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# **Kerr Lake, Data Centers, and the Case for Recreation**

A resource analysis for Vance County and the Kerr-Tar region

Prepared March 2026 | Vance County, North Carolina

Updated March 27, 2026, incorporating findings from the  
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers NEPA Public Scoping Session  
on Franklin County's water reallocation request

48 cited sources | Includes USACE presentation slides and full meeting transcript analysis

## Executive Summary

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Kerr Lake sits at the center of a growing tension between competing uses for the same finite resources: water, power, and land. A Microsoft data center campus is already permitted in neighboring Person County. Franklin County has initiated a new water allocation request from the reservoir. And Vance County, as a Tier 1 economically distressed county, is positioned to attract similar industrial proposals with some of the most generous tax incentives in the state.

This report examines what data centers actually deliver to rural communities, what they consume, and how those tradeoffs compare to an alternative path: investing in Kerr Lake as a regional recreation and tourism economy. The numbers favor recreation, and it is not close.

**This updated edition incorporates findings from the March 26, 2026 NEPA public scoping meeting**, where residents learned that Franklin County is requesting 15.7 million gallons per day from the reservoir's conservation pool, nearly as much as the entire Kerr Lake Regional Water System is currently authorized to draw. The Corps confirmed it will not proactively model growth in existing communities' demand, will not quantitatively incorporate climate change projections, and considers land use, data centers, and building permits outside its scope. The community's window to shape this process is narrow.

## 1. What Kerr Lake Is Today

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John H. Kerr Reservoir covers roughly 50,000 acres with 800–850 miles of shoreline, spanning six counties across North Carolina and Virginia. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has managed it since the dam's completion in 1953. It was authorized under the Flood Control Act of 1944 for flood control, hydroelectric power, water supply, recreation, and fish and wildlife conservation.<sup>3,4</sup>

The dam houses seven Francis turbines with 227 MW of installed capacity, generating over 426 GWh annually. Dominion Energy receives 58% of the output; Duke Energy gets the remainder.<sup>4</sup>

### Water Allocation

The Kerr Lake Regional Water System (KLRWS), operated by the City of Henderson, holds a Corps authorization for 20 million gallons per day (MGD). Current usage sits around 6.9 MGD. The system's interbasin transfer certification allows 14.2 MGD to flow into the Tar River, Fishing Creek, and Neuse River basins, serving Henderson, Oxford, Warren County, Granville County, Franklin County, and a dozen smaller municipalities.<sup>5,6</sup>

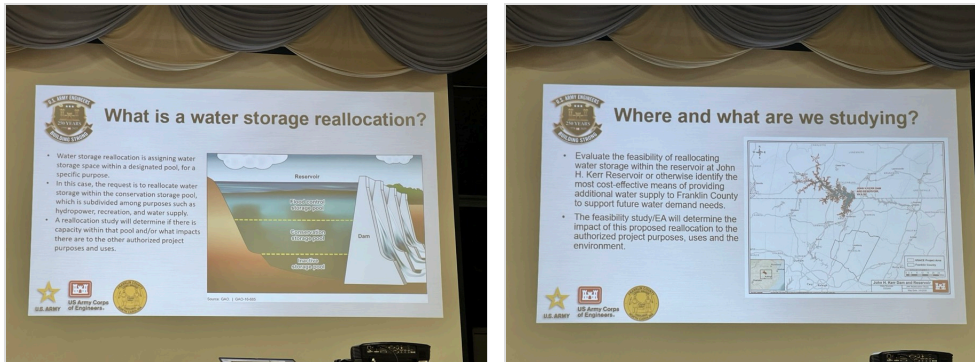
Virginia Beach draws water through the Lake Gaston Pipeline, a 76-mile, 60-inch pipeline completed in 1997 after nearly 20 years of legal battles between North Carolina and Virginia. Construction cost approximately \$150 million. The pipeline

can move 60 MGD, with Chesapeake holding a 10 MGD share. Virginia Beach's actual daily consumption runs at roughly 30 MGD. The water stored in Kerr Reservoir flows downstream to Lake Gaston, where it gets pumped into the pipeline at the Pea Creek intake. This lowers Kerr Reservoir by 2–4 inches daily.<sup>7,36</sup>

