

JULY-AUGUST 2026 • VOL. 84 / NO. 4

PUBLIC POWER MAGAZINE

AMERICAN PUBLIC POWER ASSOCIATION

AI AND UTILITIES

Preparing your
workforce for AI **p. 14**

Responsible data center
development **p. 24**

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PUBLIC POWER MAGAZINE

JULY-AUGUST 2026

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Cover photo courtesy Coldwater Board of Public Utilities, Michigan.

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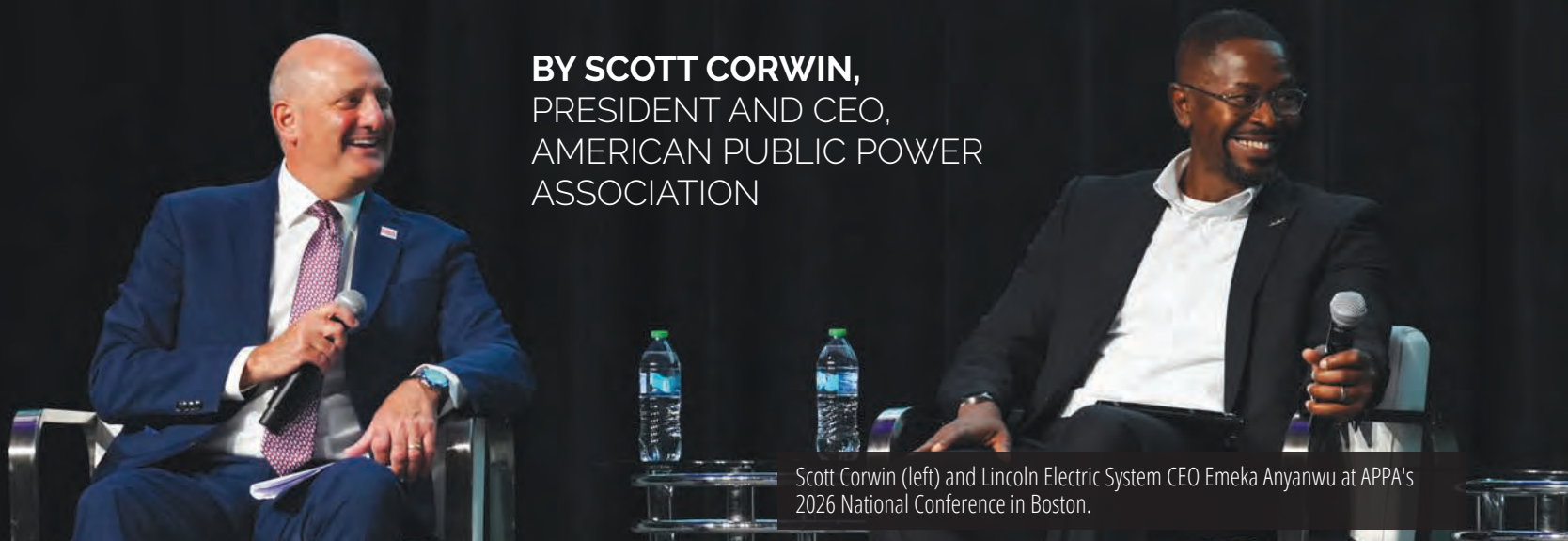
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AI and the Role of Utilities

BY SCOTT CORWIN,
PRESIDENT AND CEO,
AMERICAN PUBLIC POWER
ASSOCIATION



Scott Corwin (left) and Lincoln Electric System CEO Emeka Anyanwu at APPA's 2026 National Conference in Boston.

“AI is one of the most powerful forces shaping the world today. It is not a clever app or a single model; it is essential infrastructure, like electricity and the internet.”

- Jensen Huang, Founder and CEO, NVIDIA

Placing artificial intelligence on par with electricity may be a step too far — much of modern society, including AI, doesn't operate without it. Yet, there is no denying that AI is a singular focus of massive infrastructure investments occurring across the U.S. and the world. And AI is playing an increasing role in power supply planning and operations, rate design, and system maintenance. It presents new tools and new risks for utilities to manage, from how they handle customer service to analyzing system performance and forecasting usage to cybersecurity and beyond.

Huang further described AI as a “five-layer cake,” with energy serving as the foundational layer that will ultimately determine how much AI will produce. Public power communities now serve some of the largest data centers on earth, providing the power that is driving state-of-the-art technology forward in a global competition that impacts not only our economy, but also our national security.

Certainly, these large new loads do not fit every community. Locally governed public power utilities can evaluate whether a large facility is a match for a community and its priorities, and

whether there is mutual benefit. In the federal policy realm, we are noting to policymakers and regulators that one-size-fits-all policies on data center interconnection, cost allocation, and rates generally do not work for the thousands of diverse public power communities across the country.

APPA has advocated strongly that data centers should not harm grid reliability nor affordability for existing customers. What is called for is smarter, technology-neutral permitting reform; flexibility for locally governed utilities in issuing longer-term contracts; and protections for existing customers against unfair cost shifts.

This issue of *Public Power* explores both the functional side of considerations for using AI in your utility — including how public power utilities are using various AI tools (see page 6), supporting staff readiness and adoption (see page 14), and creating policies that support secure and ethical use (see page 40) — as well as how public power is working with data center developers and preparing their communities for the associated load growth (pages 24 and 32).

Whether your utility or community approaches AI and data centers with guarded caution or open arms, APPA is here to support and connect public power in this time of major change. We want to hear how you are using AI and what insights you have learned, how you are preparing for or working with new large load customers, and what resources will help you do so more effectively. In addition to having these conversations at our events and trainings (including a Large Load Virtual Summit in November), we are launching a new APPA Engage group on AI — look for it on APPA Engage or let us know if you'd like to join. 



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HOW PUBLIC POWER IS PUTTING AI TO WORK

UTILITIES CAUTIOUSLY TEST TOOLS FOR CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT, FORECASTING, AND MONITORING

BY BETSY LOEFF, CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Public power utilities big and small are already looking at what artificial intelligence can do for efficiency, forecasting, and more. Tasks range from supporting everyday interactions to conducting deep analyses and keeping up with changing regulations and market conditions. The aim of combining AI-based tools and technology with utility expertise is to improve safety, inform risk management, enhance reliability, and lower costs for utilities and customers alike.

While AI tools are still being honed and trained, customers are increasingly

becoming accustomed to — and might even take for granted — how AI has become ingrained with daily interactions. However, these tools present risks if given automatic controls that exceed their capabilities.

As public power organizations explore and implement these tools, they are doing so with caution and consideration for utility and community security while working to keep up with customer expectations around efficient, personalized service.



Efficient, Effective Interactions

Often, a first place for AI adoption for utilities is applications that aim to enhance customer service.

In one example, Greenville Electric Utility System in Texas has managed 20% annual growth over the past six years by adding only two full-time call center workers and offering customers the option to use an AI-based chatbot.

“We didn’t feel that we had the staffing to manage a live chat in a way that a user might expect,” said Kami Williams, community connections specialist for GEUS. “Whenever you get on a chat, most people think they’ll ask a question and then have a person on the chat within a couple of minutes, but our [customer service representatives] are already busy helping people who walk into the lobby, call us, or send us an email.”

GEUS has 18,000 meter connections, and the utility manages billing for city services including water, sewer, and trash. The team picked a system that can deliver pre-trained

answers to customer queries or point customers to a page on the utility’s website that answers the question in depth or allows them to take action.

“Our customer service manager takes the lead on writing and editing some responses, but I recommended we direct users to the website where we already house information, too,” Williams said. That recommendation means the team doesn’t need to constantly update the chatbot responses when things such as rates or program offerings change.

Williams said getting the chatbot started took minimal time. “We looked at responses daily for a few weeks,” she explained. Now that the system has been in place for a couple of years, the team reviews responses each quarter and makes changes as needed.

In the week before the interview for this article, Williams’ dashboard showed that the chatbot answered 117 queries from 77 unique users. The self-resolution rate was 78%, which she explained means the chatbot answered 78% of the questions asked in a way that provided customers with the information they needed.



GEUS' community connections department (from left to right: Chris Mangual, Jimmy Dickey, Kami Williams), general manager Tyler Hjorth (center), customer service manager Micah Harris, and board secretary Doug Rozhart (right) celebrate the utility's 135th anniversary at the chamber of commerce. Photo courtesy GEUS.

In Colorado, Colorado Springs Utilities doesn't use an AI chatbot with customers but does support call center staff with AI tools. Service agents save time with real-time access to a knowledge base, making them better informed and making responding faster. Those agents also save time with AI-generated wrap-up codes and call summaries, which have decreased after-call activities by 20 seconds per call.

Springs Utilities has implemented Voice Analytics (Genesys), which provide insights from every customer conversation, automated and searchable transcription ability with topic and behavior intelligence, advanced customer sentiment, and agent empathy analysis. All of this provides the utility with better visibility into why customers contact them, improved coaching and quality assurance for their agents, enhanced customer experience, and increased operational efficiency.

Salt River Project, which serves 1.2 million electric customers in Arizona and fields more than 1.5 million customer calls each year, is looking at similar uses of AI, such as generating call summaries or using prior interactions to help contact center agents understand why a person is calling. Kaitlyn Libby, director of corporate strategy and risk management at SRP, said the AI tool SRP is piloting provides real-time insights and

assistance that enable contact center agents to focus on the discussion rather than taking notes or toggling between tabs to search for information. "We're not planning on having AI interact with our customers directly," Libby said. "We are really trying to figure out how it can assist our agents behind the scenes."

