

The Future of AI Runs Through Indian Country

Commentary by Alex Brunson, Elise Previdi, Richard Luarkie, and Morgan Bazilian

By 2030, the U.S. is projected to experience a significant increase in demand for power capacity to meet the needs of its rapidly expanding network of data centers. This surge is being driven in part by the explosive growth of AI models, cloud services, and high-performance computing workloads, which require unprecedented levels of energy and computational power. In response, the Department of Energy (DOE) [identified 16 federal sites](#) across the country that could support this growth.

However, another solution exists—forming strategic partnerships with Native Nations and placing some of this high-tech infrastructure on Native American lands.

In July 2025, the White House issued a [Fact Sheet](#) about a new executive order aimed at accelerating the buildout of data centers, semiconductor facilities, and related transmission lines by streamlining environmental and regulatory reviews. This order recognizes data infrastructure as essential to national competitiveness and security.

Native Nations offer a complementary and important path forward, grounded not only in land and infrastructure, but also in sovereignty, sustainability, and long-term community benefit.

Across Indian Country, Native Nations possess a unique combination of assets: large and contiguous land bases, growing energy portfolios, water rights, sovereign authority, local expertise, and a pipeline of technical talent. Several Nations already host IT facilities, while others control land in prime locations for future development.

Yet, despite this potential, Tribal lands have been largely absent from the national data center strategy. Many Tribes have repeatedly expressed interest in participating in and benefiting from the digital economy, making this a pivotal time to bring Native Nations in as full partners in America's AI infrastructure buildout.

While only a few Native Nations have the balance sheets to support large-scale projects on their own, they can still bring valuable advantages to partnerships aligned with long-term development goals. "Data center investment, in my view, should be uniquely attractive to Tribes," said Todd Malan, an executive vice president at QTS Data Centers. He points to the opportunity for these projects to generate new Tribal revenue streams and diversify economies beyond gaming. The challenge, he notes, is "convincing data center developers and hyperscale customers that there are advantages to locating on Tribal land."

Economic Opportunity at Scale

Gaming has shown that when opportunities are structured for long-term benefit, Native Nations can create significant revenue streams. The key question is not simply whether data center projects can generate revenue, but how those revenues are reinvested to strengthen systems, create quality jobs, and build lasting prosperity.

AI infrastructure already produces substantial economic returns. Amazon projects that AI will contribute about [\\$1.5 trillion](#) to the global economy in the next five years, and the global data center market is expected to grow to more than [\\$584 billion by 2032](#). Scaling AI infrastructure is now a federal priority. In July 2025, the Administration announced a [multibillion-dollar AI hub](#) in Pennsylvania, backed by \$90 billion in private investment from Amazon, Google, Blackstone, and CoreWeave. These investments include both compute clusters and significant upgrades to the power grid, showing the pace and scale of AI expansion.

Other high-profile projects underscore this rapid growth. In [Baton Rouge](#), Meta is constructing a new \$10 billion data center—Amazon is also allocating \$10 billion toward the construction of a data center 200 miles north in Mississippi’s [Madison County](#). These facilities won’t employ thousands, but in rural communities, even a few hundred well-paying jobs can be transformative.

As reported by the *Wall Street Journal*, data center roles often start at [\\$80,000](#)—a compelling salary in regions where the median income is under \$60,000. A [PwC impact study](#) found that between 2017 and 2023, of the 4.7 million data center-related jobs created in the U.S., 4.1 million were in supporting industries: construction, maintenance, lodging, and food services. Construction roles in particular offer wages that are often [double the national average](#).

Sovereignty as a Strategic Asset

Native Nations can go beyond leasing land by owning and operating compute infrastructure, securing equity in the digital economy, and shaping how AI delivers value to their communities.

For example, the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara (MHA) Nation has expanded into oil infrastructure, purchasing the Plaza/Wabek pipeline to transport oil from Fort Berthold Reservation into the Enbridge system. In the gas sector, the Southern Ute Tribe owns and operates Aka Energy Group, a midstream company that designs, constructs, and manages natural gas gathering, treating, and processing facilities. On the renewable front, the Viejas Band of Kumeyaay Indians’ solar-plus-storage microgrid exemplifies how Tribes are integrating energy into infrastructure planning.

One of the most valuable Tribal assets is operationalized sovereignty. With the authority of federal recognition, Native Nations can implement their own executive orders on Data Centers and AI Infrastructure. Similar to the executive order issued on January 23rd, 2025, titled “[Removing Barriers to American Leadership in Artificial Intelligence](#),” these Tribal orders could complement the Administration’s EO and, at a minimum, address the following in a much more expeditious manner:

- Speed-to-Market Leadership: While data center and energy projects on non-Tribal lands often encounter 3 to 10 years of permitting delays, Tribal

projects, when governed through sovereign permitting authority and federal-Tribal cooperation, can advance much faster. A [2023 University of Wisconsin study](#) found that while standard Tribal energy projects can face up to 49 federal approval steps, these timelines can be significantly reduced when Tribal Energy Development Organizations (TEDOs) are empowered to lead permitting processes. This advantage becomes even stronger when paired with the permitting reforms proposed in the [Institute for Progress's Special Compute Zones policy framework](#).

- **Energy Infrastructure Readiness:** Many Native Nations embrace an “all-of-the-above” energy approach—combining renewables, traditional generation, and next-generation tech. This positions them to help solve the \$5.2 trillion energy infrastructure challenge facing the AI industry. Moreover, building new data center facilities offers a strategic opportunity to upgrade transmission lines, benefiting both Native communities and the broader national grid.
- **Talent and Innovation Ecosystem:** This pipeline is already being cultivated across Indian Country. Tribal colleges, vocational programs, and partnerships with universities are training Indigenous youth for high-tech careers. Placing data centers on Tribal land opens doors for job training, apprenticeships, and education pipelines that allow students to stay in their communities while accessing competitive careers. Examples like the [Navajo Nation's Innava Data Center](#) and [Nova Corporation](#) show that when tribes invest in IT services and infrastructure, they don't just diversify their economies—they build a workforce prepared to lead the digital transition. The Innava project, launched in Albuquerque, was paired with a training and certification center aimed at preparing Navajo youth for careers in cybersecurity and data services.

A Path Forward

Development must prioritize ROI for Native Nations and ensure transparency, with safeguards that prevent data centers from mirroring past extractive or exploitative business models in the digital economy. By engaging as full developers and equity partners, Tribes can guide site selection, infrastructure planning, and long-term

operations in ways that secure lasting community benefits while advancing federal goals of faster permitting, resilient infrastructure, and national competitiveness in AI.

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