Franklin County initiated a NEPA scoping process in 2026 for a new allocation from the reservoir, anticipating water supply shortages over the next 50 years. The formal request is for **10,200 acre-feet** of storage reallocation from the conservation pool. Franklin County has also issued a public-private partnership Request for Qualifications for a raw water pipeline and treatment facility, estimated at approximately **\$200 million**, with the private developer expected to fund at least 50% of the project cost.<sup>2,34,35</sup>

### How the Conservation Pool Works NEW

At the March 26 scoping meeting, Corps engineers explained the reservoir's pool structure in detail. The water behind the dam is divided into three pools: an inactive sediment pool at the bottom, the conservation storage pool in the middle, and flood control storage at the top. Water supply, hydropower, recreation, and downstream flow all come from the conservation pool. The Corps described it as vertical slices of a shared resource rather than stacked layers. When the water level drops, every authorized use is affected simultaneously.<sup>33</sup>



USACE presentation slides: Conservation pool structure (left) and study area map (right). Source: USACE Wilmington District, March 26, 2026.

Current Kerr Lake Water Users: City of Henderson/KLRWS (6.9 MGD actual / 20 MGD authorized), Virginia Beach (~1.07% of conservation pool, ~10,000 acre-feet), Mecklenburg Cogeneration Partnership (3 MGD), Virginia Department of Corrections (16,000 gallons/day), Town of Clarksville and Burlington Industries (grandfathered rights). All existing agreements combined use approximately 3% of the conservation pool.<sup>33</sup>

### KLRWS Ownership and Expansion NEW

The KLRWS is owned by three co-equal partners: the City of Henderson (60%), City of Oxford (20%), and Warren County (20%). It serves bulk customers across Vance, Granville, Warren, and Franklin counties, including the towns of Kittrell,

Norlina, Warrenton, Stovall, and Middleburg. Franklin County already purchases treated water through this system.<sup>37</sup>

A \$109 million treatment plant expansion is currently under construction, designed to increase capacity from approximately 10 MGD to 15 MGD initially, with a path to 19–20 MGD. This raises a critical question: if the existing regional system is already expanding to serve its member communities (including Franklin County), why does Franklin County need a separate 15.7 MGD allocation and a \$200 million independent pipeline and treatment plant?<sup>37,38</sup>

The KLRWS currently uses only about **35% of its authorized 20 MGD allocation**. The treatment plant expansion would bring capacity much closer to the full authorization. Whether Franklin County's projected 50-year demand could be met through expanded KLRWS participation rather than a new reallocation is a question the Corps' feasibility study should address, but one that Franklin County's RFQ for a standalone facility suggests has already been decided politically.<sup>37</sup>

### Current Economic Impact

Kerr Lake State Recreation Area hit 1 million annual visitors in 2023, one of only five North Carolina state parks to reach that threshold. Vance County saw \$70.2 million in visitor spending that same year, a \$5.23 million increase from 2022, with tourism directly employing over 445 people and generating \$16.2 million in payroll. The reservoir has prevented approximately \$400 million in flood damage since its completion.<sup>8,9</sup>

The lake is home to the only naturally reproducing striped bass population in Virginia, which makes it a draw for anglers across the mid-Atlantic. Major League Fishing hosted its Phoenix Bass Fishing League Regional at Kerr in October 2024, bringing 200 competitive boaters with a \$60,000 top prize.<sup>11</sup>

## 2. What Data Centers Actually Bring

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The standard pitch goes like this: a billion-dollar investment, thousands of construction jobs, steady tax revenue, and a signal that a community is open for business. The reality, documented across dozens of deals, looks different.

### Jobs

A typical data center running 2–5 megawatts employs about 30 permanent workers. A 250,000-square-foot facility might have around 50 full-time staff. Microsoft estimates about 50 full-time employees per facility. Google's 500-acre, 500 MW campus in Kansas City promised 1,000 construction jobs but only 200 permanent positions.<sup>12</sup>

Apple's \$1 billion data center in Maiden, North Carolina, the closest cautionary example, permanently employs just 50 people.<sup>13</sup>

### Tax Incentives and the Real Math

North Carolina's incentive programs for data centers are among the most aggressive in the country. A "Qualifying Data Center" investing at least \$75 million gets sales and use tax exemptions on electricity and equipment. An "Eligible Internet Data Center" in a Tier 1 or Tier 2 county (Vance is Tier 1) gets exemptions at the \$250 million threshold on electricity, business property, and software. Property tax reimbursement of 90% is available for the first five years. There is no minimum job creation requirement.<sup>14</sup>