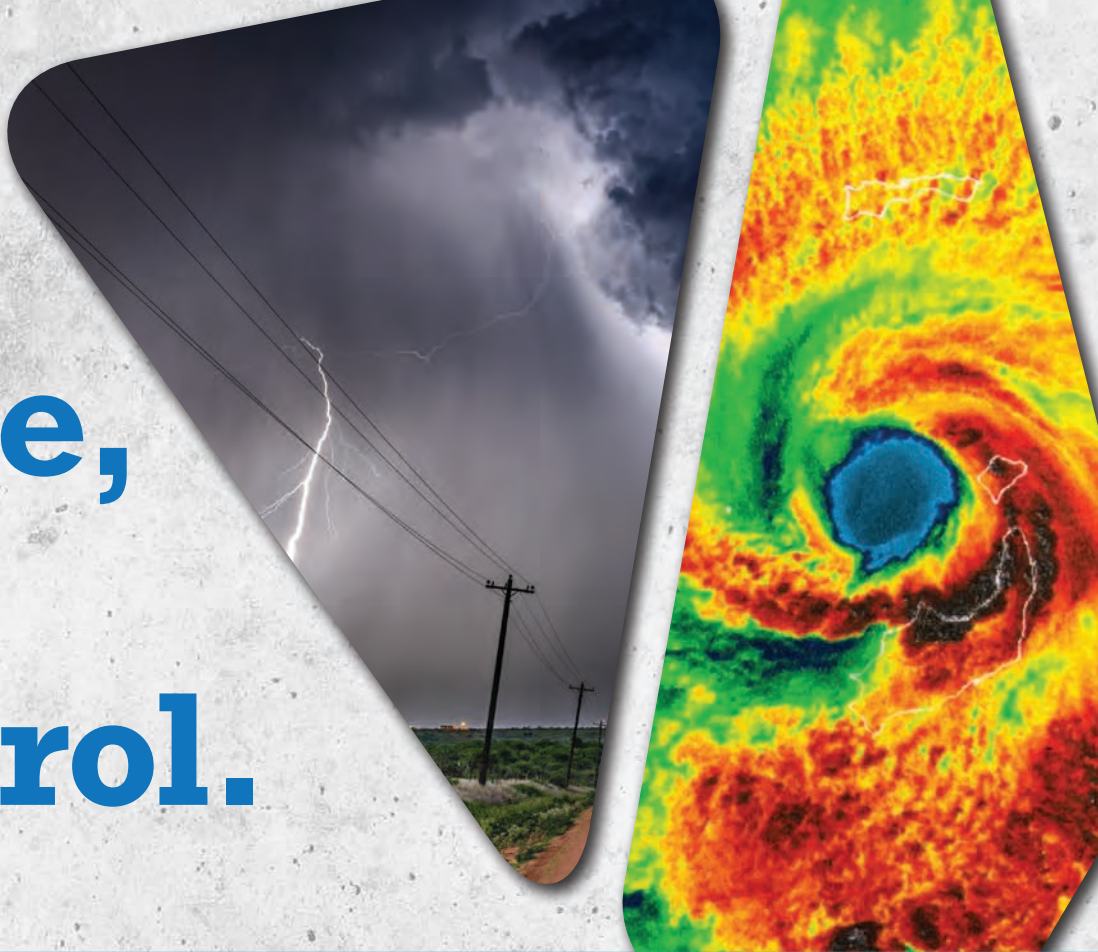
Informed Decision-Making

Utilities are also finding that AI is suited for analyzing a complex array of factors for more accurate forecasting.

The procurement team at Springs Utilities has time-saving uses for AI, said Rich Norton, the utility's general manager of supply chain. "We've used AI to assess supplier cost increases by analyzing large volumes of internal and external data to determine whether requested price changes are justified," he explained. Among other things, the AI looks at real-time prices for commodities such as the metals used in transformers and other equipment to estimate a should-cost baseline.

"AI quantifies reasonable portions of the price increase, highlights potential overcharges, and generates recommended

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How Public Power Has Used AI

Administrative & Governance Tasks

- Develop presentations/slide decks
- Catalog workflows and processes
- Summarize emails/reports
- Draft standard operating procedures
- Automate/support general administrative tasks
- Take/organize notes
- Research/review board minutes and key actions
- Summarize meeting minutes
- Research/summarize legislative/regulatory text
- Identify relevant funding opportunities in federal policy
- Highlight compliance changes
- Detect data anomalies
- Custom bases for internal use/consistency
- Transcribe audio

Accounting & Finance

- Process invoices
- Identify billing corrections
- Draft rate case materials
- Integrate financial planning and load forecasting

Communications & Marketing

- Draft public messaging
- Create short promotional videos
- Brainstorming ideas for social media posts
- Creating/altering images
- Message sentiment analysis
- Update/personalize press releases and other templated messages
- Generate alt text for digital images
- Adjust reading level/tone of messages
- Develop basic websites
- Cluster customers into segments for program targeting

Customer Service

- Identify meter issues
- Conduct customer research
- Website chatbots
- Created bill estimation tool
- Prompt/response library for common customer inquiries
- Suggest resolutions based on closed calls/tickets
- Translation assistance

Reliability & Risk

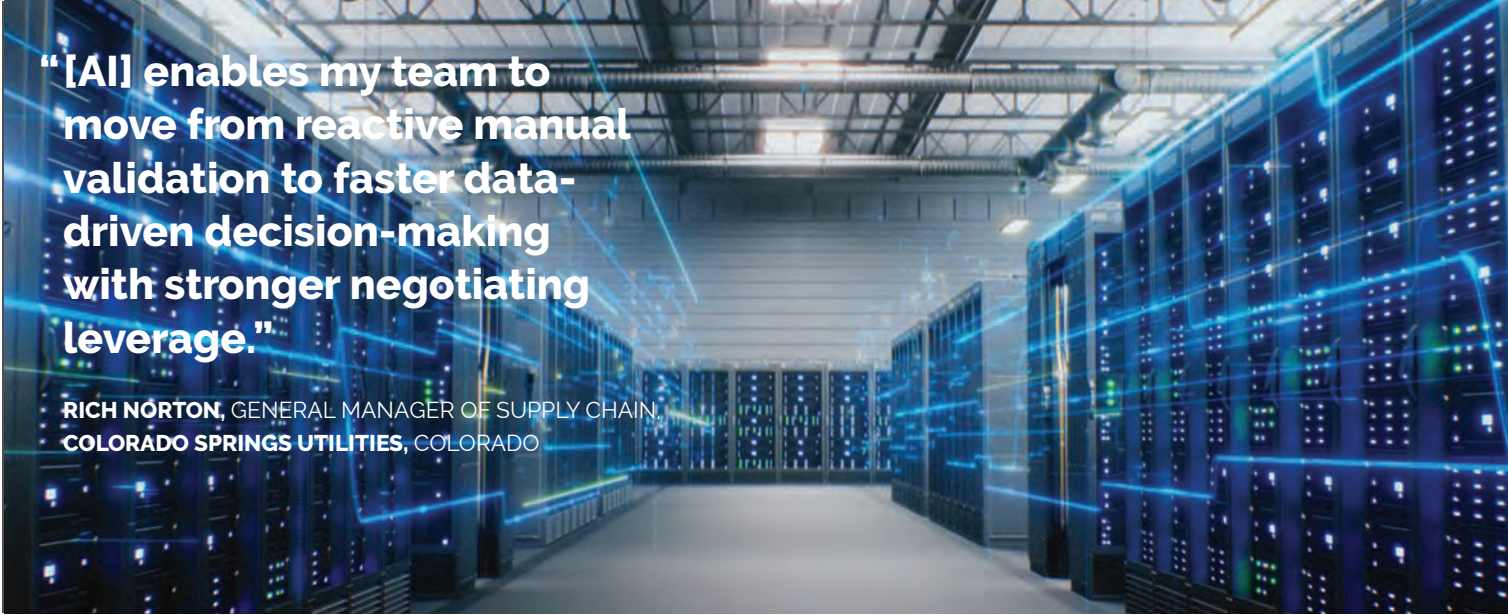
- Analyze asset health for predictive maintenance
- Identify operational trends
- Analyze drone/satellite inspection imagery
- Detect structural issues in poles
- Analyze distribution system risk
- Project weather and wildfire risks
- Prepare initial qualitative risk assessment
- Detect smoke near utility assets and send alerts

Supply Management

- Analyze usage patterns
- Load forecasting
- Forecast procurement/supply chain prices or equipment needs
- Model impacts of EV and DER adoption

Safety

- Draft job hazard analyses
- Analyze incident/near-miss trends
- Look up/offer advice from utility manuals, briefings, and other guidance



“[AI] enables my team to move from reactive manual validation to faster data-driven decision-making with stronger negotiating leverage.”

RICH NORTON, GENERAL MANAGER OF SUPPLY CHAIN,
COLORADO SPRINGS UTILITIES, COLORADO

actions for commercial negotiations,” Norton continued. “This enables my team to move from reactive manual validation to faster data-driven decision-making with stronger negotiating leverage.”

The Springs Utilities procurement team is in the early stages of using AI to compare supplier proposals. Responses to a complex RFP can be hundreds of pages long, which means that historically, evaluation teams had to spend considerable time assessing and scoring such proposals. Norton said with the use of AI, reviews of supplier proposals can be completed in a matter of minutes, although he warns that one still needs to carefully read the executive summary AI provides and ensure it aligns with the proposal.

Looking ahead, Norton’s team is developing an AI-driven tool for labor and materials cost trends to provide forward-looking market insights. The platform evaluates a broad range of external factors — including geopolitical developments, executive orders, and regulatory changes — to help anticipate cost fluctuations and support more informed decision-making. “In today’s environment, we have to account for all those variables,” Norton said.

Another tool the Springs Utilities procurement team is developing with the technology team will analyze past statements of work documentation to help employees write better SOWs.

Continuous Training

SRP has given staffers who write computer code access to GitHub, a developer platform where programmers can write, store, share, and manage code. Owned by Microsoft, GitHub has its own version of Copilot that helps developers write code, so it’s speeding up the development process. However, the utility’s initial testing team found that machine-written code needed human review and correction, Libby said.

