Pennsylvania Farm Bureau

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Dear Members of the Center for Rural Pennsylvania Board of Directors,

On behalf of Pennsylvania Farm Bureau, thank you for the opportunity to testify today and ensure that the agricultural community has a voice in this important discussion. We appreciate the Center for Rural Pennsylvania's commitment to examining emerging issues affecting rural communities and for inviting us to share the perspective of Pennsylvania's farmers.

For those who may be unfamiliar with our organization, Pennsylvania Farm Bureau is the Commonwealth's largest general agriculture organization, representing farms of every size and commodity across the state. As a grassroots organization, our policy positions are developed and adopted by our members through our county Farm Bureaus, ensuring that the positions we advocate reflect the priorities and concerns of farmers across Pennsylvania.

When our members adopted Pennsylvania Farm Bureau's policy on data centers at our Annual Meeting last November, data center development was still a relatively new issue for much of Pennsylvania's agricultural community. At the time, there was limited publicly available information regarding the long-term impacts of these facilities on agriculture and rural communities. What our members did know was that developers were actively seeking thousands of acres of land, often productive farmland, and that artificial intelligence was driving unprecedented demand for electricity, water, and digital infrastructure. These unknowns prompted our members to proactively establish policy to guide future conversations.

Over the past year, we have continued engaging with policymakers, utility providers, local governments, and our membership to better understand both the opportunities and challenges associated with this rapidly expanding industry. Our position has remained consistent: Pennsylvania agriculture is not opposed to economic development. Farmers understand the importance of investment, innovation, and job creation. However, economic development should complement—not compete with—the resources that make rural Pennsylvania successful.

Agriculture remains one of Pennsylvania's leading industries, contributing billions of dollars annually to the Commonwealth's economy while supporting thousands of jobs both on and off the farm. Farmland is not an infinite source. Once productive agricultural land is permanently converted to industrial use, it is rarely returned to farming. As the demand for large-scale data centers continues to grow, thoughtful planning will be critical to balancing new investment with the long-term preservation of Pennsylvania's agricultural landscape.

Our members' policy reflects several key priorities.

Land Use

The greatest concern we hear from our members is the loss of productive farmland. Prime agricultural soils are among Pennsylvania's most valuable natural resources. These soils support food production, contribute to local economies, and provide environmental benefits that cannot easily be replicated elsewhere.

For that reason, Pennsylvania Farm Bureau recommends that development avoid USDA Land Capability Class I through III soils whenever possible and instead prioritize brownfield and previously developed industrial sites. Pennsylvania has numerous locations already served by infrastructure that may be appropriate for redevelopment without permanently removing farmland from production.

Many of our members have voluntarily enrolled their farms in Pennsylvania's Farmland Preservation Program because they are committed to protecting their land for future generations. They made a conscious decision to accept permanent development restrictions in exchange for preserving productive farmland and ensuring that their farms remain in agricultural use. We believe that commitment should be respected. If a landowner has chosen to permanently preserve their farm, public utilities and infrastructure projects should honor that decision and avoid undermining the purpose of the preservation easement. Protecting these preserved farms is essential to maintaining Pennsylvania's agricultural land base and respecting the stewardship commitments made by farm families.

This is not simply about protecting farmland today, it is about ensuring future generations have the opportunity to continue farming tomorrow.

Energy and Water Infrastructure

Another significant concern is the demand data centers place on electrical infrastructure and water resources.

Artificial intelligence and cloud computing require facilities that consume substantial amounts of electricity, often equal to the needs of tens of thousands of homes. Farmers depend on reliable electrical service every day to milk cows, ventilate livestock barns, refrigerate milk, irrigate crops, store produce, and operate grain drying equipment. Service interruptions or increased costs directly affect agricultural productivity.

Similarly, water is a shared resource. Agriculture, municipalities, manufacturers, and now increasingly data centers all depend on reliable water supplies. Understanding how these facilities affect local water availability is essential before major development occurs.

Pennsylvania Farm Bureau therefore supports tracking the direct and indirect impacts of AI deployment and data center development on electricity demand, water consumption, and land use. Better information will allow policymakers to make informed decisions while protecting existing users.

We also believe new large electrical loads should not jeopardize reliability for existing residential customers, farms, or businesses. Utilities should ensure sufficient capacity exists before approving major new customers, and developers should bear the costs associated with infrastructure necessary to serve their facilities rather than shifting those costs onto existing ratepayers.

Fiscal Responsibility

Our members also believe economic development incentives should be carefully evaluated.

Pennsylvania Farm Bureau opposes providing special tax incentives specifically for data center development. While every industry benefits from a strong business climate, agriculture has long operated without many of the incentives being proposed for other sectors. Public investments should provide clear public benefits while ensuring taxpayers are not subsidizing infrastructure primarily benefiting private development.

Artificial Intelligence

Although today's discussion often focuses on data centers, our members also recognize that artificial intelligence will increasingly shape education, workforce development, and agriculture itself.

Pennsylvania Farm Bureau supports responsible AI adoption that includes transparency, human oversight in high-stakes decisions, teacher training, data privacy protections, and workforce education. AI has tremendous potential to improve efficiency and innovation, but public confidence depends on responsible implementation.

Looking Ahead

As Pennsylvania considers how to attract this growing industry, we encourage policymakers to recognize agriculture as essential infrastructure. Farms not only produce food, fiber, and fuel; they preserve open space, support wildlife habitat, sustain rural economies, and contribute significantly to Pennsylvania's quality of life.

The choices made today regarding land use, infrastructure investment, utility planning, and economic incentives will have lasting consequences for both agriculture and rural communities.

Pennsylvania Farm Bureau stands ready to work collaboratively with legislators, state agencies, local governments, utilities, developers, and other stakeholders to develop policies that encourage innovation while protecting Pennsylvania's agricultural future.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I look forward to answering any questions the Board may have.

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