Good Jobs First, a nonpartisan subsidy watchdog, found that state and local governments pay an average of \$2 million per permanent data center job in subsidies. Apple's Maiden facility hit \$6.4 million per job: \$321 million in subsidies divided by 50 permanent employees. Google's campus in Lenoir cost \$1.2 million per job: \$254 million for 210 positions.<sup>13</sup>

Facility	Investment	Subsidies	Permanent Jobs	Cost per Job
Apple, Maiden, NC	\$1B	\$321M	50	\$6.4M
Google, Lenoir, NC	\$600M+	\$254M	210	\$1.2M
National average	Varies	Varies	30–200	\$2.0M

Source: Good Jobs First, 2024

## Water Consumption

Data centers use water primarily for evaporative cooling, and roughly 80% of that water never returns to the system. A mid-size facility consumes about 300,000 gallons per day, equivalent to 1,000 households. Large facilities can pull 5 million gallons per day, matching the demand of a town of 50,000.<sup>15,16</sup>

Google's single data center in Council Bluffs, Iowa consumed 1 billion gallons in 2024, roughly 2.7 million gallons per day. Microsoft's global operations withdrew 2.8 billion gallons, with net consumption of 1.7 billion after discharges.<sup>17,18</sup>

Lawrence Berkeley National Lab reported in 2024 that U.S. data centers consumed 17 billion gallons of water directly and an additional 211 billion gallons indirectly through electricity generation. By 2028, direct consumption could double or quadruple.<sup>19</sup>

For context: The entire KLRWS system currently draws 6.9 MGD from Kerr Lake. A single large data center could match or exceed that number on its own.

## Power

A typical hyperscale data center consumes around 100 MW, equivalent to powering 100,000 homes. In 2023, data centers consumed 26% of Virginia's total electricity supply. Utilities across the country received requests for over 700 GW of power connections in 2025, more than the 477 GW the entire United States consumed the year prior. Utilities requested \$29 billion in rate increases in the first half of 2025 alone, double the prior year.<sup>20</sup>

Virginia residents now face projected electricity bill increases of \$276 per year by 2030 attributable to data center load.<sup>20</sup>

### Community Backlash

In 2024, roughly \$64 billion worth of data center projects were blocked or delayed by local opposition across nearly 200 community groups in 25-plus states. Lawmakers in at least eight states introduced legislation requiring data centers to report water use. In Stokes County, North Carolina, the planning board voted to recommend against a proposed 1,800-acre data center campus in December 2024. In Port Washington, Wisconsin, over 1,000 residents petitioned against an OpenAI/Oracle data center.<sup>22,23</sup>

## 3. What Data Centers Take from Kerr Lake's Backyard

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Microsoft purchased the 1,350-acre Person County Mega Park for \$26.85 million in October 2024. Person County borders Vance County directly to the west. Permitting was expected to begin in 2026, with Duke Energy slated to power the facility. Residents raised concerns about water consumption and a lack of transparency. County officials had signed NDAs during negotiations.<sup>1,26,27</sup>

Microsoft has pledged to fund its own infrastructure, avoid increasing utility rates, and "replenish more than it consumes" in water. No specific water demand figures for this site have been published. North Carolina does not maintain a comprehensive inventory of data centers and has no centralized tracking of aggregate water consumption across facilities, a gap documented in WRAL's February 2026 investigative reporting. County officials' NDAs remain in place even after the land purchase was publicly announced. The water source for the Person County facility has not been publicly identified, though the site sits adjacent to the Kerr/Roanoke basin.<sup>1,45,46</sup>

The broader North Carolina data center pipeline has exploded. Amazon broke ground on a 20-building campus in Richmond County. Energy Storage Solutions is building a 900 MW campus in Tarboro. CBRE reports that NC data center construction activity has jumped fifteenfold.<sup>28</sup>

Each of these projects draws from the same regional power grid and, in many cases, the same water systems. The cumulative demand is what matters, not any single facility's footprint in isolation.

### What the Corps Will Not Study NEW

At the March 26 scoping meeting, a resident directly raised the issue of data centers, noting that several are planned for the region and that they consume enormous amounts of water without returning it to the basin. The Corps responded that data centers would be captured in their regional socioeconomic analysis but that they "do not subdivide by basin." When pressed on whether cumulative future demand from data centers, population growth, and additional reallocation requests

would be modeled, the Corps was clear: "All we're doing is looking at this specific proposal, how it impacts the project now."<sup>33</sup>

The Corps considers land use decisions, building permits, and industrial water demand to be matters for state and local government. This means no federal entity is evaluating the combined impact of Franklin County's 15.7 MGD request alongside the water demands of data centers already permitted or under development in the same region.

