

Photo: Cara Horowitz

The United Nations mega-conference focused on climate change known as COP ("Conference of the Parties") is well underway in Belém, Brazil with 193 countries plus the EU, 57 heads of state, 39 ministers and hundreds of governors, mayors, and local officials participating. Two of my UCLA Law colleagues are on the ground in Belém this week and will be sharing updates. Despite — nay, because of — the Trump administration's absence, media interest in the climate summit is high.

"Are COPs still worthwhile?" is one underlying narrative in the media coverage. Skepticism is understandable.

The climate talks feel both more urgent and more depressing this year: 2025 is set to be the second or third warmest year on record. The United States — a superpower and super emitter — is not attending. That despite the fact that pollsters have found that 79% of U.S. registered voters support the United States' participation in the Paris Climate Agreement, and 65% opposed Trump's decision to

again withdraw from the Agreement.

On the one hand, it is helpful to not have Trump representatives in Brazil bullying other countries out of climate action at a time when renewable energy is truly hitting its stride. On the other hand, many nations are showing up in Belém with watered-down climate goals on this 10th anniversary of world powers signing the Paris Agreement. We're not on track to reduce planet-warming emissions as planned, though it certainly could be worse. IEA's World Energy Outlook, released last night, finds oil and gas demand will likely keep rising through 2050 under nations' current policies. Given this context, what can states like California accomplish by attending?

(We interrupt this column with a public service announcement. Here's how to pronounce Belém: beh-LEYN not bell-EM. Keep an open mouth on the soft second-syllable, more like an "n" sound than an "m" sound. We now return to our regularly scheduled programming.)



California is filling the power vacuum left by Trump. “In California we continue to believe, by an overwhelming majority, that confronting climate change and accelerating clean energy deployment is not only an environmental priority, but a moral, an economic, and a public health imperative,” State Sen. **Josh Becker** said in his opening remarks in Belém. Becker is one of two climate-focused California legislators attending, along with Sen. **Henry Stern**.

Gov. Gavin Newsom is leading a delegation of state officials that includes Natural Resources Secretary **Wade Crowfoot**, California Department of Food and Agriculture Secretary **Karen Ross**, California Public Utilities Commission President **Alice Reynolds**, California Air Resources Board Chair **Lauren Sanchez**, and Tribal Affairs Secretary **Christina Snider-Ashtari**. “The United States of America better wake up,” Newsom told a packed room during one of his appearances. “It’s not about electric power. It’s about economic power. We, as the state of California, are not going to cede that race to China.” It’s Newsom’s first time attending the climate summit and he’s getting a lot of mileage out of being there, but it’s hardly new for California to be well represented. Newsom follows in the footsteps of both Arnold Schwarzenegger and Jerry Brown.

Besides assuring the rest of the world that there are still trustworthy American partners on climate action, state leaders at COP forge partnerships and sign agreements with other subnational, and even national, governments. MOUs on things like methane and 30×30 conservation, and cap-and-invest. Legislators can be exposed to legislative solutions that work abroad and bring them back home. Sen. Anna Caballero, a Democrat from Merced, told CalMatters that she traveled to the UN summit in Dubai two years ago looking for climate solutions that would keep workers in her region employed as the state transitions away from fossil fuels. That story includes the voices of some Republicans and environmental justice organizers who question the practical value of sending a delegation. It’s true, the climate summit can be performative. Just look at the bombastic social media presence of **Governor Helder Barbalho** of the state of Pará, where COP is being held, who has been hanging out with Newsom. But isn’t hamming it up part of the job of being a governor?

“I think they can have a real impact. I think it’s very important,” former Secretary of State **John Kerry** told NPR about local officials showing up at COP.

That’s why the UN and COP-host Brazil should be doing more to bring state leaders and subnational governments to the table. My UCLA colleague **Jason Gray** has a

suggestion for how the just-launched Tropical Forests Forever Facility can be improved: include state- and provincial-level governments in decisions about how payments will be used and ensure those funds make it to the people taking action in their territories. Read his Op-ed at The Conversation.

Another trend I'm watching this year is the big focus on methane. **Bloomberg Philanthropies** and a network of partners including the **UN Environment Programme's IMEO, Carbon Mapper** and the **Global Methane Hub**, announced a $100 million initiative to expand global satellite monitoring capabilities for methane emissions. Brazil, China, and the UK co-hosted a Methane Summit featuring initiatives to slow the pace of climate change and deliver immediate benefits for air quality, food security, and public health. This is important because reducing methane is like pulling the emergency brake on climate change.