The need for human intervention, correction, and training is common in AI. When SRP installed an AI-powered camera system to monitor remote transmission lines running through forested land, the camera vendor also provided 24/7 customer support, including vetting the images that trains the AI to more accurately distinguish actual wildfires from weather phenomena or campfires. Now the system sends real-time alerts to SRP’s emergency services team so they can review the cameras’ footage before taking action, Libby said.

In addition to its remote-monitoring network, SRP has sensors along the transmission line that record temperature, wind, and precipitation. These data help the utility identify risks, such as high winds and low humidity, along specific corridors of the system, allowing grid operators to de-energize parts of the system rather than implement a disruptive, widespread public safety power shutoff. It also helps operators



“AI’s grassroots movement helped us build early momentum, but could become a little disjointed over time if you don’t coordinate it.”

KAITLYN LIBBY, DIRECTOR FOR CORPORATE STRATEGY AND RISK MANAGEMENT, SALT RIVER PROJECT, ARIZONA

flag wind corridors so that maintenance workers can check for excessive conductor sway or prioritize tree-trimming operations.

Test First

All of the applications SRP and the other utilities are now using were piloted before being rolled out.

“AI is sort of a crawl-walk-run sort of thing,” said Travas Deal, CEO of Colorado Springs Utilities. “First, you have to have governance around it. Then, you look for those lower-risk projects and test them out. But I think the opportunities and utility are endless. AI is going to be transformative for our organization and others.” Deal spoke more about how Springs Utilities is using AI at APPA’s 2026 National Conference in Boston.

Both SRP and Springs Utilities are trying to apply consistency and guardrails in AI adoption. Both allow staff to use Microsoft Copilot, and both have implemented policies to ensure the basics are covered. At Springs Utilities, that means multiple departments vet all and AI applications before they are made available for business use. The cybersecurity team has implemented controls that prevent users from accessing unapproved AI platforms while providing secure solutions such

as Copilot, Deal said. “Nothing else can be downloaded with any Colorado Springs Utilities computer or cellphone.”

The Springs Utilities team continues to train all 2,300 employees on compliance issues related to data and AI use. Like Springs Utilities, the SRP team is carefully training employees and working to protect sensitive data from AI exposure. “We’re not putting any sort of sensitive customer data or critical infrastructure information into AI tools,” Libby said.

“Whether the organization’s ready or not, you have employees who see AI and use it in their personal lives, and, of course, that starts intriguing them,” said Deal. “When it first started really taking off — before we even started looking at how to utilize it — we wanted to make sure that the AI applications our employees were using met our cybersecurity and privacy standards, especially when it comes to the protection of customer data.”

Data issues aren’t the only risks AI can pose. There’s a price tag, too.

Libby acknowledged a strong appetite for AI across the utility, encompassing requests for many different tools. “AI’s grassroots movement helped us build the early momentum, but could become a little disjointed over time if you don’t coordinate it,” she noted, adding that many AI tools are shifting to usage-based fee structures and could chalk up “very real” costs for the organization if not managed with intention. 🇺🇸

From Reactive to Resilient: Rethinking Utility Safety in the Age of AI

The storm rolled through overnight, leaving downed lines and dark neighborhoods in its wake. By first light, crews were already in the field navigating unfamiliar terrain, working long hours, and making split-second decisions to restore power safely. For public power utilities, this is routine. So is the reality that even experienced crews and strong protocols don't eliminate risk.

The challenge isn't lack of commitment. It's that many safety systems haven't kept pace with the complexity of modern utility operations.

Today's utilities are managing more than poles and wires. They're balancing grid modernization, extreme weather, cybersecurity, and evolving regulations, while maintaining reliability and affordability. Crews are increasingly dispersed, often working alone or under pressure in fast-changing conditions. In that environment, safety risks shift quickly.

Too often, safety still runs on paper logs, spreadsheets, and disconnected systems. Incident reports may live in one system, training records in another, and corrective actions somewhere else, creating a fragmented view of risk that makes it harder to spot patterns, respond quickly, or prevent the next incident.

This limited integration creates blind spots, especially around reporting, emerging risks like fatigue and stress, and contractor oversight. Utilities also depend on third-party



workers who must meet the same standards but may operate outside core systems.

The result is a safety model that can be more reactive than preventative, responding after incidents instead of anticipating and preventing them.

For public power leaders, the question is pressing: how do you move from reactive safety management to a proactive, resilient approach?

The key is connecting systems that have been operating separately. A growing number of utilities are shifting toward platform-based EHS software, which bring incident management, training, inspections, corrective actions, and compliance into a single view. Safety leaders can see what's happening across the workforce and operations without chasing data across systems.

With centralized data and workflows, utilities can identify trends that might otherwise stay hidden, including recurring

equipment issues, patterns in near misses, or gaps in training. Automated workflows help ensure incidents trigger corrective and preventive actions that are tracked to completion. Field crews can access checklists and report hazards from any device and any location.

Add purpose-built, artificial intelligence, and the model becomes even more powerful.

AI-driven systems can analyze historical and real-time data to flag emerging risks earlier, adapt plans to field conditions, and prioritize corrective actions by risk level. Instead of relying on hindsight, teams gain practical foresight.

This technology is about supporting people, not replacing them. Line workers, supervisors, and safety leaders still make calls that keep work safe and reliable. Better information simply makes those decisions faster and more consistent, embedding safety into daily operations instead of a separate process.

Cloud-based solutions like the HSI Platform help close this gap by unifying EHS software, workforce training, compliance tools, and analytics. Incident management, contractor oversight, audits/inspections, and corrective action tracking work together to give utilities the visibility and control needed to manage risk at scale.

The impact is measurable: fewer incidents, stronger compliance, and a workforce better prepared for the realities of the job.

Back in the field, the crews responding to an outage now work with a different level of support. Hazards are flagged in real time. Procedures are instantly accessible. Risks are identified earlier. The job is still demanding, but it's safer, smarter, and more connected.

For public power utilities, the path forward is clear. The question is no longer whether to modernize safety programs, but how quickly can that transformation happen.

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To understand your organization's current position, evaluate your existing safety and EHS approach and explore what a more connected, AI-powered, data-drive solution could unlock. Find out more with HSI: <https://hsi.com/solutions/ehs-environmental-health-and-safety/ehs-for-the-power-industry>



Building AI Readiness

Utilities Create Policies, Guidelines, and Training to Prepare Their Workforce

BY JESSICA PORTER,
CONTRIBUTING WRITER



Staff complete AI training at Greenville Utilities Commission, North Carolina.

The discourse around using artificial intelligence seems to always come back to making sure to keep the human touch involved — whether in validating input or output, owning decision-making, or taking action. For organizations, the challenge is ensuring that employees have the knowledge and support to use these tools effectively.

AI is often heralded as a productivity aid, but as some leaders push for more adoption across their organizations, they often find it is not yet achieving those results. Part of the issue is readiness and understanding — the AI tools can only help as much as people are able to use them. If people don't have training that helps them understand how the tools work or that goes deep into how to use the tools well, then they will only use the tools for moderate improvements and simpler tasks.

While many utility jobs require hands-on experience and skills that AI cannot replace, there are still ample opportunities for AI to enhance technical skills and operational understanding. Preparing the public power workforce for the age of AI means finding the right balance of allowing freedom to explore emerging tools and setting guardrails to protect customer information and utility operations. Resist AI

“If an employee is going to use a tool, we’re holding that employee accountable.”

JULIE DECOOK, COMMUNICATIONS MANAGER,
HOLLAND BOARD OF PUBLIC WORKS, MICHIGAN

and utilities risk falling behind and unintentionally putting customer information at risk. Embrace AI too quickly or passively, and utilities risk investing dollars in technologies that may be redundant or overkill.

Another set of concerns exist around the security and ethics of using AI-based tools for certain functions. As these tools are still getting developed or trained, public power utilities are working to balance implementation and experimentation with safety and security.

As they navigate these challenges, public power utilities are setting policies and guidelines and learning best practices for preparing employees to use AI tools to optimize their workflows while prioritizing privacy and security.

Guidance and Accountability

Recognizing the risk and opportunities associated with AI, leadership at Holland Board of Public Works in Michigan developed AI guidelines for employees centered around generative AI. The process, which lasted from July 2024 to June 2025, included gathering a team of 11 people from across the organization in discussion and research and reviewing policies from other organizations.

“We didn’t want everyone testing out the latest and greatest model they heard about over the weekend with our equipment and data,” said Julie DeCook, communications manager for Holland BPW. “We did research to understand the risks to privacy, security, and other issues like copyright and bias. It boils down to employee accountability, safety, and integrity.”

“What resonated with us were the policies that were more directive and behavior-based versus being too specific, because we can’t predict the future,” DeCook said. “We also know through experience in creating corporate policy that if it’s too granular and specific, it doesn’t stand up to the test of time.”



Julie DeCook. Photo courtesy Holland Board of Public Works.

The result was a straightforward directive centered around the utility’s core values with guidelines and expectations for employee use.

“We thought it would be important to link to our core values because those are concepts employees understand and have relationships with,” DeCook said.

The guidelines encourage employees to use AI tools with caution and to always use critical thinking. They remind employees not to use AI for decision-making, and that everything generated by AI requires human review. Employees are prohibited from adding sensitive, confidential, or personally identifiable information into generative AI.

To minimize risks related to privacy, security, and ethics, the guidelines also require employees to understand how the AI tool they want to use works.

“We tell them: If you’re going to pick a tool, make an informed decision, because you’re responsible for what you enter, the tool you use, and whatever it generates,” DeCook said. “If an employee is going to use a tool, we’re holding that employee accountable.”