## 4. The Recreation Alternative

Kerr Lake has the physical assets to be one of the top recreation economies in the Carolinas and Virginia. At 50,000 acres with 850 miles of shoreline, it is larger than Lake Norman, Smith Mountain Lake, Jordan Lake, and Lake Gaston. It already draws a million visitors a year. But it dramatically underperforms every comparable lake in the region in economic output, because it has never received the investment, designation priority, or coordinated marketing to capture its potential.<sup>8,29</sup>

### Comparable Lake Economies

Lake	Acres	Annual Visitor Spending	Jobs	Key Detail
Lake Norman, NC	32,750	\$429M (Iredell, 2024)	2,428	12 marinas, \$14.5M state tax
Smith Mtn Lake, VA	20,600	\$120M+ (2 counties)	1,319	60% of county tax base
Lake Gaston, NC/VA	20,000	\$134M (Halifax, 2023)	800+	7th in NC tourism growth
Jordan Lake, NC	13,943	\$86M (Chatham, 2024)	690+	Corps-managed
Kerr Lake	50,000	\$70.2M (Vance, 2023)	445	Largest lake, lowest return

Sources: NC Dept. of Commerce visitor spending reports; Iredell Free News; Cardinal News; Halifax County tourism data; Chatham County tourism data.

Kerr Lake is the biggest body of water in this group by a wide margin, yet it generates the lowest visitor spending. Iredell County alone, with a lake roughly two-thirds Kerr's size, generates six times the revenue. Smith Mountain Lake, less than half the acreage, drives enough economic activity that county officials there call it "the biggest factory we have." Lake magisterial districts generate nearly 60% of Franklin County, Virginia's real estate tax revenues, over \$22 million.<sup>29</sup>

Even Halifax County on the North Carolina side of Lake Gaston, a lake half Kerr's size, saw \$134.46 million in visitor spending in 2023 and ranked seventh among all 100 NC counties in tourism growth rate.<sup>30</sup>

## What the Gap Represents

If Kerr Lake performed at even half of Lake Norman's per-acre visitor spending rate, Vance County's tourism revenue would triple. That is not aspirational thinking. It is what happens when a lake gets proper marina investment, lodging development, restaurant and retail districts near the water, event programming, and marketing coordination.<sup>29</sup>

The Army Corps maintains 30 recreation areas and four marinas at Kerr, but the surrounding counties have not built the commercial ecosystem that turns visitors into overnight stays and repeat trips. Lake Norman has a dozen private marinas. Smith Mountain Lake has nearly the same. Kerr Lake has four.

## Recreation vs. Data Center: Side by Side

Factor	Data Center	Recreation Economy
Permanent jobs	30–200	Hundreds to thousands, diverse
Water impact	300K–5M gal/day consumed	Needs clean water, doesn't deplete
Revenue distribution	One corporation	Distributed across small businesses
Tax revenue	Abated 75–90% for 10–15 yrs	Broad base, no abatements
Community identity	Industrial / infrastructure	Destination / quality of life
Property values	Mixed; industrial depresses	Lakefront premium lifts area
Subsidy cost per job	\$2M–\$6.4M	Standard development rates
Reversibility	Hard to undo once built	Flexible, iterative

## 5. The Water Question

This is the piece that ties everything together. Kerr Lake's water is already spoken for by multiple parties, and demand is increasing on every side.

The KLRWS has headroom (6.9 MGD actual against 20 MGD authorized), but that headroom exists to serve population growth across Henderson, Oxford, Warren County, Granville County, Franklin County, and their downstream customers. Franklin County's new allocation request signals that the region is already planning for tighter supply.<sup>2,5</sup>

Virginia Beach's pipeline can pull up to 60 MGD. Drought events have repeatedly tested the system. In 2001–2002, November inflows hit the lowest on record, prompting the Corps to establish weekly stakeholder conference calls that continue today. By October 2007, the lake dropped to 293.9 feet, approximately 5 feet below normal and within the emergency trigger zone, with Franklin County preparing mandatory water restrictions. The 2012 drought saw inflows averaging only 40–

50% of normal from April onward, dropping to 40% from July, closing boat ramps and forcing the Corps to generate only the minimum contractually required energy. Most recently, moderate to severe drought in 2024–2025 brought the lake near the 293–294 foot drought trigger elevation before late-season rainfall provided relief.<sup>7,31,39,40</sup>

Adding a data center drawing 300,000 to 5 million gallons per day to this system is not a neutral act. It introduces a customer that cannot scale down during drought, cannot be shut off during low-pool events, and operates 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. When there is a conflict between residential water supply and a corporate cooling system, someone loses.

