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DIGITAL THIRST, AGRICULTURAL CRISIS - HOW DATA CENTRE GROUNDWATER CONSUMPTION IS THREATENING

***Santhosh Kumar S*[1] and *Devesh G B*[2]**

[1]Business Development Executive, Nannilam Eco Village, Karumandurai, Salem, 636138.

[2]B.Sc. (Hons.) Horticulture, Tamil Nadu Agricultural University, Paiyur, Krishnagiri- 635112.

Introduction: The Hidden Hunger of the Digital Age

Every message, video, or AI query drive data centres that pump millions of litres of water daily to cool servers, most of which evaporates and leaves the water cycle. This invisible demand directly competes with farmers, tapping the same aquifers that have irrigated crops for centuries. Without intervention, the digital economy risks undermining the very water that sustains global food production.

> *"The world has entered an era of Global Water Bankruptcy — a post-crisis condition where human societies have drawn down water resources beyond renewal" — United Nations University Report, 2026*

This article offers a comprehensive, evidence-based analysis of how data centre groundwater consumption is threatening agricultural productivity, farmer livelihoods, and food security at both national and global levels and what urgent action is required.

The Mechanics of Water Consumption in Data Centres

Understanding why data centres consume so much water requires a brief look at the physics of computing. Modern processors particularly the Graphics Processing Units (GPUs) used for AI workloads operate at extreme power densities, generating heat that must be continuously removed to avoid hardware failure. There are three primary ways data centres consume water:

Direct Cooling — On-Site Evaporative Cooling:

Water is sprayed across heat exchangers; as it evaporates, it draws heat away from the servers. This is the most widely used and most water-intensive method. Up to 80% of the water drawn for this purpose evaporates and is permanently lost.

Indirect Cooling — Power Plants Supply Power:

Thermal power plants that supply electricity to data centres consume enormous quantities of water to cool their steam turbines. This 'off-site' water footprint often exceeds the direct water use of the data centre itself.

Embodied Water — Chip Manufacturing:

The production of processors requires ultra-pure water in semiconductor fabrication. This embedded water consumption, while less visible, and is significant.

Countries Already Facing This Crisis

Chile — A Landmark Legal Battle

Chile hosts one of the largest clusters of data centres in South America, driven by its ambition to become the 'global hub of the Southern Hemisphere.' However, cities such as Santiago face severe water stress, and local agricultural communities particularly in the Elqui Valley and surrounding regions where agriculture consumes 81% of the regional water supply have raised urgent alarms.

Uruguay — When a Nation's Drinking Water Was at Stake

In 2023, Uruguay faced its worst drought in 74 years. A Google data centre drew water from the same reservoir serving Montevideo's three million residents, sparking protests and a government review. Farmers relying on rivers and groundwater competed directly with tech infrastructure for the dwindling resource.

Netherlands — Data Centres vs. Dutch Agriculture

The Netherlands, a leading agricultural nation, hosts Europe's largest concentration of data centres near Amsterdam. Groundwater management faces tension between cooling demands, farming, and residential needs.

United States — Arizona and the American Corn Belt

In the American Southwest, data centres in Phoenix, Arizona one of the driest cities on Earth exacerbate water stress. Studies of the Ogallala Aquifer, vital for corn and soybean production across eight states, show that depletion directly lowers crop yields, with losses rising sharply as the water table falls.

India — The Frontline Crisis

India is simultaneously the world's largest consumer of groundwater and one of its fastest-growing data centre markets. The collision between these two realities is already devastating in some regions — and is projected to worsen catastrophically within this decade.

How This Affects Agriculture — The Core Crisis

Groundwater is not a luxury for agriculture it is a lifeline. Approximately 70% of India's national irrigation supply comes from groundwater. In states like Punjab, Haryana, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Telangana, tube wells and borewells are the only reliable source of irrigation water during dry seasons.

When aquifer levels fall, the consequences for agriculture cascade rapidly:

- **Irrigation Failure:** Wells and borewells run dry, forcing farmers to drill deeper at costs they cannot afford.
- **Crop Failure:** Without water, crops wither in the field. Rice, wheat, sugarcane, and vegetables the staples of India's food supply are all water-intensive crops that cannot survive aquifer depletion.
- **Farmer Debt and Displacement:** Declining yields mean declining income. Farmers trapped in debt cycles cannot invest in alternative water sources, forcing them off their land.
- **Reduced Cropping Intensity:** A study published in Science Advances found that groundwater depletion could reduce India's cropping intensity by up to 20% nationally and by up to 68% in critically depleted regions directly threatening food production for over one billion people.
- **Water Quality Degradation:** As groundwater tables fall, communities drill deeper, encountering saline, arsenic-contaminated, or otherwise unfit water directly harming human health.