After noticing employees using AI in their workflows, Greenville Utilities Commission in North Carolina began developing a policy in 2023 by evaluating approaches taken by other companies and utilities. In 2024, the public power utility adopted a policy that guides employees in using AI safely and in compliance with existing regulations.



Michael Champ (left) and other SMUD employees with the group from Cordova High School that won the Best in Energy Award from SMUD for developing an AI agent to help residents save energy. Photo courtesy SMUD.

GUC’s policy dictates that employees cannot solely use AI to make operational or financial decisions or decisions that will have an impact on customers. Employees are required to label all work that was created using AI in any capacity. Additionally, employees are prohibited from sending proprietary or confidential information outside the organization, which includes adding it to AI tools.

“We used the Samsung example, where engineers used AI for designs, and those designs became part of the public domain,” said Andy Anderson, chief administrative officer at GUC. “When we use examples, employees better understand the risk and need to protect the company’s and customers’ data at all costs.”

Additionally, the team incorporated a section on AI into its Acceptable Use Policy two years ago and are working on an updated version. Every employee must review and sign a statement that confirms they have read and will abide by the policy.

Learning As You Go

Using AI tools is voluntary for Holland BPW employees. The utility holds voluntary training to facilitate conversation among its team. Facilitators share ways they have been successful with AI and ask employees what tools might help their workflows.

Regardless of whether they’re interested in AI, all employees go through Holland BPW’s cybersecurity training that features safety and accountability, and its IT department is always available to answer tech questions.

For employees interested in diving deeper into the capabilities of AI, Holland BPW holds workshops to build their skill set and created a Microsoft Teams channel where employees can share tips. Leadership recorded a video that outlines basic Microsoft Copilot training, the utility’s preferred and approved AI tool, to help employees create more effective prompts that generate better content.

“The learning curve is to be patient, allow yourself to experiment, and always read what comes out of AI. Push back and tell it to revise what it generates. Make the tool get the

product as good as possible,” DeCook said. “If you’re trying to draft a list of topics, push back to help train the AI, which will help it understand what you want to generate so it will improve over time.”

The GUC team attends and presents at utility-related conferences and local events on various business topics to stay updated on trends in AI use. The team recently presented at an AI event at a local university with representatives from the healthcare, manufacturing, and defense industries.

“We’re leaning in and volunteering to speak at events,” said Todd Cannon, director of information technology at GUC. “We’re not AI experts, but it puts us in the front of the room to share ideas and learn from others.”

Meanwhile, AI has proved to be an invaluable tool for the utility as seasoned leaders retire and new employees join the industry.

If a pivotal staff member is nearing retirement, the GUC team develops models to learn and store that person’s industry



“Succession planning is important, and having AI to collect and mine 30 years of knowledge for the next employee to leverage is extremely valuable.”

ANDY ANDERSON, CHIEF
ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER,
GREENVILLE UTILITIES COMMISSION,
NORTH CAROLINA

STORM RESPONSE STARTS BEFORE THE WEATHER DOES

- TRUSTED GEAR
- RENTALS
- TESTING AND REPAIRS
- GROUNDS AND JUMPERS
- FAST SUPPORT
- QUICK SHIPPING



SCAN TO GET STORM-READY BEFORE THE NEXT EMERGENCY CALL



“We need employees to use tools and make mistakes in safe ways that aren’t high impact. That’s how you learn boundaries and capabilities.”

MICHAEL CHAMP, DIRECTOR
OF SPECIALIZED ENTERPRISE
INITIATIVES, **SACRAMENTO
MUNICIPAL UTILITY DISTRICT,**
CALIFORNIA

knowledge. For example, an irreplaceable employee with 30 years of experience recently retired from the utility. GUC captured documents she created over her career and used AI to index and reference that information. Instead of having to sit down and type, employees can use dictation to document their knowledge.

“It’s little things that can make a big difference in cataloging information,” noted Anderson.

“Succession planning is important, and having AI to collect and mine 30 years of knowledge for the next employee to leverage is extremely valuable,” Anderson said. “For employees who are central to load management initiatives, having an AI model that helps them more accurately predict the optimal time to implement changes saves millions.”

Using tools to allow for easy access to information that can only be learned over a long career in the industry allows GUC to bring new hires up to speed quickly or to have another reference when they have questions about utility processes and practices.

“We leveraged AI within our IT ticketing system. When someone calls or messages with an issue, the system mines past tickets and presents possible fixes based on history,” Anderson said. “We depend heavily on interns for our help desk, and the

AI tool helps them make decisions you’d normally expect from an IT professional with many more years of experience.”

Experimenting the Right Way

In California, Sacramento Municipal Utility District created an AI Governance Council in 2024 that includes executives from various departments, including IT, legal, human resources, cybersecurity, and its diversity and inclusion group. SMUD also developed a roadmap, AI+HI, that outlines the public power utility’s AI vision, guiding principles, and an adaptable path forward centered on human intelligence.

SMUD blocks all AI tools except those that go through its governance process to help the utility understand and control where data is being used. Once a tool is approved, it’s added to a register, so SMUD has visibility into which tools and models employees are using.

“We look to see if it’s an appropriate use of AI, and then we put in controls we need,” said Michael Champ, director of specialized enterprise initiatives at SMUD. “We start with a strong control framework and adjust it over time to add appropriate flexibility as we better understand the AI tool’s behavior, capabilities, and limitations.”

The council meets monthly to discuss potential AI opportunities and review current AI use cases to ensure each aligns with cybersecurity and ethics standards. The group created a risk and control matrix that identifies the risk associated with various AI tools and presents controls to avoid those risks.

SMUD leadership provides high-level AI training to employees about authorized and unauthorized uses of AI. The training reinforces policies, such as not to upload data into a public tool, and provides tips for employees to watch out for bias and hallucinations. The training also walks employees through how to use SMUD GPT, which is a customized and trained tool for the utility.

The team holds workshops, town halls, and presentations to train staff. For example, it recently held a demonstration on ways field employees could use AI, such as in seeking health and safety advice or for translation assistance.

“Just because you use a tool doesn’t mean you’ve thought of all the ways you can use it in your job,” Champ said. “Training helps them think of more ways they can use it. We talk about

what they do in their job and how it can be optimized.”

Once SMUD implements a tool, they lean on employees to help test it. For example, AI has repeatedly proved it’s unable to do mathematical analysis and accurately cite references — inadequacies only learned through employee trial and error.

“We need employees to use tools and make mistakes in safe ways that aren’t high impact. That’s how you learn boundaries and capabilities,” Champ said. “Every day we’re learning the ways AI can make mistakes and how we can adjust our approach to get better results.”

Similar to safety shares, SMUD holds “AI shares” to encourage employees to talk about what might have gone wrong with their AI use. Champ has found that people can be reluctant to share the ways they use AI and even more reluctant to share the errors they find.

“To get people comfortable talking about AI use takes ongoing management to change those relationships,” Champ said.

When the message of openness and experimentation comes from the top down, employees are more likely to share their own experiences. If members of leadership share their own experiences with AI, including failures and successes, it builds trust that employees can do the same.

“The message needs to be ‘I’m not leading you in this new thing; we’re all in this together and learning,’” Champ said. “Some employees might be ahead of me in the process, and we’re doing it together.”

Alongside its strong internal efforts, SMUD supports community-based AI learning, including backing a local high school student showcase, where students presented AI agents they developed during a 10-week program. SMUD presented an award to a team project that focused on helping residents save energy and reduce costs. 🇺🇸

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MYTHS AND FACTS ABOUT AI AND ELECTRICITY USAGE

As artificial intelligence drives change in the energy sector, its rapid advancement leaves a lot of room for questions – and uncertainty – around its energy use needs and impacts.

MYTH
The growth in AI's electric use is all hype and inflated projections.

FACT
Data centers consumed **224 terawatt-hours** of electricity in 2025 — nearly triple the 76 TWh used in 2018.ⁱ This growth is increasingly attributed to data centers serving AI. Data center usage is expected to more than double to 426 TWh by 2030.ⁱⁱ

Electric Use of U.S. Data Centers

Year	Electric Use (TWh)
2018	76
2020	110
2022	140
2024	190
2026	250
2028	350
2030	426

FACT
Data centers currently use less electricity than residential air conditioning and commercial lighting. Though anticipated growth could increase the proportion of electricity consumed by data centers to 10% or more of the U.S. total by 2030.ⁱⁱⁱ

5.8%

Residential AC^{iv}

4.7%

Commercial lighting^v

4.4%

Data centers^{vi}

Data centers consume a greater share of electricity in some states than others.^{vii}

25%
Virginia

15%
North Dakota

12%
Nebraska

11%
Iowa

11%
Oregon

8.6%
Nevada

MYTH
Data centers comprise the greatest share of electricity use in the U.S.

MYTH
AI is behind all load growth.

FACT
While data centers comprise the majority of projected load growth, not all data centers are for AI, and other factors include:

Manufacturing & industrial uses

Population growth

Electrification of transportation

Building electrification

FACT
A third of data centers are in Virginia, Texas, and California, and half of data centers currently under construction are part of existing large clusters.^{viii} Behind Virginia and Texas, Georgia and Illinois have the most planned data centers.

While **87%** of existing data centers are in urban areas, **67%** of planned data centers are in rural areas.

Only **39%** of planned data centers are in counties without any preexisting ones.^{ix}

MYTH
Data center development is distributed evenly across the country.

MYTH
Most of AI's energy use is from people making silly images and deepfake videos.

FACT
Less than half of data centers' power consumption is for computing power, with cooling, lighting, and other uses comprising anywhere from **40%-70%**.^x An estimated 80-90% of computing power for AI is used for inference – or to train the AI model, not for people to use it.^{xi}

While exact energy use for individual tasks depends on the complexity of the model and requested output, individual tasks on average use a small amount of energy.