Northern Virginia's experience is instructive: data centers there consumed nearly 2 billion gallons in 2023, a 63% increase from 2019, and declining water levels in the Potomac Aquifer have already forced some localities to switch from groundwater to surface water for drinking.<sup>17</sup>

### Franklin County's Request in Context NEW

At the March 26 scoping meeting, the room audibly reacted when the Corps revealed that Franklin County is requesting **15.7 million gallons per day**. For context, that is nearly 80% of the entire KLRWS authorization that currently serves multiple counties. It is a new allocation. Franklin County does not currently draw directly from Kerr Lake, though it does purchase water indirectly through the KLRWS.

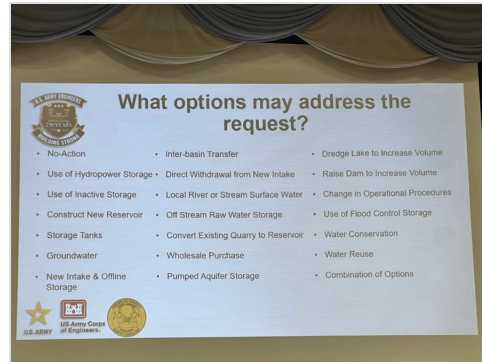
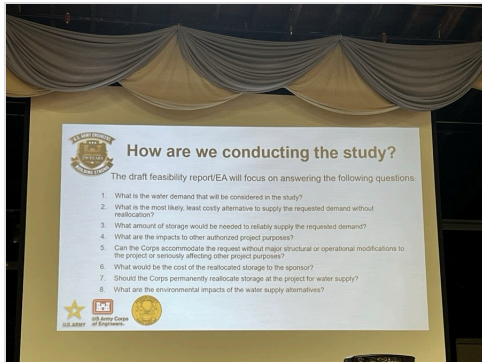
The Corps confirmed that all existing agreements combined use approximately 3% of the conservation pool, and that Franklin County's request would add roughly another 1%. While those percentages sound small, the precedent at other reservoirs is instructive. The City of Raleigh purchased **100% of the water supply pool at Falls Lake** (42% of total conservation storage), and subsequently petitioned for and received an additional 17,300 acre-feet reallocated from the water quality pool, adding 22 MGD of capacity. No other municipality holds any portion of Falls Lake's water supply storage. Kerr Lake's conservation pool is finite, and the Corps acknowledged there is a threshold beyond which further reallocation begins to impact hydropower, recreation, and downstream flows.<sup>33,48</sup>

The math: Kerr Lake's current users draw a combined total that already stresses the system during drought. Franklin County's 15.7 MGD request would claim nearly as much water as the entire existing regional system uses. A single large data center could add demand equivalent to 50–100% of what Henderson and its partner municipalities currently use. There is no mechanism in place to prioritize residential or recreational water over industrial cooling during scarcity events. And the Corps has confirmed it will not model cumulative future demand as part of this study.<sup>33</sup>

### What the Corps Will and Will Not Do NEW

Based on the scoping meeting, the Corps' feasibility study will:

