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The nutrient bank at Great Meadow in Virginia. CLARA HUDSON/ WSJ

Old Golf Sites Make Data Centers Greener

BY CLARA HUDSON

The rolling greens and fairways of a now-defunct golf course in Northern Virginia are still visible beneath a blanket of crunchy leaves and unruly grass.

Far from its manicured past, the former golf course in Gainesville, Va., is now deliberately overgrown, bursting with trees—from sycamore to sweet gum and black cherry—wildflowers and other plants to create what's known as a nutrient bank, where companies can buy credits to offset the harm they cause to the environment at their sites nearby.

Nutrient bank lands in Virginia are overseen and approved by a state environmental regulator and can't be built on in the future. That's especially significant in an area of the state dubbed "Data Center Alley" amid a push to build data centers for energy-hungry artificial intelligence.

Companies looking to offset data center damage account for about 10% of credits at the former golf course, said ACRE Investment Management. The company oversees other nutrient banks, including at the nearby Great Meadow, known for hosting the Virginia Gold Cup horse racing event. The banks have also pulled in swaths of credit purchases for data centers and a range of industries in recent years, including utilities.

"Every piece of land is a portfolio, it's a blank canvas," said Chandler Van Voorhis, cofounder of ACRE, explaining that it can be more profitable to plant new trees and leave the land alone than to try and produce goods from it.

A nutrient bank is essentially a living purifier for the land. Root systems from the abundant assortment of plants act as a filter for nitrogen and phosphorus, helping to improve water quality and soil health by offsetting runoff from chemicals used in agriculture and other pollutants. Letting the land be and allowing plants to flourish also boosts biodiversity and air quality.

"You *can* put a price on nature," Van Voorhis said.

That price is anywhere from \$10,000 to \$35,000 for each credit, which equates to one pound of phosphorus removed from a river basin. They're a one-time binding sale, and dictate that the nutrient bank perpetually stay in its forested state.

^{Note}
In Virginia, companies have to agree to environmental mitigation to get a permit to build in the state, which they can either do themselves onsite, or through credits. Another way to fulfill that requirement, aside from credits, might be to restore a wetland very close to one of its sites. The projects have to meet specific water quality criteria to the best of their ability before turning to nutrient credits.

Businesses buying such credits must purchase them from the same designated geographic area—like a ZIP Code for drainage. Virginia’s nutrient credit program has been in force since 2005.

However, there is a new way to oversee nutrient banks in the state. The Virginia Department of Environmental Quality in December said it is launching a new nutrient credit marketplace intended to make credits more transparent and make it easier for them to be bought and sold.

The proliferation of data centers in Northern Virginia has sparked environmental concerns, especially due to greenhouse gas emissions, water consumption and worries about chemical use. What’s more, building new data centers in rural areas or previously unpaved land makes more of the landscape impervious, which can have a range of effects from increasing water runoff to drought, and even boosting harmful algae blooms, said Lauren Bridges, who researches data centers’ energy and water impact at the University of Virginia.

“A data center itself is just a building with servers,” she said. “But it’s what it connects to and what it relies on that really gets at its true total cost.” *Clara Hudson writes for WSJ Pro Sustainable Business.*

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