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Assessment, incentives key to government's data center energy goals

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March 05, 2007 ([Computerworld](#)) -- More than two dozen technology leaders and representatives from the U.S. Department of Energy met on Friday in Austin to discuss where federal energy-efficiency laws regarding computers should be focused.

Last week's meeting was the second in a series of planned discussions. The next roundtable is expected to be held in Washington later this year.

With more than 70 energy-related pieces of legislation currently being considered in Congress, and a bill signed by President Bush late last year calling for an in-depth study of data center efficiency, increased government regulation seems inevitable.

"The scariest thing most businesses can hear is 'I'm from the federal government, and I'm here to help,' but we really are in a listening mode," Andy Karsner, assistant secretary for energy efficiency and renewable energy at the DoE, said during the Austin meeting.

Representatives from the state of Texas and the city of Austin also attended the gathering.

One of the first initiatives expected to come out of the roundtables is a policy to conduct Energy Savings Assessments (ESAs) at the country's largest data centers. A similar and recently completed effort within 200 of the largest heavy industrial businesses identified opportunities to save over 50 trillion BTUs of natural gas, a sum equivalent to the amount of natural gas used in 700,000 U.S. homes annually.

The DoE plans to conduct another 250 ESAs this year.

Keys to improving energy efficiency, participants in Austin said, include assessment, incentives, server consolidation and virtualization. Another recurring theme from technology industry executives was the need for a dramatic shift in the historic separation between facilities and IT personnel.

Paul Perez, vice president of scalable data center infrastructure at Hewlett-Packard Co., said an ongoing effort at the company to consolidate 85 data centers into six has had to include "an integration of the two domains of IT and facilities." Traditionally, he said, "there has been an inconsistency of approach, no common vision and sometimes a lack of trust."

Also needed are methods to document total operational and disposal costs that will drive the decision-making process, he said.

A short-term goal of the DoE and industry initiative is to adopt specifications that will lead to the creation of an Energy Star designation for servers. Qualifying systems could then be easily identified for local and federal purchasing incentives such as rebates.

Pacific Gas and Electric Co. in San Francisco has been offering rebates for installation of certain "high-efficiency" servers for about a year, and Roger Duncan, deputy general manager of Austin Energy, said Friday that his company will also offer similar incentives. A "fine tuning" of the utility company incentives is also needed to ensure the assessment process within data centers to meet efficiency criteria for rebates is not too burdensome.

Lorie Wigle, marketing director of server software, technologies and initiatives for Intel Corp., said changing attitudes regarding energy efficiency within technology organizations remains at a very early stage.

"For many, the energy cost is still a shrug," Wigle said. "I don't necessarily see any firestorm of concern. We have to show people from an operational level why they should care about the energy side."

Another goal is to determine a methodology for creating a metric that measures data center efficiency as a product of its computational value, said William Tschudi, project manager of the applications team within the environment energy technologies division at Berkeley National Laboratory. "It would be great to have a 'miles to the gallon' comparison," Tschudi said. "Getting to those kinds of understandings is why we are here, and five years ago we couldn't have even convened a group to consider these issues."

One participant suggested such a metric could establish a baseline that if exceeded by businesses would result in a type of consumption tax. This would encourage efficient infrastructure designs, the participant said, but it was a prospect that none of the government officials present at the roundtable endorsed.

Karsner said that communication will be the key to the future, and reminded other participants that the President's submitted budget for 2008 calls for \$9 billion in funding to facilitate energy efficiency.



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