INTELLIGENCE UPDATE

The struggle between AI and net-zero is becoming visible

Peter Judge 17 Feb 2026

In the early 2020s, data center operators began setting net-zero emissions goals. The majority now have target dates to eliminate — or at least offset — their greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, with many large operators, including Microsoft, Amazon, Google, Digital Realty and Equinix, fixing on 2030.

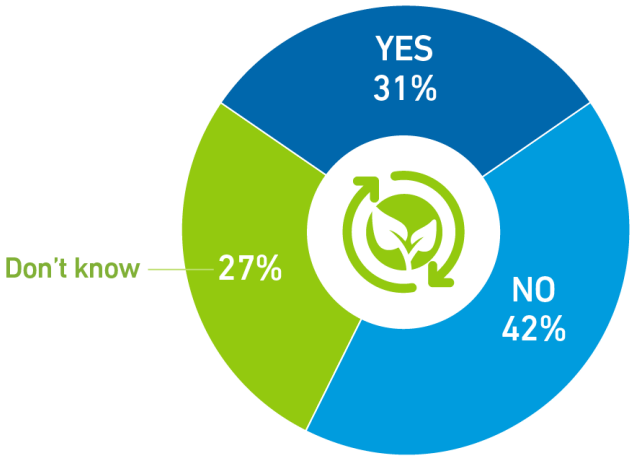
As that deadline approaches, meeting these goals is becoming more difficult. Rising demand for AI facilities is driving energy consumption much faster than anticipated. This surge, along with other factors, is straining electricity capacity and prompting some operators to generate prime power on-site — almost universally derived from fossil natural gas.

Operators' increased energy use means they are emitting more, and as net-zero deadlines approach, they have a shorter timeline in which to address those emissions. Demand for energy attribute certificates (EACs) is surging, and prices are expected to increase. Uptime Intelligence expects net-zero goals will cause large organizations to invest in another expensive option — on-site carbon capture and storage.

Operators publicly acknowledge this tension while generally maintaining their net-zero aspirations. In practice — and in private — they are starting to admit that rapid growth in demand for AI compute is making net-zero targets less achievable, according to responses to the Uptime Institute Sustainability and Climate Change Survey 2025 (see **Figure 1**).

Figure 1 AI expansion plans are reshaping net-zero targets

Have AI implementation expansion plans caused you to modify or extend your organization's net-zero emissions goals? (n=158)



(Only includes respondents with a net-zero emissions goal.)

UPTIME INSTITUTE SUSTAINABILITY AND CLIMATE CHANGE SURVEY 2025

Around 27% of respondents from organizations with a net-zero goal said they did not know whether AI had affected their target. This figure may reflect organizational siloing, with those involved in data center operations often remote from decisions about sustainability strategy.

Operators in the US and Europe appear more likely to maintain net-zero goals than those in other geographic markets, although the sample sizes are small for such a breakdown. Some 70% of respondents in Europe and 63% in the US said that AI expansion plans would not affect their net-zero aspirations.

These results were overshadowed by the responses from the rest of the world. Respondents in the Asia-Pacific and the Middle East were more likely to say that AI growth was pushing their sustainability goals further out.

Whatever operators say publicly, it is clear that the AI boom will complicate efforts to achieve ambitious emissions goals set before the surge in data center energy demand. Some of the commitments are effectively in limbo, pending a painful reassessment.

A retreat from net-zero goals may be made more palatable if supported by government. The current US administration has reversed earlier federal net-zero policies, and in early 2025 the US financial regulator, the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), abandoned plans to require businesses to report their exposure to climate risks.

In Europe, the Omnibus package of directives simplified climate-related reporting to ease what policymakers described as the "regulatory burden" on business. As part of this process, the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD) was amended: its original requirement for companies to adopt a climate transition plan compatible with the 1.5°C goal of the Paris Agreement and the EU's aim for climate neutrality by 2050 was removed.

However, the perceived "dialing down" of sustainability requirements is far from universal. Uptime Intelligence is tracking a continued increase in regulations affecting data centers in countries including China and Japan — and even in the US, at the state level.

Irrespective of the practical difficulties of achieving net-zero and regardless of the presence or absence of legal requirements to do so, operators are facing a rising tide of opposition from local residents concerned about the environmental impact of new data center projects. Explicitly linking AI to a retreat from net-zero commitments would give ammunition to these opponents.

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About Uptime Institute

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Offerings include the organization's Tier Standard and Certifications, Management & Operations reviews and assessments including SCIRA-FSI financial sector risk assessment, the Sustainability Assessment, and a broad range of additional risk management, performance, availability, and related offerings. Uptime Education training programs have been successfully completed by over 100,000 data center professionals, such as the much-valued ATD (Accredited Tier Designer) and AOS (Accredited Operations Specialist). The Uptime Education curriculum has been expanded by the acquisition of CNet Training Ltd. In 2023.

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