Then there are the lobbyists. Admittedly, COPs have become a lot like the World Cup: an international spectacle corrupted by fossil fuel persuasion. There's plenty of evidence of behind-the-scenes obstruction at COP. (Exhibit A: The new Drilled podcast, "The Corruption of COP.") But one group missing in action this year is oil company CEOs, who've taken cues from Trump and decided to skip.

It'll be worth watching how fossil fuel disinformation is handled during the conference. Brazilian President **Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva** has named COP30 "the COP of Truth" that would "impose a new defeat on the deniers" who "reject not only the evidence of science, but also the progress of multilateralism" and "control algorithms, sow hatred and spread fear" and "attack institutions, science and universities," notes CAAD. And by holding COP "in the heart of the Amazon," Brazil has promised to elevate the voices of Indigenous people. I'm also watching what comes out of "Climate Justice Day" at COP.



Also filling the power vacuum is China, which has the largest delegation at COP30 after Brazil and brings good tidings. China's carbon dioxide emissions have now been flat or actually falling for 18 months, according to this analysis published Tuesday by Carbon Brief. China has more than 200 green industrial projects in the pipeline for producing lower-carbon chemicals, fuels, and building materials, according to Canary's **Maria Galluchi**.

Festivities aside, COP is still the main decision-making body of the UNFCCC. It's the one arena where all the players in climate politics are present and activated. COPs are indeed tortuous and often tedious, writes **Fiona Harvey** at the Guardian. "COPs will not solve the climate crisis by themselves, but it looks unlikely that the problem can be solved without COPs." With 56,118 delegates registered, COP30 is expected to be the second-largest COP in history, according to a Carbon Brief analysis of

registrations. There's a compelling case to be made for changing the format and the cadence of COPs. (Twice a year, anyone?) And this year's record-number of "virtual delegates" watching from afar shows that some are taking that to heart.

So, is COP good or bad? Obviously, it's both. Is COP still worthwhile? As the old saying goes, if you're not at the table, you're on the menu.

Welcome to The Drain, a weekly roundup of environmental and climate news. Our song this week is the admittedly on-the-nose "Kyoto Now!" by Bad Religion.

Energy & Climate Politics

Climate was a winner in last week's election when Democratic candidates swept to victory in key races and even down-ballot races like a Georgia public utilities commission race (and in election coverage).

True, climate change was rarely mentioned during New York Mayor-elect Zohran Mamdani's campaign, but many of his biggest pitches like the free fare bus program and green schools have the co-benefits of climate action.

TIME magazine looked at the climate undertones in Mamdani's campaign. Meanwhile Heatmap News' **Robinson Meyer** looked at Mamdani's past climate activism, including his early days in the New York State Assembly in 2021 "when Mamdani placed himself at the forefront of the debate over the future of fossil fuels in New York's energy system." As he takes office, he won't likely stay so silent on climate. A Sunrise Movement spokesperson observed that "Zohran was talking about climate action in a way people could understand, and people were able to see the impacts of this climate action in their everyday lives."

In New Jersey, Democratic Rep. Mikie Sherrill campaigned heavily on electricity rates, vowing to declare a state of emergency on utility costs on her first day in office and institute a utility rate freeze, **Hayley Smith** notes. Sherill's vanquished GOP opponent ran on banning offshore wind, so the election is a boost for wind, writes **Clare Fieseler** at Canary.

In Virginia, Democrat Abigail Spanberger focused on affordability in energy and said she would expand and incentivize the development of solar energy projects, along with technologies such as fusion, geothermal and hydrogen. Though could having a

Democrat lead a state be a new liability for energy projects facing Trump ire? Barclays' analysts, Axios reports, call the election a "mixed result" for Dominion's Coastal Virginia Offshore Wind project that's under construction.

In Georgia, the election of two new public service commissioners represents a "seismic change" in the state's energy landscape and "reflects a new politics of electricity in America," writes **Emily Pontecorvo.** There, democrats Alicia Johnson and Peter Hubbard campaigned to protect ratepayers from skyrocketing energy bills through more renewable energy. Relief won't come right away, and Republicans still control 3 of the 5 seats.

Energy regulators and state officials could demand that AI data centers get off the grid and rely on battery power during about 50-60 hours a year of peak use, and save everyone money, NPR's **Scott Horseley** reports, citing **Severin Borenstein**.

