4/12/23, 11:54 AM

If it champions clean energy, why did Amazon kill an emissions bill?
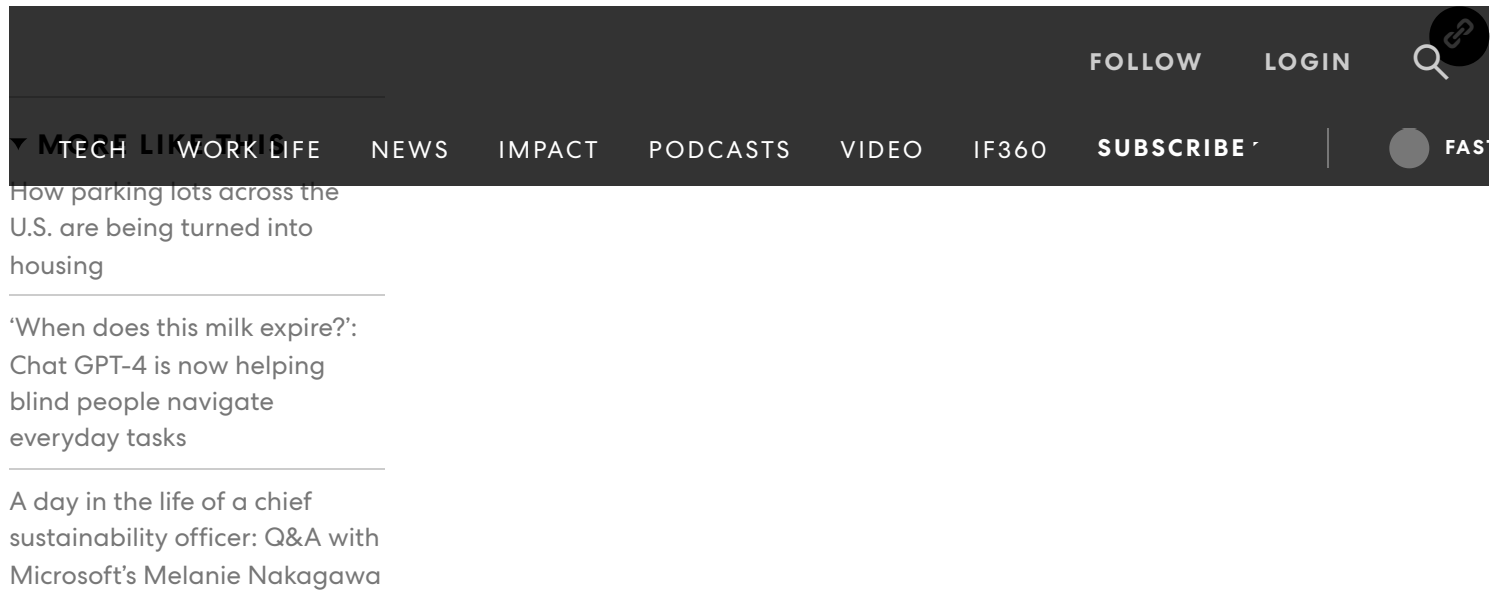
04-11-23

Amazon claims to champion clean energy. So why did it just help kill an emissions bill in Oregon?

The bill would have required large data centers, cryptocurrency miners, and other big power users in Oregon to shift to 80% clean energy by 2030, and 100% by 2040.

[Photos: M-Labom/iStock/Getty Images Plus, Gado/Getty Images/iStock/Getty Images Plus]

▼ MORE LIKE THIS

How parking lots across the
U.S. are being turned into
housing

'When does this milk expire?':
Chat GPT-4 is now helping
blind people navigate
everyday tasks

A day in the life of a chief
sustainability officer: Q&A with
Microsoft's Melanie Nakagawa

BY ADELE PETERS
4 MINUTE READ

In rural Oregon, a small electric utility called Umatilla Electric Cooperative used to rely mainly on clean hydropower. It had a small carbon footprint. But when large data centers came to the area—built by companies like Amazon—demand for power soared, and the utility had to find sources other than hydro. Over the past decade, the utility's carbon emissions per megawatt hour have increased by 543%.

A recent bill in Oregon would have required large data centers, cryptocurrency miners, and other big power users in the state to shift to 80% clean energy by 2030, and 100% by 2040. (The whole state reached 70% clean energy in 2022.) Amazon privately lobbied against the bill—despite the fact that the company presents itself as a climate leader, with a goal to reach net-zero emissions by 2040 itself. The bill died in a committee last week; Pam Marsh, the state representative who sponsored it, says Amazon helped kill it.

