At a White House photo op last week, surrounded by rich auto executives and congressional Republicans, Trump delivered his latest blow to Americans' pocketbooks by announcing a policy change that could cost us consumers up to $185 billion when filling up our tanks at the pump.

If you're scratching your head trying to recall this event, you probably read or watched coverage that framed it as Trump gleefully attacking Biden rules that encouraged electric vehicles. The proposal from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) has to do with the Corporate Average Fuel Economy program, or CAFE standards. To say that it rolls back the Biden administration's approach to fuel economy standards is a wild understatement.

Read my UCLA Emmett Institute colleague **Ann Carlson** (here and here). As the former acting administrator of NHTSA, Carlson helped set the Biden-era standards, so she knows better than most people what is lost in scrapping the rules and the legal problems with the new proposal.

Much of the media coverage offered scant details about the Trump proposal. Few stories included the potential cost to Americans who are already hurting from high consumer costs. Instead, most reporting fixated on how Trump was attacking Biden and EVs. This misses a more compelling dynamic that audiences want to know about in this affordability crisis, even if Trump calls it a Democratic Party "con job."

Anyone who puts gas in a car knows that fuel economy is not a con job.

This new Trump proposal would raise fuel *consumption* by around 100 billion gallons through 2050 relative to the Biden standard, costing Americans up to $185 billion. That's according to NHTSA's own economic analysis. Reuters reporter **Valerie Volcovici** lays out those brutal facts in a story titled "Trump fuel economy rollback may make cars cheaper, but higher gas bills will absorb savings."

So, while American families are spending more money on energy, those automakers who were sucking up to Trump in the Oval Office last week would save $35 billion through 2031 and average upfront vehicle costs could decline by about $930. That's *if* they decide to pass along the savings — a big if and a small savings in the long-run.

"Consumers will be paying more in lifetime fuel costs than saved in technology costs beginning in model year 2027 in every single one of their three alternative (scenarios) compared to the original standards under Biden," Dave Cooke at Union of Concerned Scientists told Volcovici.

Some other reports got close to hitting on these important points but fell short. "Fuel savings vs. car costs" is how one Politico story framed Trump's rollbacks of the CAFE standards. "The higher [Biden] standards would have saved drivers a combined $35 billion over the lifetime of a fleet built to the higher specification," the story says. But rather than just pointing out that requiring vehicles to be more fuel-efficient saves money for consumers by helping them buy less gasoline, the story prefaces that sentence with the words "Democrats and environmentalists contend…" Why?

Hopefully more reporters will follow Volcovici's example as they cover Trump's attempts to blame others for the affordability crisis. Eleven months into his term, consumer prices are rising. Polling consistently shows that public trust in Trump's economic leadership has faltered. His line last week about "affordability being a con job" clearly didn't land, because this week he traveled to Pennsylvania to try a

rebrand. “You can call it ‘affordability’ or anything you want,” Trump said this week, “but the Democrats caused the affordability problem and we’re the ones that are fixing it.” Not much better and no, they really aren’t.

Cost of living will continue to dominate politics from now until the mid-term elections, including energy affordability. To be sure, energy affordability isn’t always a simple message. But this particular lane of the affordability crisis is pretty easy to navigate. Trump just intervened to essentially make you buy more gas and increase corporate profits. That’s a helluva message for voters heading into 2026. It’s fuel economy, stupid.

Welcome to the Drain, a weekly roundup of environmental and climate news from Legal Planet. Our song of the week is “Cars” by Gary Numan. Here’s what else is going…

More Mobility News

The New York Times is at it again. “Are E-bikes out of control?” asks this week’s NYT Magazine cover story. I’ve railed against past coverage of electric-assist bicycles for

being simplistic, sensationalist, and downright irresponsible.

This story, by avid cyclist **David Darlington**, is by contrast a fairly sound take. It clearly spells out the differences between Class 1 pedal-assist bicycles, which help millions of people commute without cars, and Class 2 and 3 motorbikes that are by all accounts riskier. And it quotes reputable safety advocates who are also cycling enthusiasts. But savvy readers will notice that yet again the lead anecdote is the case of a teen injured *while not wearing a helmet* and that much more could be said about the potential adverse effects of making people get a license to ride on an e-bike. Pedal-assist bicycles remain a truly effective car alternative, and hence a climate solution.

Traffic congestion is back at record levels, with the average American spending 63 hours per year stuck in traffic, NPR's **Joel Rose** reports. In the Greater Los Angeles area, the average commuter lost 137 hours to delays last year, according to the Texas A&M report. Congestion pricing and remote work are working in other areas, Rose notes.

