rural Pennsylvania, that means AI policy is becoming a land-use issue, especially for farm families whose farmland may be affected by new transmission lines and related infrastructure.

This testimony connects the author's work in artificial intelligence policy with his work on eminent domain reform. It argues that AI infrastructure and farmland protection can no longer be treated as separate issues. As Pennsylvania considers data centers, power lines, and related infrastructure, it must also consider how land is taken, how farm families are compensated, and how rural communities are asked to carry the costs of technological progress.

## Community Education

For the last three years, I have been educating farmers about artificial intelligence. Although I have worked in national roles on technology policy for nearly three decades, this was new territory for me. To prepare, I educated myself through studies with Oxford, MIT, Purdue, and Harvard.

Early on in the lectures that I gave, I focused on what AI was, its history, and its growing presence in everyday life. As time went on, the conversations centered more on people: farmers wondering how AI might help them better manage crops and livestock, and young agriculturists asking which careers might be less vulnerable to AI disruption. In late 2025, after colleagues at Penn State and I put together the Futures of AI in Rural Education (FAIR) summit, I discussed the impact of AI on education, both good and bad.

The Penn State FAIR project was very well received. This year, as our team began discussing how to update that work, we realized that broader AI education for the general population should be our next goal. We also soon realized that we were walking into a field of landmines.

Community investment authorities were concerned that local education on AI could create more controversy around proposed data center projects. Parents were becoming more aware of the often negative impact of technology on their children. And, perhaps most interestingly, a number of other groups at Penn State and different universities around the Commonwealth were also beginning to discuss community education around AI. We had the right idea, but this wasn't going to be an easy lift.

Despite those challenges, our team continues to plan for FAIR II. Scheduled for November 12, strategically after the midterm election, FAIR II will bring together best-in-class experts on AI and community education.

I mention this background to make clear that I am not opposed to AI, nor am I an anti-AI Luddite. Far from it. I use AI daily to write letters and memos and to support research. Honestly, I was quite surprised when AI failed me as I attempted to use it to write this very testimony and had to do most of that by hand. This was a good reminder that ChatGPT is very much like having a wise personal assistant, but it still cannot replace judgment, lived experience, or local knowledge. Those skills will be vitally important as we go on in this discussion.

## **Allenwood: Preserved Farmland Versus Power Lines for Data Centers**

In June 2026, my phone lit up with word that farmers in Union and Lycoming Counties had learned that new power lines for a data center might cross their land. Within days, I was standing in their farm fields, talking with them about where those lines were proposed to cross and the devastating impact they believed the project would have.

This is some of the best farmland in Pennsylvania, and almost all of the potentially impacted farms in that area are preserved. Yet under current Pennsylvania law, while that preservation designation prevents a farmer from permanently damaging his or her land, it does not necessarily prevent a power company from doing lasting damage through the force of eminent domain.

## **The Alvira Lesson**

These farm families live with the memory of Alvira, a rural community near Allenwood that was taken by the federal government during World War II for the Pennsylvania Ordnance Works. In 1942, homes and farms were cleared through eminent domain so the site could be used for TNT manufacturing and explosives storage. The facility operated for only a short period, but the community was never restored and much of the land later became federal prison property or state game lands.

As someone who has studied AI extensively, I sincerely believe that America must remain competitive in this field, including from an international security perspective. But I also know that urgent claims made in the name of national need deserve careful scrutiny. In 1942, just months after Pearl Harbor, the Alvira munitions facility was announced as a wartime necessity. Yet production ceased well before the end of the war. My concern is not that AI is unimportant. My concern is that we may be overbuilding too quickly, in the wrong places, before we fully understand the long-term need, and that some of the same families could once again be asked to carry the burden. (You would be correct if you inferred from this section that Andy Bater considers discussion of data center moratoriums worthwhile.)

## Eminent Domain Reform

I am no stranger to the issues surrounding the taking of private land for public use. For the last five years, I have worked to help farm families in Centre County who will be impacted by the future construction of the State College Area (U.S. 322) Connector. There, the need is more apparent: PennDOT documented 144 reportable crashes on the existing 322 corridor over a recent five-year period, including three fatal crashes and 60 injury crashes.

The link between the Allenwood data center case and the State College Area Connector is that we do not properly compensate farmers for the full loss created when land is taken. The land is too often viewed as merely acres on a spreadsheet. The generations of work that went into that land, the markets that evolved around it, and the family agricultural business legacies, past and future, are treated as matters of minimal consequence. If those losses were fully recognized, decisions would be made more carefully, and the full impact on communities would be assessed up front.

For example, farmers near Allenwood were not rejecting innovation when they raised concerns about power lines for data centers. Many already use precision agriculture and GPS guidance, and they were concerned that power lines could disrupt those systems. Drone usage could also be curtailed, which is problematic as drones are quickly becoming one of the most common ways to apply fungicide. In other words, technology built elsewhere could prevent technology from being used on their own farms. If the long-term financial loss to these farm families for just those losses in future capability were properly calculated, the metrics for one power line route versus another might look vastly different.

This is why I worked extensively with Senator Dush's office on the creation and introduction of Pennsylvania Senate Bill 225, which would amend Title 26, Eminent Domain, of the Pennsylvania Consolidated Statutes to provide compensation for loss of goodwill in just compensation and the measure of damages.

Senate Bill 225 passed the Senate unanimously and is now ready for a vote on the House floor.

The reforms in Senate Bill 225 matter because the decisions now being made about AI infrastructure will shape rural Pennsylvania for generations. If data centers, transmission lines, and related projects are truly necessary, then they should be planned with the same seriousness as any other public undertaking: with honest accounting of local impacts, fair compensation for current and future business losses, and a presumption that productive farmland is not just a fungible commodity.

## Conclusion

We must not be shortsighted in our discussions about the impact of AI infrastructure on the lands that produce our food. Yes, I do believe artificial intelligence may prove to be as great an invention as fire itself. Let us not burn up our farmland while we learn how to use it.