"Companies like Amazon continue to tout their own heroic measures while immediately lobbying against bills like this one in Oregon that would accelerate those same solutions at the speed and scale we need," says Bill Weihl, a former tech company sustainability executive who now leads the nonprofit ClimateVoice, advocating for the tech industry to support stronger climate policy.

Another law, passed in 2021, already says that large, investor-owned utilities in Oregon have to move to 100% clean electricity on the same timeline. But that left out some areas where power use is quickly growing, including utilities like Umatilla that serve Amazon's data centers.

"We realized that within the 25% of the state that's not served by the large utilities, in some cases we have these outlier uses in data centers and potentially crypto miners," Marsh says. "And we realized that big data centers can consume as much electricity as 80,000 homes. So they're huge."

In a statement, Amazon said the company opposed the bill because it didn't address the challenges of adding new renewable energy. "Building new renewable projects requires infrastructure investments in the grid, and today there are hurdles in key areas like permitting and interconnection," it said.

It's true that infrastructure is a major challenge. "Especially since the Inflation Reduction Act was passed, economics are no longer the barrier to building renewable energy and decarbonizing the grid," says Mark Dyson, who runs the carbon-free electricity program at the nonprofit RMI. "Now the barrier to building renewable energy and decarbonizing the grid is the grid infrastructure that is outdated."

But it's not clear why it wouldn't be possible to set a goal to reach clean energy while simultaneously working on issues like how to build new transmission lines faster. "We also wrote an 'opt out' in the bill so that if we get toward 2030 or 2040 and something happens in the world that makes it impossible for them to get to those goals, there would be a way for [data centers and other large energy users] to go on the record and certainly indicate that, which is only fair," Marsh says. "We've done the same thing for the big utilities."

An Amazon spokesperson told *Fast Company* that the bill had an "ambiguous" pathway for compliance and that there should have been better stakeholder engagement as the bill was drafted. "I think they just don't want to be regulated," Marsh says. "They have a corporate commitment to sustainability and climate action, which is a commitment that I now question."

Amazon says it plans to reach a goal of 100% renewable electricity for its operations by 2025. It's now the largest corporate buyer of renewable energy in the world. Like many other companies, it defines "100% renewable" as matching its annual energy use with renewables across an entire electric grid; a specific data center might still get dirty energy some of the time that's offset by projects elsewhere on the grid.

ADVERTISEMENT

In Oregon, Amazon is adding new fuel cells to help supply more electricity for some of its data centers that will run on natural gas, though they could run on hydrogen in the future. They're meant to be a temporary measure until new renewable electricity can be added, though it's not clear how soon that can happen. The company is also working with Umatilla Electric Cooperative in an agreement that lets it select where the utility is getting power for Amazon's data centers.

"The level of hypocrisy here would be hilarious if it weren't so disturbing—naming a sports arena after your "climate pledge" for clout while lobbying to bypass the basic clean energy requirements that public utilities are held to," says a current Amazon worker who is a member of Amazon Employees for Climate Justice, a group that pushes the company to take stronger climate action. "It makes me feel bad for the sustainability team here—they're working their butts off because they know better than anyone how little time we have to switch Amazon and the rest of the economy to renewables before catastrophe hits. But then the company undercuts that mission by building *new* dirty energy infrastructure."

Marsh argues that the bill's 2030 and 2040 goals are feasible for companies to hit. "If [large] utilities believe they can make the 2030 objective, I am very confident that our data centers can do the same," she says. The bill targeted data centers and crypto mining, rather than small utilities, because data centers have caused the current challenge.

"When a data center locates in one of these smaller communities, the excessive use that they require pushes the utilities outside of the allocation that they get from [clean hydropower]," Marsh says. "So then

the utilities are having to go to the larger outside energy market and buy energy that is very often coal or natural gas based. Without the data centers, the utilities would be fine."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Adele Peters is a staff writer at Fast Company who focuses on solutions to some of the world's largest problems, from climate change to homelessness. Previously, she worked with GOOD, BioLite, and the Sustainable Products and Solutions program at UC Berkeley More
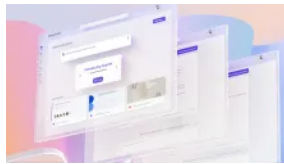
Today's Top Stories:

01

TECHNOLOGY

This Pedro Pascal-backed biotech startup just raised $10M to fight aging

02

TECHNOLOGY

Inside Microsoft's sprint to integrate OpenAI's GPT-4 into its '365' app suite

03

NEWS

After Winnie the Pooh, these other characters will soon enter the public domain

04

TECHNOLOGY

What is WaterTok? Why flavored water is blowing up on TikTok

05

CO-DESIGN

So long treadmill desks! Meet the Walking Room

More Top Stories:

4/12/23, 11:54 AM

If it champions clean energy, why did Amazon kill an emissions bill?