Impact on India — A Timeline

Timeline	Projected Development	Agricultural Impact
2025 (Now)	India: 150 billion litres/year consumed by data centres. 150+ operational data centres, 1,200 MW capacity.	Aquifer stress visible in Bengaluru, Hyderabad belts. Farmers in Karnataka and UP reporting

Timeline	Projected Development	Agricultural Impact
		falling water tables.
2026–2027	Gigawatt-scale AI data centre hubs planned in Jamnagar, Mumbai, Chennai, Hyderabad. Adani: ₹10 billion investment.	Chennai and Tamil Nadu coastal aquifers begin showing signs of increased stress. Paddy and sugarcane farmers in delta regions face competition.
2028	Global data centre water use projected at 1,068 billion litres/year. India likely contributing 250+ billion litres.	Serious irrigation shortfalls expected in Tamil Nadu's Cauvery delta and Krishna-Godavari zones. Crop failure risk rises significantly.
2030	India data centres consuming 358 billion litres/year — more than double 2025 levels.	40% of Indian cities may face drinking water shortages (NITI Aayog). Agricultural groundwater access critically compromised in south and northwest India.
2030–2035	If unregulated, 60–80% of India's data centres will operate in high water-stress zones.	Cropping intensity in Tamil Nadu, Punjab, Haryana, Karnataka may decline by 20–68%. Food security emergency conditions possible.

Proposed Solutions: What Must Be Done

The crisis is serious, but it is not irreversible. A combination of technological innovation, regulatory reform, and agricultural-digital collaboration can protect both the data infrastructure nations need and the food systems humanity depends on.

Technological Alternatives for Data Centre Cooling

A. Liquid Immersion Cooling

Servers are submerged in a specialized non-conductive dielectric fluid that absorbs heat directly from chips and circulates it to external heat exchangers. This method eliminates the need for evaporative water cooling entirely. Liquid cooling markets are projected to grow from US$5.65 billion in 2024 to over US$48 billion by 2034 as adoption accelerates.

B. Direct-to-Chip Liquid Cooling

Coolant is delivered directly to GPUs and CPUs via precision pipes, dramatically reducing water consumption compared to air evaporation methods — analogous to the difference between drip irrigation and flood irrigation in agriculture.

C. Closed-Loop Cooling Systems

Unlike open-loop evaporative cooling, closed-loop systems recirculate the same water repeatedly through sealed heat exchangers. These systems can reduce freshwater consumption by 70% or more, without compromising cooling efficiency.

D. Treated Wastewater Reuse

Data centres can source their cooling water from treated municipal wastewater instead of freshwater aquifers. This approach is already demonstrated at scale in California's Orange County, which recycles wastewater to produce 130 million gallons of drinking-quality water daily. Data centres adopting this strategy reduce freshwater drawdown by up to 50%.

Agricultural-Digital Synergy Models

Rather than viewing data centres and agriculture as adversaries, forward-thinking models propose active collaboration:

- **Heat Recycling for Agriculture:** Data centre waste heat can be repurposed to warm agricultural greenhouses in cooler climates, turning a pollutant into a resource.
- **AI-Powered Precision Irrigation:** AI platforms like Kilimo help farmers optimize irrigation, easing pressure on aquifers shared with data centres. Over 2,000 farmers in seven countries have saved 30 million m^3 of water

Conclusion: The Choice Before Us

The digital revolution and agriculture need not clash, but without urgent action, data centres increasingly drain water for food. In Chile, farmers went to court; in Uruguay, cooling competed with drinking water; in Bengaluru, servers outcompete borewells; in Greater Noida, villagers fear for their fields; and in Tamil Nadu, Cauvery delta farmers face a looming water crisis.

India's data centre water consumption is set to more than double by 2030. Unless the policy, technology, and corporate responsibility frameworks catch up with this growth, the nation that feeds over a billion people will find its agricultural foundation undermined by the infrastructure of the digital economy.

> *The world does not have to choose between digital progress and food security. But it must stop treating groundwater as a free resource available without limit to whoever drills deepest. Farmers were there first — and without them, no algorithm, no server, no data centre will matter at all.*

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