Text generation: 114-6,706 joules per response

Image generation: 2,282-4,402 joules

Video: about 3.4 million joules, or 1 kilowatt-hour, for a 5-second video

FACT
User-submitted reviews of various AI models, such as the AI Energy Score, show vast differences in efficiency – with similar tasks taking hundreds or thousands time the energy from one model to the next.

MYTH
All AI models and tasks use roughly the same amount of energy.

i Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, "2024 United States Data Center Energy Usage Report", <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/32d6m0d1>

ii International Energy Agency, "Key Questions on Energy and AI", <https://www.iea.org/reports/key-questions-on-energy-and-ai>

iii University of Oxford Environmental Change Institute, "AI Could Consume 10% of U.S. Electricity by 2030", <https://www.eci.ox.ac.uk/news/ai-could-consume-10-us-electricity-2030-researchers-outline-path-sustainable-growth>

iv EIA, "How much Electricity is Used for Air Conditioning in the United States?", <https://www.eia.gov/tools/faqs/faq.php?id=1174&t=1>

v EIA, "How much Electricity is Used for Lighting in the United States?", <https://www.eia.gov/tools/faqs/faq.php?id=99&t=3>

vi Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, "2024 United States Data Center Energy Usage Report", <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/32d6m0d1>

vii Electric Power Research Institute, "Analyzing Artificial Intelligence and Data Center Energy Consumption", <https://www.epri.com/research/products/3002028905>

viii Pew Research Center, "US data centers' energy use amid the artificial intelligence boom," <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/10/24/what-we-know-about-energy-use-at-us-data-centers-amid-the-ai-boom/>

ix Pew Research Center, "Most new data centers in the U.S. are coming to rural areas", <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2026/04/13/most-new-data-centers-in-the-us-are-coming-to-rural-areas/>

x Sandia National Laboratories, "A review of Load Growth Drivers & Associated Resource Planning Activities", June 2025. https://www.sandia.gov/app/uploads/sites/273/dlm_uploads/2025/07/Sandia-Report_Load-Growth-Drivers_June-2025.pdf

xi MIT Technology Review, "We did the math on AI's energy footprint", <https://www.technologyreview.com/2025/05/20/1116327/ai-energy-usage-climate-footprint-big-tech/>

Public Power Leaders: Michael Beckham

Michael Beckham has served as electric utilities director of Lakeland Electric in Florida since 2022, after starting as assistant general manager in 2015. His leadership has contributed to Lakeland Electric earning a Reliable Public Power Provider, or RP3, designation from the American Public Power Association in recognition of the utility's outstanding reliability, safety, and workforce development. His leadership in the electric sector has spanned both investor-owned utilities and public power, including at Georgia Power and Alabama Power, both Southern Company subsidiaries, FirstEnergy Corporation, and the Tennessee Valley Authority. Beckham holds a Bachelor of Science in electrical engineering from Georgia Tech and a Professional Engineering License.



What brought you to your career in public power?

I'm a Professional Engineer by training, and after graduating in 1981, at that time the power industry was growing rapidly — especially in the development of nuclear power. I had the good fortune to land a job with Georgia Power/Southern Company as they were building Plant Vogtle, their nuclear plant. I was there for four years, and that was a good learning experience. I later went on to work at the coal-fired plant, Plant Hammond, in Rome, Georgia, for eight years before transferring to Georgia Power's general office as a clean air project coordinator, corporate technical services.

My career with public power began when I started work at TVA as an assistant plant manager at the Kingston plant in Knoxville, Tennessee. From there, I went back to the private sector, moving on to First Energy in Ohio, where I served as a director of Ashtabula & Lakeshore Power Plants. After that, I took this opportunity here in Lakeland, which was my first time working for the municipal side of public power. I've been here for 10 years, and it's been quite a different experience from both TVA and the investor-owned utility side.

What has been your leadership philosophy at Lakeland Electric?

I've learned to take a different approach than I did in private industry. We ultimately report to the city manager, and that has taught me to align my management with the needs of the city. Investor-owned utilities can acquire outside funding, but ours

is drawn entirely from the community. It can make funding a little more challenging, but it also reminds you to be attuned to the needs of the community you're living in.

While that can make it harder for a city of Lakeland's size to acquire funding for capital-intensive projects like a large nuclear plant, it has encouraged me to remain attuned to smaller-scale opportunities. Right now, we're investigating whether to invest in nitrogen generation and are looking to maybe partner with a company that could support the infrastructure side of that. I've tried to balance looking for development and innovation opportunities with staying careful about taxpayer money.

What are you proudest of having achieved at Lakeland Electric so far?

We recently replaced our old coal plant that was starting to show wear with a much more reliable 120-megawatt dual

peaking plant. We've been successful at balancing changes to the generation side of things with ensuring reliability and have also worked out power-purchase agreements with Orlando Utilities Commission and Tampa Electric that have allowed us to continue sourcing affordable power.

I'd say we're now set going forward to continue either building or sourcing generation that will provide us with consistent power irrespective of changes to policy at either the federal or state level. That puts us in a good position to continue serving our customers no matter what happens in the future.

I'm also proud of Lakeland Electric for having maintained strong transmission infrastructure that allows us to act as an intermediary between those larger nearby utilities and other areas. 🇺🇸



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How Public Power Is Keeping Communities First in Data Center Development

BY ADAM PATTERSON, CONTENT SPECIALIST,
AMERICAN PUBLIC POWER ASSOCIATION

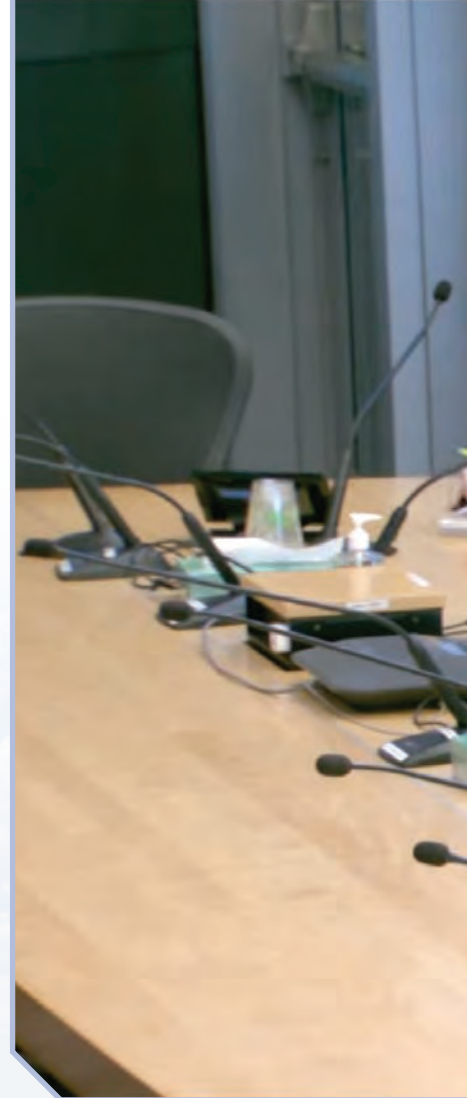
As development of large data centers continues, efforts to protect people and communities from feeling the effects are occurring at the federal, state, and local levels.

In March, President Trump announced the voluntary Ratepayer Protection Pledge, a nonbinding agreement signed by major tech companies where they committed to build or supply their own electricity for data centers. As of April 2026, 27 states are advancing state-level data center legislation that would require developers to cover data

center energy costs or report usage. Three other states — California, Ohio, and Utah — have already enacted laws related to data center development.

The aim in these initiatives is to find a balance in which data center development does not drive up the cost of electricity for consumers. Other measures aim to also protect grid reliability or mitigate environmental or other community impacts.

At the local level, public power utilities are navigating how to serve new large loads while upholding their commitment to affordability and meeting the needs of existing customers. This involves a balance between accommodating economic development while protecting rates, ensuring reliability, and upholding prior clean energy commitments. Local actions include developing policies for new large loads, informing state legislation, and stepping back to examine potential effects and opportunities for development, including issuing moratoria on new development.





City Light staff speaking at a Seattle City Council meeting. Photo courtesy Seattle City Light

Protecting the interests of their communities and ensuring data center contracts are negotiated in ways that are fair and sustainable often involves a case-by-case evaluation and depends on the utility and its unique resource and risk profile.

Supporting Long-Term Growth

Kansas City, Kansas, has long been an industrial hub serving a historic manufacturing base. The region's industrial sector is still thriving and now includes national tech companies and smaller startups. This legacy of serving large load customers has made the Kansas City Board of Public Utilities well qualified for negotiating fair contracts with new data centers.

The public power utility has taken a measured and practical approach to incorporating data centers. These have included provisions that protect existing customers from shouldering the costs if any of these data centers abruptly close after establishing themselves as large purchasers of electricity generation.

Such stipulations are designed to prevent the kind of economic aftershocks the city experienced when industries withdrew from the area in the past. "We don't want to go back to the aluminum smelter days, which were quite punitive on some communities," said BPU Chief Financial Officer Andrew Ferris. "So, these measures are built to say, 'We hope you're going to be here long term, but if by chance you're not, then I'm going to have enough collateral in the bank to unwind my positions in a meaningful way that allows you to exit while cushioning any detrimental impact.'"

BPU General Manager Jeremy Ash noted these measures are being put in place out of respect not just for the individual residents of Kansas City, but for the industrial and commercial customers who have maintained long-term investments in the region.

"Consumer protection is a major priority for our leadership team. Our philosophy is that core business and industrial customers have been largely responsible for building out the system we have today. So, we're asking ourselves how we make



Jeremy Ash, Kansas City BPU



Andrew Ferris, Kansas City BPU



Jeff Wolf, Seattle City Light

“The number one theme is to be cautious. Don’t set yourself up for long-term failure out of a short-sighted pursuit of revenue potential. Speed of the market is important, but so is protecting your community.”