TECH   **WORK LIFE**   **NEWS**   **IMPACT**   **PODCASTS**   **VIDEO**   **IF360**   **SUBSCRIBE**   **FAST**

TECHNOLOGY

FBI says you should avoid public USB stations if you don't want malware on your phone

TECHNOLOGY

Twitter's blue checkmark purge may have finally begun

CO-DESIGN

Here's what it's like to live in a windowless dorm designed by a billionaire

LEADERSHIP

How 'workism' replaced religion

FOLLOW   LOGIN

TECH   WORK LIFE   NEWS   IMPACT   PODCASTS   VIDEO   IF360   SUBSCRIBE | FAST

TECHNOLOGY

Is TikTok harming our cognitive abilities?

LEADERSHIP

How to partner with your anxiety, rather than letting it make you miserable

NEWS

Theranos CEO Elizabeth Holmes tried and failed to avoid prison while her case is on appeal

CO-DESIGN

Sneakers are often designed for men by men. So track star Allyson Felix built her own

CO-DESIGN

AI redesigned the Starbucks logo, and the AI won

CO-DESIGN

How the Milwaukee Bucks built a thriving global brand

CO-DESIGN

AI feels like a magic act. By 2033, it will be a horror movie

TECHNOLOGY

AI celebrity deepfakes are over. Hoaxes as entertainment are just beginning

NEWS
Gen Z is the least happy generation at work. Here's how good leaders can set them up for success

CO-DESIGN
Exclusive: Fanta's new logo ditches the fruit, just like its soda

TECHNOLOGY
Tesla workers shared disturbing and embarrassing videos captured by car cameras: Report

TECHNOLOGY
Why content moderation could make or break the metaverse

TECHNOLOGY
How LinkedIn got serious about skills

CO-DESIGN
From Neil Young to Wu-Tang, a small Vermont venue is keeping the gig poster tradition alive

TECHNOLOGY
Expedia is integrating ChatGPT into its app to help users make travel plans

LEADERSHIP

Psychological safety: 3 ways leaders can create a safe space

NEWS

Book banning is sweeping parts of America. These celebrities want you to help stop it

IDEAS

Vegans need to stop exaggerating the health benefits of a plant-based diet

IDEAS

I'm an ER doctor: Here's what I found when I asked ChatGPT to diagnose my patients

IDEAS

In the midst of Arizona's historic drought, a Saudi company is tapping into its groundwater

NEWS

Why French protesters stormed BlackRock's office building in Paris today

IDEAS

Plant-based meat isn't perfect, but it is a form of harm reduction

TECH   WORK LIFE   NEWS   IMPACT   PODCASTS   VIDEO   IF360   **SUBSCRIBE**   FAST

TECH

OpenAI will pay you up to $20,000 to find bugs in ChatGPT

TECH

4 under-the-radar gadgets I find indispensable

TECH

Russia-owned rocket-maker Khrunichev Center says sanctions won't slow production

NEWS

NEWS

Theranos CEO Elizabeth Holmes tried and failed to avoid prison while her case is on appeal

NEWS

Book banning is sweeping parts of America. These celebrities want you to help stop it

NEWS

Gen Z is the least happy generation at work. Here's how good leaders can set them up for success

CO.DESIGN

CO.DESIGN

What designers wish they'd known before going freelance

CO.DESIGN

Ghia, the nonalcoholic aperitif, has a redesigned bottle that's ribbed for your pleasure

CO.DESIGN

Can this tiny device save you from the flu?

WORK LIFE

WORK LIFE

This is how AI will disrupt the DEI industry

FOLLOW   LOGIN

WORK LIFE

TECH   WORK LIFE   NEWS   IMPACT   PODCASTS   VIDEO   IF360   **SUBSCRIBE**   ● FAST

Why adults with ADHD often thrive as freelancers and entrepreneurs

WORK LIFE

5 nonnegotiable morning routines successful people use to win the day