

From Copper to Code: Montana's AI Moment Has Arrived

Montana helped build America's electric infrastructure. The copper pulled from the ground in Butte made modern wiring possible and powered the spread of electricity into homes, factories, and towns across the country. Those men carving out a living under the earth did not just extract ore; they made progress possible. Long before technology hubs had names, Montana was already enabling a national transformation.

Artificial intelligence represents the next transformation of that scale, and this is Montana's AI moment. Whether Montana participates early, with its eyes open and its values intact, or waits until the rules, the markets, and the power dynamics are already set elsewhere is not a philosophical question; it is a practical one. History is clear on this point: waiting has never been a neutral choice for this state. AI is coming, and Montana will either help shape it or live with decisions made somewhere else.

Artificial intelligence is not a distant technology or a Silicon Valley experiment. It is not confined to proposed data centers in Butte, Colstrip, or anywhere else. AI is already changing how businesses operate, how governments make decisions, how work gets done, and how capital moves.

Goldman Sachs estimates that artificial intelligence could reshape roughly 25 percent of today's jobs over time. That statistic lands differently in a state where a single plant closure can hollow out an entire town, where career ladders are narrow, and where people do not assume the next opportunity will simply appear down the road. For Montana, early engagement is not optional; it is the difference between influence and reaction.

Montanans already know the cost of waiting. Decisions made in Washington, D.C., reshaped the future of Colstrip, and while many Montanans fought hard, reaction came too late to change the outcome. Regulations Montana did not help shape mothballed roughly half of Colstrip's generation capacity, cost thousands of jobs, wiped out millions in economic development, and stripped an energy hub of the security and stability it once provided.

I saw this firsthand during more than a decade working on energy and infrastructure policy, fighting for Montana jobs before Congress, federal agencies, and the White House, where decisions about complex systems, regulatory timing, and market design determined whether Montana shaped outcomes or absorbed them. Montana did not lose leverage at Colstrip because we lacked conviction; we lost it because the decisions were already made by the time the consequences were undeniable.

That lesson shaped how I approached helping build Montana's cannabis industry as well. When I helped lead the effort to legalize cannabis in 2020, we were not handed a finished market. There was no federal roadmap, no proven regulatory model, and no shortage of skepticism. Montana chose to engage early and design deliberately. Today, that industry is valued in the billions, generates roughly sixty million dollars a year in new tax revenue, and supports thousands of Montana jobs. That outcome was not accidental; it came from showing up early instead of reacting late.

Artificial intelligence now presents the same choice, only at a much larger scale, with consequences that arrive faster and cut deeper. AI is already embedded across the economy and will shape where investment flows, where skilled workers choose to live, and which regions remain competitive.

Data centers are part of the picture, but they are not the story. If Montana's role in artificial intelligence is reduced to hosting infrastructure while the intellectual property, the workforce strategy, and the long-term value creation happen somewhere else, then we are not participating in the future; we are renting out the ground beneath it. Hosting servers without building capacity is not development, it is extraction.

This moment is not about chasing headlines or hype. It is about deciding what kind of future Montana wants. That means preparing workers for AI-enabled jobs rather than displacement, updating public institutions so they can responsibly use new tools, and attracting investment that strengthens communities instead of hollowing them out. It also means making deliberate choices now, before market forces harden and options narrow, about how Montana educates, regulates, and competes.

Montana once helped electrify the nation. We are capable of helping shape the next great infrastructure shift as well. From copper to code, Montana has done this before. If we show up early, we help build the future. If we wait, we live with the consequences. This is Montana's AI moment.

About the Author - Pepper Petersen is Executive Director of the Montana AI X Initiative, which focuses on how artificial intelligence intersects with economic opportunity, workforce development, and institutional readiness.