Recent analyses show a growing gap between the rates charged by investor-owned utilities and those of publicly owned electricity providers, writes **Blanca Begert** for Inside Climate News. The story is based on two recent Emmett Institute policy papers by **Ruthie Lazenby** and **Denise Grab**, who are quoted.

In Massachusetts, lawmakers are weighing a bill that would allow 10 more cities and towns to prohibit the use of fossil fuels in new construction through an existing pilot program, **Sarah Shemkus** reports at Canary Media.

California and LA



Why has California, despite ambitious climate goals, struggled to reduce driving distances and increase infill development? Brookings researchers **Ben Swedberg** and **Adie Tomer** identify 18 specific issues across five categories that combine to stymie California's climate ambitions.

As Washington retreats, California could lead on carbon-controlling regulation. It's a silver-lining from Trump's EPA dumping the endangerment finding. "All options are currently on the table," Lauren Sanchez, chair of the California Air Resources Board, told CalMatters in an interview. My Emmett Institute colleague Ann Carlson, a former federal official and expert on the Clean Air Act "first floated this idea," **Alejandro Lazo** reports.

And yet, the Interior Department could announce as soon as this week a plan to allow new oil and gas drilling off the California coast for the first time in decades, three people briefed on the matter told the NY Times. There's already a full-on legal fight over offshore drilling near Santa Barbara and Newsom says such a plan is "dead on arrival."

The SCAQMD approved a 5-year agreement with the ports of LA and Long Beach

that requires them to develop plans that set capacity targets and timelines for switching from diesel equipment to electric and hydrogen technologies. Some environmental groups say it falls short. My UCLA colleagues set out recommendations 2 years ago in a policy paper called “A Heavy Lift.”

Sen. **Monique Limón**, California’s new Senate Pro Tempore and a climate hawk, sat down with **Noah Baustin** for Politico’s California Climate newsletter to talk about priorities, oil and gas, and safety concerns.

New insurance regulations pushed by **Ricardo Lara** were supposed to ensure that homeowners in fire zones would have coverage available. But companies can still avoid serving many high-risk areas, a New York Times investigation found. Lara responded on X. The Eaton Fire Survivors Network held an event last week calling on Lara to resign.

Santa Barbara County’s Board of Supervisors voted last week against Sable Offshore Corp. in its request to transfer local operating permits for its three newly acquired platforms off the Santa Barbara coast.

But that’s nothing compared to the scathing and bizarre allegations reported by a unique investigative outfit called Hunterbrook. Sable “leaked key info to investors including golfer Phil Mickerson,” Hunterbrook reports, even posting leaked audio of the investor calls. Sable’s stock price has been tumbling since, Politico reported afterward.

Climate Interventions



Stardust Solutions, an American-Israeli geoengineering startup seeking U.S. government contracts, has quietly begun lobbying on Capitol Hill but the firm seems to have failed to disclose said lobbying "due to a clerical error." Not a good start for this new wave of for-profit startups looking to build trust in its plans to cool the planet. There's already plenty of confusion and conspiracy injected by right-wing players.

Some notable scientists who have worked on solar geoengineering research for decades wrote a warning for MIT Technology Review against these emerging efforts to start and fund private companies to build technologies that could alter the climate of the planet. " We also strongly dispute some of the technical claims that certain companies have made about their offerings," **David Keith** and **Daniel Visioni** write.

My Emmett Institute colleague **Ted Parson** dissects why it's concerning that private startups like Stardust are moving into this space.

Trump administration

Today is Day 43 of the federal government shutdown under a Republican president, House, and Senate — and it might be the last. But it's done a number on the country.

At EPA, operations are "slowly grinding to a halt" and the publication of proposed and final rules in the *Federal Register* has slowed to a trickle.

At the Interior Department, 29,000 employees have been on furlough since Oct. 1, but the department "has barreled ahead with Trump priorities, including energy development." That's according to E&E News, which did a roundup of the impact on various energy and environment agencies.

Interior Secretary Doug Burgum has been flying around the Middle East and Europe promoting American oil and gas, with stops in Abu Dhabi for a major oil summit and in Athens for a global energy gathering. "There is no energy transition — there is just energy addition," Burgum said in Athens.

The Trump administration is about to force coal plants to stay open past their closing dates which **Jeff St. John** refers to as "an unprecedented intervention in the power sector that is already making energy even more expensive for Americans."

And the US Geological Survey added "metallurgical coal" to the federal government's list of critical minerals. (They weren't forced to call it "beautiful clean coal.")