In Los Angeles, activists with a group called **People's Vision Zero** have been arrested for doing guerrilla pedestrian improvements at Westwood crosswalks. "Jonathan Hale and more than a dozen other activists were halfway through painting a third crosswalk at an intersection in Westwood on Sunday, when two police cars pulled up," **Suhauna Hussain** reports for the LA Times. Hale says he contacted the mayor's office about the dangerous Westwood intersection and never heard back.

And one L.A. man is single-handedly battling those who would use orange traffic cones to try to block people from accessing parking spots. **Karen Garcia** profiled Joey the "cone king" Morales for the LAT.

Trump returned from a recent trip to Japan touting an obsession with Japanese mini cars, called kei cars, and ordering his administration to cut red tape to get U.S. automakers to pump out tiny cars too. The problem is the administration is doing everything it can to hinder EVs, and to make cars less efficient. Plus, adorable, no-frills, tiny cars don't fit most Americans' lifestyles, as **Andrew Moseman** points out at Heatmap News.

Meanwhile, the need to address truck pollution remains urgent. To identify new state actions to increase demand for zero-emission trucks, UC Berkeley's Center for

Law, Energy and the Environment and the UCLA Law Emmett Institute on Climate Change and the Environment just released a new report: "**Driving Demand: Solutions to Increase the Market for Heavy-Duty Zero-Emission Vehicles**."

Data Centers

A coalition of more than 230 environmental groups, including Friends of the Earth, Food & Water Watch and others, is demanding a national moratorium on new datacenters in the U.S., **Oliver Millman** reports for the Guardian. Signatories included more than a dozen California organizations, including several chapters of 350.org, Consumer Watchdog and the John Muir Project.

But a Silicon Valley campaign is under way right now to win Trump over on AI regulation and try to secure an executive order that would block a flurry of possible state laws on data centers, the WSJ reports.

Case in point: the new incoming administration in Virginia plans to work with the state legislature to shift policy toward having data centers "pay their fair share" by supplying their own energy, Utility Dive reports.

Russell Contreras at Axios reports that a supercomputer data center built by Elon Musk's xAI in Southwest Memphis, a historically Black neighborhood, faces a legal challenge from the NAACP, which argues the site's gas generators are violating the Clean Air Act.

Utility giant **NextEra Energy** said it plans to develop data centers across the country for Google and owner Alphabet — a big pivot from renewable power to natural gas. The utility is even partnering with **ExxonMobil** to develop gas plants with carbon capture.

Exxon for its part reveals that it has identified sites in Louisiana and Mississippi for these first planned gas-fired power plants to directly supply data centers, Axios writes.

More Energy and Climate Politics

The electricity sector is now the largest energy employer, surpassing fossil fuel sector jobs for the first time, ever. That's according to the IEA.

The House is expected today to consider that permitting bill that I mentioned last week, the so-called SPEED Act. The bipartisan bill would "overhaul the decades-old National Environmental Policy Act without favoring either renewables or fossil fuels" and has the support of some Dems. But uh-oh Heatmap's **Jael Holzman** reports today that three leading Senate Democrats (Whitehouse, Schatz, and Heinrich) on energy and permitting reform issues are a nay.

In Massachusetts, a rare win for renewable energy under the Trump administration: The DOE has approved an $8.6 million grant that will allow the nation's first utility-led geothermal heating and cooling network to double in size, **Phil McKenna** reports at Canary Media.

New York state will require top polluters to report their greenhouse gas emissions starting in the summer of 2027, but will stop short of implementing its cap-and-invest carbon market and requiring emissions reductions, **Anne Mulkern** reports for Politico. "There is robust evidence that by moving forward with a well-designed cap and invest program, the governor can actually be cutting costs for working families in New York," EDF's Kate Courtin said.

The global leader in solar power is… Hungary? According to a recent report from think tank Ember that pulls from full-year 2024 data and only considers nations that generated over 5 terawatt-hours of solar.

At the EU level, an omnibus simplification bill will massively reduce the scope of corporate sustainability disclosure rules introduced in the last political term. "More than 80 percent of Europe's companies will be freed from environmental reporting obligations," POLITICO reports.

Dozens of U.S. solar companies have urged federal lawmakers to revoke a Trump administration policy that has stalled project permits, they said in a letter to leaders in Congress on Thursday.