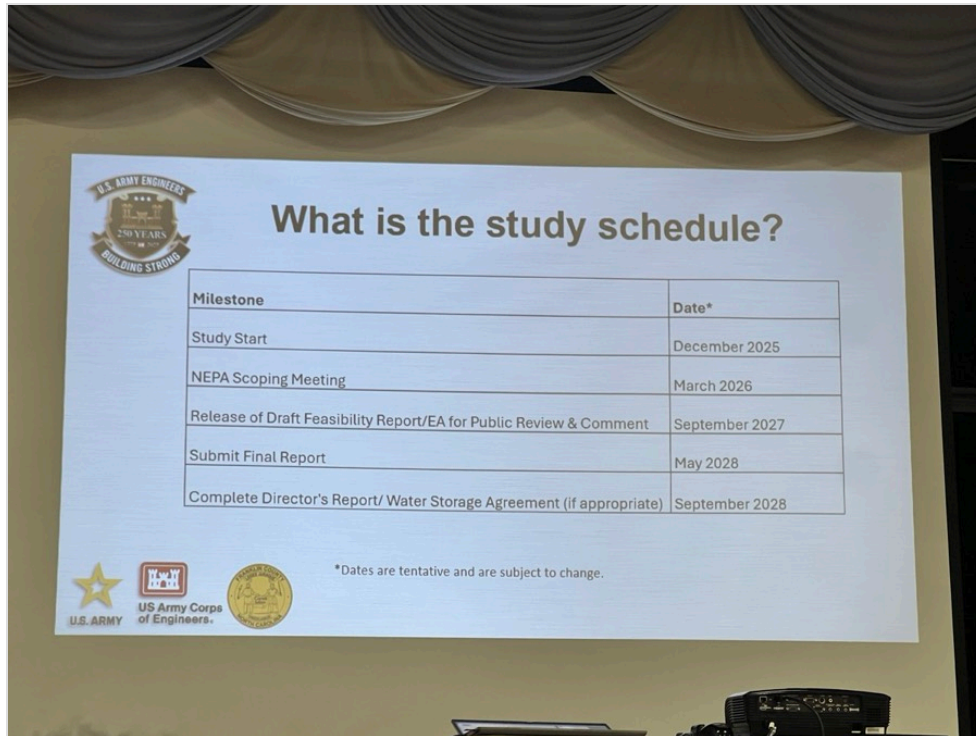
- Independently verify Franklin County's projected demand using their own economists and engineers
- Model the reallocation against the full historical period of record, including the drought of record, going back to the early 1950s
- Analyze impacts to hydropower generation and flood risk management
- Evaluate alternative water sources (the "next least costly alternative")
- Include a qualitative assessment of climate change
- Require approval from both North Carolina and Virginia before signing any water storage agreement



USACE slides: The 8 questions the feasibility study will answer (left) and the full list of alternatives under consideration (right).

The study will **not**:

- Proactively model growth in demand for communities that already hold allocations
- Quantitatively incorporate climate change projections into its engineering model
- Evaluate cumulative impacts from data centers, industrial development, or other future reallocation requests
- Address land use, building permits, or economic development decisions
- Assess impacts to recreation, property values, or tourism economies



USACE study schedule. Final report May 2028; Water Storage Agreement (if approved) September 2028.

The draft feasibility report is expected in September 2027 with a 30-day public comment period and at least one additional public meeting. The study can be terminated at any point if both the Corps and Franklin County agree. The most recent comparable reallocation, at Philpott Lake for Henry County, Virginia, took **10 years** (2014–2024) to complete for a more modest request: 5,200 acre-feet of storage supporting 4 MGD of withdrawals, at a cost of \$904,294. That process involved only one state and received an Environmental Assessment rather than a full Environmental Impact Statement. Franklin County's larger, multi-state request will almost certainly take longer.<sup>33-41.42</sup>

## 6. Vance County's Position

Vance County is classified as Tier 1 under North Carolina's economic distress rankings, among the 40 most distressed counties in the state. Median household income sits at \$50,465. The poverty rate is 19%, and child poverty reaches 36.7%. Unemployment runs around 5.7%, with labor force participation at 58.6%.<sup>32</sup>

These numbers make the county eligible for the most generous state incentives, including the Eligible Internet Data Center exemptions. That is exactly what makes the county attractive to data center developers, and exactly what makes the deal terms worth scrutinizing. A company can invest \$250 million, pay minimal sales tax, get 90% property tax reimbursement, create 50 jobs, and call it economic development.<sup>14</sup>

The alternative path, building a recreation economy around Kerr Lake, would create jobs accessible to the existing workforce: hospitality, food service, marine services, retail, event coordination, guiding, construction. These are jobs that do

not require a computer science degree or a security clearance. They circulate money through local businesses rather than routing it to a corporate headquarters in Redmond or Cupertino.