JEREMY ASH, GENERAL MANAGER,
KANSAS CITY BOARD OF PUBLIC UTILITIES, KANSAS

sure they’re maintaining their equitable share, and that we’re not taking this investment they’ve made over the long term in our community and making it available for somebody new to jump in and out,” Ash said.

BPU emphasized the importance of setting policy that makes room for new economic development while recognizing that a public power utility’s foremost goal is to ensure the broader well-being of the community it serves.

“The number one theme is to be cautious. Don’t set yourself up for long-term failure out of a short-sighted pursuit of revenue potential. Speed of the market is important, but so is protecting your community,” Ash said.

“City Light designed its new large load policy to ensure new or expanding large data centers bear their own energy and infrastructure costs, rather than shifting them to other customers.”

JEFF WOLF, LEGAL AFFAIRS ADVISOR,
SEATTLE CITY LIGHT, WASHINGTON

He noted the importance of evaluating the consumption patterns of various types of data centers to determine what the grid can handle. “Each of these data centers have nuance to them. An AI data center is different than a hyperscale data center. Understanding that they function in different ways can better position you to protect the grid from voltage issues.”

Ash recommended treating prospective data centers like any other customer and doing due diligence in understanding the true cost they will have on the system. He said BPU does not offer any economic development incentive or discount for new data centers. “We still see them as meaningful customers, like all of our customers, and because of this we want to make sure that they’re paying their fair share.”

Amber Oetting, director of communications at the BPU, characterized the utility’s approach as “building a best practice playbook” so that public power utilities navigating similar questions around data centers can learn from their experience.

“At the end of this, our goal is to have gone through the process consciously so we have built a road map other utilities can follow.”

Ensuring Community Benefit

Nebraska has recently become a prospecting area for data center companies drawn by the state’s inexpensive real estate and affordable power, with Meta siting near Omaha one of the largest data center campuses in operation in the U.S.

The Nebraska Public Power District is the largest electric provider in the state and has customers spread across 84 of the state’s 93 counties, spanning rural areas to midsize cities like Kearney.

NPPD took a forefront role in supporting and informing the design of LB 1261, a state bill passed into law on April 14, 2026, that ensures data center customers take responsibility

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Snohomish PUD CEO/General Manager

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Tom Kent, NPPD



John McClure, NPPD

for building and maintaining the energy infrastructure needed to serve them. Notably, the law shifts 100% of the financial burden for constructing new energy generation to these large-load customers while obligating them to sign long-term contracts with the local public power district.

NPPD President and CEO Tom Kent noted this bill was passed at an especially transformative time for the public power utility, which serves the state's more rural areas, since data center developers have shifted their prospecting away from larger cities.

“Public power is generally thought of as easier to work with and can be more responsive because we often have fewer regulatory hurdles.”

TOM KENT, PRESIDENT AND CEO,
NEBRASKA PUBLIC POWER DISTRICT

“Of late, the hyperscalers have gotten more interested in rural Nebraska, which wasn't a primary target until maybe the last six months.” He also noted rising interest from smaller data centers that are anticipating demand of less than 100 megawatts, even those as small as 5 MW.

Kent said data center customers are drawn to Nebraska because “public power is generally thought of as easier to work with and can be more responsive because we often have less regulatory hurdles.”

NPPD remains attuned to the feedback of its customers, which Kent said has recently become more mixed about data center construction and has included increased concerns around potential effects on water quality and availability as well as electric rates.

On the other hand, Kent recognized potential community benefits from data centers, including that “they can add a lot to the property tax base, which is important for funding roads and infrastructure.”

NPPD took a proactive role in speaking with the governor and governor's staff over the last year about what it had been hearing in its communities and whether there might be any forthcoming legislation related to large loads.

The governor's office shared a draft of a large-load bill with NPPD in December 2025. NPPD worked closely with state legislators to “come up with something that would allow private investment for generation projects greater than 1,000 MW that we can structure in a way that would protect public power legacy customers and allow for additional economic development,” said John McClure, executive vice president of external affairs and general counsel at NPPD.

McClure worked to ensure these included stipulations to protect the status of public power in Nebraska, such as “if a greater than 1,000-MW generation facility would be installed, it has to be done very cooperatively and collaboratively with the local public power entities, and that the local public power utility will still be the retailer to that load.”

“The fact that we are tied closely to the community and exist to serve the community helped facilitate the kind of dialogue and discussion needed to work on these challenging issues,” Kent said.

Pausing for Policy

Data centers view the Pacific Northwest as a prime development area due to its abundance of reliable and affordable power. These same assets, particularly Washington’s hydropower resources, have also been a longstanding boon to the region’s public power utilities.

After receiving significant community feedback, Seattle City Council set a one-year moratorium on siting new large data centers in Seattle. At the same time, Seattle City Light announced a new large load policy.

Jeff Wolf, City Light legal affairs advisor, said broader community concerns around data center development have increased over the past year.

“At a recent City Council meeting, residents spoke in favor of a proposed one-year moratorium on the development of new or expanding data centers of more than 20 MW. Attendees expressed concerns about the consumption of electricity and water associated with data centers, the associated strain on infrastructure, noise and heat that could negatively impact health, the safety of drinking water, and the foreseeable impact on utility rates and the economy,” he shared.

Seattle intends for the moratorium to allow its city officials time to “identify what mitigation measures and community benefit policies, if any, would be most appropriate to address the impact of locating new or expanded large-scale data centers.”

Wolf explained City Light’s policy is designed to ensure the costs of data centers aren’t shifted onto the utility’s existing customers.

“Serving new large loads can require expensive wholesale power purchases and major infrastructure investments. City Light designed its new large load policy to ensure new or expanding large data centers bear their own energy and infrastructure costs, rather than shifting them to other customers,” Wolf said.

The data center interest is happening concurrent with load growth from electrification and other end uses. This includes larger buildings in the city aiming to become net zero by 2045, which has driven the installation of electric heat pumps.

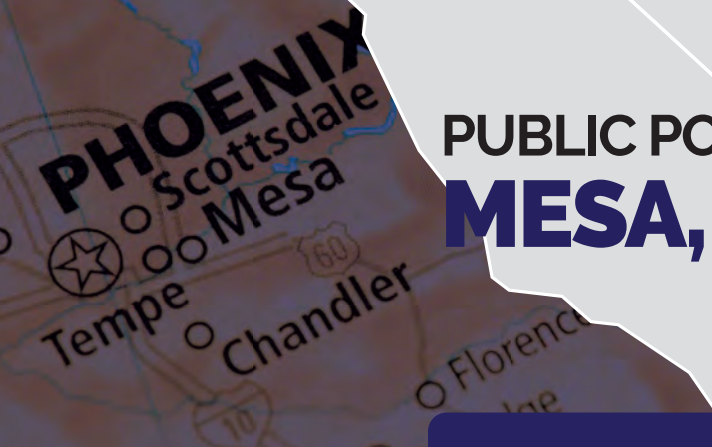
City Light is also transforming from managing a winter peak into a dual-peaking utility, as more residents are getting air conditioning due to increasingly warmer summer months. This runs up against summer being a comparative low point for the region’s hydro production, requiring City Light to plan its power purchasing and generation profile around these constraints. Wolf emphasized that Seattle is committed to following state-level legislation, like the Clean Energy Transformation Act, that is supported by its customers, with the utility remaining “very conscious that as we increase our load requirements, we acquire new power that is based on a renewable energy.”

The New Large Data Center Load Policy was drafted after significant feedback from customers.

The resulting policy is slated to contain five core provisions designed to address these concerns: a new rate class for customers over 10 megavolt-ampere, cost-based rates that reflect the incremental cost of procuring the associated power, a service agreement where large load customers accept full financial responsibility for the infrastructure and related costs for the life of the contract, as well as corresponding service queue and demand response measures that ensure Seattle’s existing customers receive power promptly and at fair rates.

Wolf noted that these measures are designed to be both structurally responsible and fulfill City Light’s abiding mission to provide reliable and affordable power while leaving room for new data center construction that upholds, rather than compromises, these priorities.

“Ultimately, the large load policy is driven by both an eye for affordability and an overall respect for the people of Seattle,” Wolf said. 🇺🇸



PUBLIC POWER COMMUNITIES

MESA, ARIZONA



POPULATION: **517,151**

UTILITY FORMED: **1917**

ELECTRIC CUSTOMERS: **18,101**

UTILITY EMPLOYEES: **37**

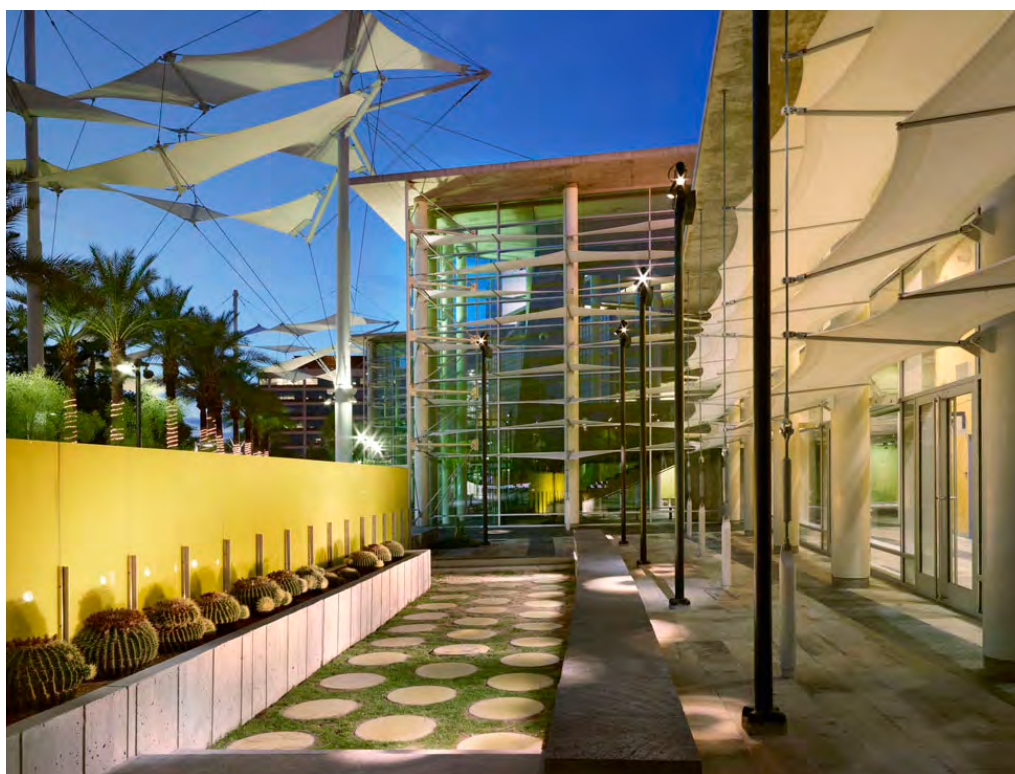
When the electric utility for Mesa, Arizona, was founded in 1917, it served a frontier town of fewer than 3,000 residents. The opening of the community-owned utility allowed the settlement to grow rapidly, building a legacy of dedicated service and support for the city, which is now home to over 500,000 residents.