Thousands of people including prominent "Make America Healthy Again" activists are urging Trump to fire EPA chief Lee Zeldin over his decisions to loosen restrictions on harmful chemicals. The petition has more than 5,000 signatures.

Alaska's Republican senators Lisa Murkowski and Dan Sullivan are splitting with the Trump administration over an expansive offshore lease plan that would open large swaths of the state's waters to drilling.

Al Gore talked to HEATED about COP30, the Gates memo, and why he thinks billionaires should face far more scrutiny in the climate fight.

Los Angeles, California

SoCalGas, the country's largest gas utility, is using funds from its customers to incentivize wildfire survivors in the Palisades and Altadena to rebuild with fossil gas instead of going electric, **Hilary Beaumont** reports in an infuriating story for Inside Climate News. The CPUC said it would eliminate ratepayer-funded incentives for gas appliances in new construction but created an exception that allows rebates for them in wildfire rebuilds." "The rules are definitely broken," **Matt Vespa** of Earthjustice told Beaumont. "This should not be allowed."

Meanwhile "Zone Zero" rules were one of policies that policymakers identified as crucial for fire prevention after the January fire in Los Angeles, but they won't get approved by years' end as the Newsom administration hoped. The Board of Forestry won't vote on final fuels until March at the earliest, **Camille Von Kaenel** reports for the California Climate newsletter "because of continued debate over enforcement and cost — and pushback from Southern Californians concerned the new rules would remove beneficial trees."

Saul Gonzalez explains the SoCal debate over "zone zero" in about a minute in this Instagram video.

Is it possible that California may never get more federal aid for the January 2025 fires that devastated parts of LA County? "It's up to Trump" writes **Alexei Koseff** for the San Francisco Chronicle. Newsom accused the Trump administration of rebuffing a meeting request, POLITICO reports.

California Attorney General **Rob Bonta** is "looking at all available options to respond," in response to the Bureau of Reclamation's decision last week to try to increase water exports from the Sacramento–San Joaquin Delta, SacBee notes.

The California Coastal Commission last week approved a rule change that CalMatters says will make it easier to build affordable housing in Monterey and elsewhere along the hundreds of miles of the Pacific coast.

More than 4,000 gallons of oil and contaminated wastewater spilled in Monterey County following a pipeline failure last Friday." The spill comes amid a string of

recent oil releases in California, including in Ventura County last month, which saw crews race storms to contain crude that had entered a waterway," the LA Times reports.

A recently released report card compiled by the American Society of Civil Engineers gives California a C- and shows just how much of California's infrastructure is in dire need of repair or replacement.

Courts and Litigation

Trump's total war on wind" faces growing headwinds. A federal judge ruled that Trump's executive order directing government agencies to halt issuing new wind leases and permits was illegal, handing a win to more than a dozen states and a New York clean energy group. California Attorney General Bonta celebrated the ruling in a press release titled "The Win(d)s Keep Coming."

A holiday sequel: The thirteen young Montanans who filed Held v. State of Montana just filed a new petition for original jurisdiction with the Montana Supreme Court today, seeking "enforcement of their historic victory" against the state for violating their constitutional right to a safe and healthful environment.

ExxonMobil and Suncor Energy want the Supreme Court to resolve what the oil companies call "one of the most important questions currently pending in the lower courts": whether cases against Big Oil are preempted by federal law, **Emily Sanders** reports for ExxonKnew.

The justices already declined to review a virtually identical petition in the case brought by Honolulu that is now heading to trial.

Connecticut's own climate accountability lawsuit moved closer to trial after a state judge last week rejected ExxonMobil's attempts to strike the case.

Hawai'i's new climate fee aimed at offsetting tourism's impact on the environment has triggered the Trump administration, which filed a motion to intervene in Cruise Lines International's lawsuit, Honolulu Civil Beat reports.

Buy better toilet paper. NRDC released its 7th annual *The Issue with Tissue* series, which exposes how America's largest tissue manufacturers are failing the climate, communities, and biodiversity by creating single-use, throwaway products from forests. Georgia Pacific's Aria brand gets the top grade. My family buys Who Gives a Crap, which has an A.

Join LENS and the UCLA Emmett Institute for a conversation with climate journalist **Sammy Roth** about why narrative matters in the fight against climate change. The Jan 9 event is a live taping of the LENS podcast. RSVP here.

Tell Covering Climate Now, and its global journalistic community, what climate story you think didn't get the coverage it deserved in 2025. Fill out the survey here.