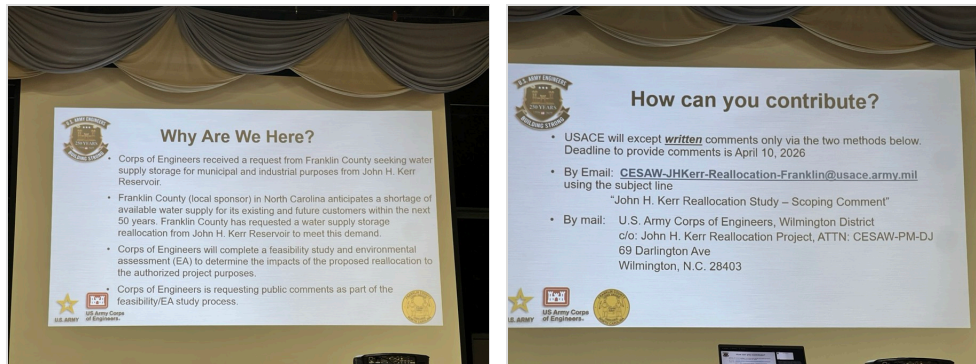
## What the Community Said NEW

The scoping meeting made clear that residents across the region understand the stakes. A Vance County science teacher put it plainly: "Rural communities' resources are extracted, but we don't get the same investment. If the investment is not coming to us, why should we continue to send our resources out?" A Warren County resident noted that the Kerr Lake Regional Water System was originally created to serve Vance, Warren, and Granville counties, and that the current process does not adequately represent those communities' interests.<sup>33</sup>

The town administrator of Warrenton asked how Kerr Lake's 3–4% allocation compared to other Corps reservoirs and learned that some, like Falls Lake, have been allocated at 100%. Multiple residents called for existing agreement holders to immediately submit their own requests to ensure their future needs are not overlooked. The Corps did not dispute this recommendation.<sup>33</sup>

Perhaps most telling: no one from Franklin County attended the meeting to explain or defend their request.

## 7. Recommendations



USACE slides: The stated purpose of the meeting (left) and how to submit written comments (right).

- 1. Submit detailed public comments before April 10, 2026**, and continue submitting after that date. The Corps confirmed late comments will be accepted. Submit by email to **CESAW-JHKerr-Reallocation-Franklin@usace.army.mil** with subject line "John H. Kerr Reallocation Study – Scoping Comment," or by mail to: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Wilmington District, c/o John H. Kerr Reallocation Project, ATTN: CESAW-PM-DJ, 69 Darlington Ave, Wilmington, NC 28403. Focus on: cumulative water demand from all sources, recreation and tourism impacts, data center water consumption, climate change projections, and the need for transparent access to Franklin County's application materials.<sup>33,47</sup>
- 2. Request full water demand projections** for any proposed data center in Vance County or adjacent counties drawing from Kerr Lake, including peak

cooling demand, drought contingency plans, and cumulative impact modeling alongside existing allocations and the Franklin County request.

3. **Demand transparency in data center negotiations:** no NDAs on public resource commitments, public hearings before any incentive packages are approved, and community benefit agreements with enforceable terms.<sup>1</sup>
4. **Commission an independent economic impact study** comparing 20-year returns of data center development versus recreation investment at Kerr Lake, including job counts by skill level, tax revenue net of incentives, infrastructure costs, and water consumption.
5. **Petition the Army Corps of Engineers** to elevate recreation as a priority use in the Kerr Lake management plan, with specific provisions for maintaining summer pool levels that support tourism and marina operations.
6. **Develop a Kerr Lake recreation investment plan** modeled on Smith Mountain Lake and Lake Norman, including additional marina capacity, lodging incentives, lakefront commercial zoning, trail development, and event programming.
7. **Coordinate through the Kerr-Tar Regional Council of Governments** to present a unified multi-county position on water allocation and economic development priorities before individual counties negotiate independently with corporate interests.
8. **Activate the Roanoke River Basin Bi-State Commission**, formally established in 2002 (NC G.S. § 77-91; VA Code § 62.1-69.37), this 18-member body (9 from each state, including 6 legislators and 3 appointed representatives) makes non-regulatory recommendations on Roanoke Basin water issues that are "usually followed." It **did not meet at all in fiscal year 2024**. Neither standing committees nor ad hoc groups convened. The one body designed to coordinate interstate water management at Kerr Lake is dormant exactly when it is needed most. Communities should demand its immediate activation.<sup>33,43,44</sup>
9. **Require existing KLRWS member communities to formally assess and document their future water needs** and submit those projections to the Corps. The Corps confirmed it will not proactively study growth in existing users' demand. If communities do not speak up now, their needs will not be modeled in the feasibility study.<sup>33</sup>
10. **Audit existing incentive structures** to determine whether a cap on subsidies per permanent job (Good Jobs First recommends \$50,000) should be adopted at the county level.<sup>13</sup>

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