Scott Bouchie, energy and sustainability director for Mesa Electric, grew up in the city and has been pleased with Mesa's growth, which has seen its population increase more than 25% since the turn of the 21st century. "It's all been very satisfying. We went from a city where downtown was a very quiet place after 5 pm to building a light rail, restaurants, and an arts center. It used to be there were no places to buy a drink, and now we have breweries and fine dining that are available after the sun goes down."

Bouchie noted that Mesa has retained its local character and sense of community amid all the development. "One of the things that really sticks out to me about downtown Mesa is that it's not corporate. We have lot of mom-and-pop local businesses that thrive here."

Although Mesa is now one of the 40 largest metro areas in the U.S., Mesa Electric itself remains a smaller utility. That's because the Salt River Project provides service to large portions of the greater metro area, whereas Mesa Electric serves the city's downtown and historic districts. Mesa Electric staff are dedicated to supporting the community, whether through local outreach events or its Trees Are Cool tree-planting program that is designed to both beautify the city and mitigate summer air conditioning load.

"In Arizona's dry heat, the difference between the sun and the shade is significant. And that cooling effect doesn't just benefit your home. It reduces AC load, which reduces your bill and



Mesa Arts Center. Photo courtesy City of Mesa.



Mesa Electric team. Photo courtesy City of Mesa.

reduces our infrastructure needs, all while the trees serve as a carbon sink,” Bouchie said.

Mesa Electric is also working to incorporate additional solar into its supply portfolio alongside battery storage development to help meet its renewable energy goals and shave rates during peak summer hours. Bouchie mentioned some solar projects that are expected to come online in late 2027 that include battery storage, which is the first time Mesa has developed a storage project.

“We’ll be able to take that inexpensive solar during the day, put it into batteries, and then discharge that as the sun is setting. It will help us shave what is the most expensive energy that we typically purchase, which is that 4 to 7 p.m. summertime electricity,” he said.

Mesa’s local quality of life has drawn national recognition — the city was ranked as the 10th best-run city in America in a 2026 national survey from WalletHub, and its electric utility has worked to uphold and advance that great quality of life amid the wave of new development. This has included ongoing coordination with city developers to ensure Mesa’s electric department can support new housing.

“When you take a parking lot that had maybe 12 lights in it and then add 200 apartments in an eight-story building, that’s a significantly different load for that area. Having the infrastructure in place to support that has been a priority for us as we work with our city council and other departments,” Bouchie said.

He attributes much of Mesa Electric’s quality service to how well the public power utility takes care of its staff, both in providing meaningful work that supports the greater community and in ensuring a positive working environment that builds and retains talent over decades.

“I’ve worked here for almost 30 years, and there really is a public-service-driven culture at the city of Mesa. It has allowed me to make a great life for my family and build a career that has been both fun and satisfying. It speaks highly of the organization that we try and make sure we’re taking care of our employees. And they pass that along in the dedicated work they put into taking care of our residents,” Bouchie said. 



Public Power Communities Offer Advantages for Data Center Development

BY PAUL CIAMPOLI, NEWS DIRECTOR,
AMERICAN PUBLIC POWER ASSOCIATION

Amid rising, rapid interest in developing data centers, these prospective customers are branching out from historically concentrated areas of development and looking at less populated areas with room to grow. Before breaking any ground, reputable developers seek to build partnerships with the community to ensure projects will be well received.

Sitting at the intersection of both electric infrastructure needs and community interests, public power utilities offer unique advantages that can be beneficial for data center development.

In July 2025, the U.S. Department of Energy announced four sites selected for artificial intelligence infrastructure on DOE lands: Idaho National Laboratory, Oak Ridge Reservation in Tennessee, Paducah Gaseous Diffusion Plant in Kentucky, and Savannah River Site in South Carolina. The locations

were chosen for the private sector to deploy AI data center and generation projects. Three of the four sites are adjacent to or within public power service territories. Savannah River Site is adjacent to both an investor-owned utility and a cooperative.

A Positive Partnership

Sarah Wheeler, external affairs manager at Idaho Falls Power, said INL has been a good partner with the public power utility and the community they share. “They’ve been based in this community forever [and] are committed to the community as well,” she said.

Wheeler said INL held a data center meeting in 2025 that included different companies and communities that have data centers. INL also invited Idaho Falls Power to discuss how data centers could affect the community.

Speakers from communities that had data centers in them were able to talk about what it looked like and what were some of the pros and cons. “That has been really important as we engage in this dialogue,” Wheeler said.

“When we’re looking at what does a good partnership entail, I think it comes back to the basics that we talk about for almost



Downtown Statesville, North Carolina. Photo by Geoff Wood courtesy of ElectriCities of North Carolina.

every project: clear, continuous communication around what's really happening. What are those projected load forecasts? What are the timelines? It's not news to anyone that getting any kind of infrastructure is taking longer and longer."

Jace Yancey, Assistant general manager of operations at Idaho Falls Power, noted that a substation transformer typically entails a two-year lead time, and there are other components "that you have to make sure that you prepare well in advance, so the collaboration is key to making all of this work," he said.

Communication is also key, Wheeler said, noting that the utility holds meetings with INL to go over projects. "It's really good to have those meetings so the utility can ask the questions like, 'What do you really think is going to happen?' That way, we can really plan ahead," she said.

Another key to partnerships is a "commitment to reliability and resilience," Wheeler noted.

"We live in this community; what affects it, we want it to be positive in perpetuity," she said, adding that with INL developing the project, there are no worries about stranded assets or leaving the community out of decisions because the INL is a committed partner and community player.

Wheeler noted that one area important to the relationship is being upfront about cost — not just the total price tag, but who's responsible for paying for which aspects of the necessary infrastructure to support a data center. "It's expensive to have transmission and distribution. It's expensive to have grid reliability." She stressed that this development shouldn't be shouldered by existing customers.

Finding the Right Fit

Carl Rees, manager for economic and community development at ElectriCities of North Carolina, said communities served by public power offer several advantages when it comes to successfully developing data centers. ElectriCities provides power supply and related critical services to over 90 community-owned electric systems in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia.

If you reverse roles "and you think about yourself as the business or the data center, the more different entities that you have to deal with to put a project together, a specific data center project, or maybe it's some other kind of business, the more complex that is," said Rees.



The city hall service desk for Albemarle, North Carolina. Photo (c) Geoff Wood.

“You have to deal with the regulations and timelines of all these different entities. If you think about public power, what that actually means is these are towns and cities. So the towns and cities typically also have water, sewer, some of them have gas functions in addition to the electric on the infrastructure side,” he said.

“They are also in charge of the land use and the permitting for projects as well. What we’ve seen is if you have a public power community that is interested in information technology and data center investment for their community,” as a community “you actually can do the work yourself to set yourself up well, to market yourself as a community that’s friendly and ready for information technology investment,” Rees said.

The suite of responsibilities and local control is a distinct advantage of projects setting up in public power communities, said Rees. It also means communities served by public power can better position themselves for the type of development that fits with their community.

“You have local control of determining [what] sort of investment and infrastructure [you’d like to see] in your community, and then you can prepare for it and go out and bring it in,” he said.

Data centers “are nothing new to North Carolina,” he noted. Apple placed a data center in Maiden, North Carolina, one of the smaller public power communities in the state, in service in 2009.

“You have local control of determining [what] sort of investment and infrastructure [you’d like to see] in your community, and then you can prepare for it and go out and bring it in.”

CARL REES, MANAGER FOR ECONOMIC AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT, **ELECTRICITIES OF NORTH CAROLINA**

That doesn’t mean these communities are suddenly seeing a spike in power supply needs.

“In their original incarnations, and still to some extent today, the model that we’ve actually seen is to have the water and some of the other resources, potentially gas and other, served by the public power community and the electric served by another provider,” he said.

Rees noted that a large data center being developed by Compass Data in Statesville, North Carolina, will involve Duke Energy providing the electricity needed for that project and the city has agreed to provide all of the other utilities. However, other projects in the works in the state include communities which will support the electric needs of the data center, both large and small.

“There’s a series that we’re looking at that are smaller co-location data centers. When I say smaller, probably ultimately maybe 40- or 50-megawatt versus some of the hundreds of MW data centers and hyperscale campuses that we see. But we are

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“When we’re looking at what does a good partnership entail, I think it comes back to the basics that we talk about for almost every project: clear, continuous communication around what’s really happening.”

