

Ireland embraced data centers that the AI boom needs. Now they're consuming too much of its energy

By MATT O'BRIEN, *The Associated Press*, December 19, 2024

CLONDALKIN, Ireland (AP) — Dozens of massive data centers humming at the outskirts of Dublin are consuming more electricity than all of the urban homes in Ireland and starting to wear out the warm welcome that brought them here.

Now, a country that made itself a computing factory for Amazon, Google, Meta, Microsoft and TikTok is wondering whether it was all worth it as tech giants look around the world to build even more data centers to fuel the next wave of artificial intelligence.

Fears of rolling blackouts led Ireland's grid operator to halt new data centers near Dublin until 2028. These huge buildings and their powerful computers last year consumed 21% of the nation's electricity, according to official records. No other country has reported a higher burden to the International Energy Agency.

Not only that, but Ireland is still heavily reliant on burning fossil fuels to generate electricity, despite a growing number of wind farms sprouting across the countryside. Further data center expansion threatens Ireland's goals to sharply cut planet-warming emissions.

Ireland has attracted global tech companies since the "Celtic Tiger" boom at the turn of the 21st century. Tax incentives, a highly skilled, English-speaking workforce and the country's membership in the European Union have all contributed to making the tech sector a central part of the Irish economy. The island is also a node for undersea cables that extend to the U.S., Britain, Iceland and mainland Europe.

Nearly all of the data centers sit on the edge of Dublin, where their proximity to the capital city facilitates online financial transactions and other activities that require fast connections. Data center computers run hot, but compared to other parts of the world, Ireland's cool temperatures make it easier to keep them from overheating without drawing in as much water.

Still, buildings that for years went mostly unnoticed have attracted unwanted attention as their power demands surged while Irish householders pay some of Europe's highest electricity bills. Ireland's Environmental Protection Agency has also flagged concerns about nitrogen oxide pollution from data centers' on-site generators — typically gas or diesel turbines — affecting areas near Dublin.

A crackdown began in 2021, spurred by projections that data centers are on pace to take up one third of Ireland's electricity in this decade. Regulators declared that Dublin had hit its limits and could no longer plug more data centers into its grid.

Ossian Smyth, an outgoing minister of state for the Irish government whose Green Party lost nearly all its parliamentary seats, said it would be a mistake to slow down Ireland's climate commitments. But he also sees the limits on data center growth set by his outgoing government as having resolved most people's concerns.