SARAH WHEELER, EXTERNAL AFFAIRS MANAGER,
IDAHO FALLS POWER, IDAHO

also looking at some hyperscale data center campuses as well.”

These decisions vary from community to community, he said. “It’s very important that communities not go blindly into this particular sector.”

There are “certainly some advantages to information technology and data centers, but if you’re a community that needs people to go to work, that’s probably not going to be a great sector for you, because data centers, they employ some more people now than maybe they used to, but you’re still looking at 50 or 100 people.”

If a community has “hundreds of people that are underemployed or unemployed, it’s probably not what you need to be looking at. You need to be looking at something larger.”

If a community is facing constraints on some of its utilities, “you may want to look at that because do you want to put all your eggs in this basket and not be able to bring a job producer in in the future and have power or gas or water/sewer for them? You need to think through those issues as a community carefully and have a plan,” he said.

Rees attributed the driving interest for data centers in North Carolina to a combination of having both a fast-growing population and having fewer resource constraints than other areas of the U.S., including access to water supply.

“Similar to some other parts of the country, our electric transmission system is a bit constrained, but at the same time, we do have power availability in some key parts of the state, and so we’ve seen that drive some data center development.”

In addition, Rees said the state has an excellent established fiber network.

The backbone of “what you need — the power, the fiber, the people — are all here in the state, and so I think that’s driving a lot of the development that we see.”

Building on Trust

“Idaho Falls Power has a very good understanding and culture of customer service. We understand that we exist for the community because of the community and they truly are the reason why we’re here doing what we do. Whether it’s a data center, whether it’s a municipal broadband network, whatever it is, when you have an entity that understands that it’s very beneficial to the community and to anybody that you partner with,” Yancey said.

Beyond being a collaborative partner, Yancey said, the city is “very open to new ideas.”

“Our community has a long history of supporting public power in general,” Wheeler said.

She noted that INL is a large employer and “we have a really good, educated, strong workforce in Idaho Falls and I think that pays dividends into how you promote economically within the community and how you continue to develop these higher-value, sometimes controversial, projects because people are able to look at the solutions and figure out how to move forward.”

Moreover, “I think that the community trusts us and they trust the INL,” Yancey said.

“They have a history there of those entities always being able to deliver the things that they need.”

Being a trusted community entity is key in ensuring community support, he said.

Wheeler noted that public power “is focused on people over profit, and we don’t want to do anything to jeopardize that trust,” because at the end of the day, “we exist because of them. And our main goal is to make sure they have safe, reliable, and affordable power. And that’s never going to change with anything we bring in. We want to maintain that trust and transparency.”

Rees echoed the experience of developers approaching with a mindset of partnership with the community. He noted that sometimes data center developers can be portrayed as bullying



People touring an exhibit on hydropower coordinated between Idaho Falls Power and Idaho National Laboratory. Photo courtesy Idaho Falls Power.

their way in and not involving the community. “That is far from what we’ve experienced. We’ve experienced the opposite,” Rees said.

“We have found in our somewhat limited and newer experience that the private sector partners that we’re dealing with are interested in partnerships, are interested in finding solutions that work for the community. And, of course, work for them as well.”

“We have experienced a level of inquiry about whether this is appropriate for the community, about what the community has done to prepare,” he added. He shared examples of data center developers asking about whether colocation with infrastructure such as a water treatment plant could supplement the project or what studies might make the development more palatable for the community.

Rees said that the process has “been somewhat of a learning curve” for both developers and utilities.

ElectriCities is working to guide member communities as it relates to data centers.

“We have had to ramp up our own education and knowledge and network in the data center industry so that we could serve as that vital partner to our members across the state of North Carolina,” Rees said.

The American Public Power Association’s report, *What Public Power Needs to Know About Serving Data Centers*, offers more examples of how public power utilities are managing the load growth driven by data centers. 🇺🇸



HOW ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE PRESENTS CYBER RISKS — AND OPPORTUNITIES — FOR ELECTRIC UTILITIES

BY ROB DENABURG, SENIOR MANAGER, CYBERSECURITY PROGRAMS,
AMERICAN PUBLIC POWER ASSOCIATION

Artificial intelligence is rapidly changing the cybersecurity landscape for electric utilities — both in terms of defensive capabilities and as a force multiplier for cyberthreat actors. While network defenders have long relied on machine-learning-supported security tools, recent advances in generative AI and large language models introduce new risks, opportunities, and strategic questions that utilities need to understand.

Enhanced Attacks

One of the most immediate cybersecurity risks of AI is its ability to advance the scale, speed, and sophistication of attacks. Generative AI tools allow threat actors — ranging from loosely organized criminal groups to nation-state adversaries — to automate tasks that once required significant expertise or manual effort. This includes writing phishing emails that are more convincing and context-aware, generating functional malware or exploit code, and rapidly adapting attack techniques in response to defenses.

One particular concern for the electric sector is how AI can help less sophisticated attackers develop malware that targets industrial control systems. Traditionally, ICS-focused malware required deep expertise in specialized protocols, engineering processes, and site-specific operations. Today, AI-based tools can assist attackers by rapidly analyzing publicly available protocol specifications, generating syntactically valid control messages, and automating reconnaissance across industrial environments.

At their current level of sophistication, AI-assisted attacks are more likely to cause noisy disruptions, trigger alarms, or fail

rather than cause damage to the physical grid. However, the potential proliferation of ICS-specific malware could greatly increase the cyber risk for electric utilities — especially those still struggling with poor cyber hygiene.

AI also enables more effective reconnaissance and targeting. Attackers can use AI to analyze large volumes of leaked data, network information, or open-source intelligence to customize attacks for specific utilities or even individual employees. For electric utilities — where legacy operational technology systems and limited staffing may coexist — an increase in attacker efficiency shortens the time between vulnerability discovery and exploitation.

AI as a Target

In addition to using AI as a tool to improve attack capabilities, adversaries are increasingly interested in targeting AI systems as a means of compromising organizations. This includes data poisoning, prompt injection, model manipulation, and exploiting weaknesses in AI-enabled applications. As utilities begin using AI for forecasting, asset monitoring, customer engagement, or cyber detection, these systems could become attractive targets for manipulation or abuse.

For example, corrupted data inputs could skew operational insights, suppress alerts, or undermine trust in automated decision-support tools. These risks underscore the importance of treating AI systems as critical digital assets, subject to governance, monitoring, and security controls just like other IT and OT systems.

Empowering Defenders

Utilities can leverage AI in defending their networks, helping small teams detect threats faster and focus attention where it matters most. AI in cyber defense is not a new concept; many security tools that utilities already rely on — including anomaly detection, intrusion detection systems, spam filtering, and behavioral analytics — have used machine learning to identify suspicious activity.

What has changed for the better is the capability of AI models. Modern AI systems can correlate far more data, reason across complex environments, and assist human analysts by summarizing alerts, prioritizing risks, and accelerating response.

Advanced Vulnerability Discovery

One of the most significant recent developments is the emergence of AI models that are capable of very sophisticated vulnerability discovery. Frontier models can review code, configurations, and system behavior to identify weaknesses, sometimes chaining multiple low-severity issues into viable exploits. This dramatically compresses the window between vulnerability discovery and real-world exploitation.

As with AI adoption more broadly, these capabilities can benefit both attackers and defenders. Adversaries can find new attack paths more quickly, but defenders can also use the same technology to uncover weaknesses before they are exploited and to prioritize remediation based on actual risk. The challenge for utilities is not just detection, but organizational readiness — having processes, staffing, and patching mechanisms fast enough to keep up with AI-accelerated discovery.

To minimize exposure, utilities should approach AI adoption with the same discipline applied to other critical systems: Maintain visibility into AI use, protect sensitive data, apply defense-in-depth, and ensure AI outputs support — rather than replace — human decision-making.

Preparing for an AI-Accelerated Future

AI is reshaping the cyberthreat landscape for electric utilities whether they actively adopt it or not. Threat actors, including those which might target utilities, are increasingly adopting AI tools to enhance their cyberattack efficiency and capabilities. This creates an imperative for utilities to adopt AI-enabled defensive tools capable of combating these increasingly sophisticated threats. The key risk is not AI itself but failing to understand how quickly both attackers and defenders are evolving. Utilities that invest early in governance, awareness, and realistic expectations — while leveraging AI's strengths for defense — will be better positioned to manage cyber risk in an increasingly automated threat environment. 🚩

ELEMENTS OF AN AI POLICY

Defining a policy for when, why, and how employees can use artificial intelligence allows your staff to employ innovative technology in ways that are secure, ethical, and practical. Components of an effective policy include:

Definitions:

Describe what the policy means by 'AI.' This includes specifying whether the policy is specific to generative AI or other types of tools. You may also want to provide high-level definitions of terms associated with AI.

Approved tools:

List which tools are approved for use and outline the process for vetting tools as they emerge.

Who's got authority:

Specify who vets tools, or who can authorize or provide guidance on their use. Some organizations establish internal committees or cross-departmental groups to review use cases and tools.

Use limits:

Specify when or for which functions employees can use AI.

Prerequisites:

Clarify if employees need to complete any training, orientation, etc. before using AI at work.

Procedures:

Reinforce the need to exercise caution with sensitive data and proprietary material and detail any parameters or restrictions to support privacy, confidentiality, and cybersecurity. Explain how and when AI outputs need to be captured as part of public records.

Accountability:

Make it clear that employees are responsible for work produced by AI — underscore the need to carefully review outputs for inaccuracy, bias, intellectual property infringement, or other concerns.

References:

Consider if there are other internal policies or SOPs affected by AI (e.g., acceptable use, social media, data privacy) and update them accordingly. Reference or link to these materials within the AI policy.

Enforcement:

Outline how you will monitor AI use and what actions might occur when employee use violates stated policy.

What other elements are in your AI policy? Share your thoughts and examples on APPA Engage.



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