It's been a rough week. For those of us in Los Angeles, we're feeling the contours of the traumatic week we experienced exactly one year ago, when I watched neighborhoods burn from my local Trader Joe's parking lot and when many thousands of us weren't lucky enough to have even that distance. Other news piling on included Trump's withdrawal from the bedrock international climate treaty, alongside his promises to boost the production of Venezuelan oil. In sum: a trash week for the climate, and it's easy to get down.

But one of the reasons I love this job is because of the opportunity to engage with our endlessly energetic students. I learn a lot from them, and I especially admire their ability to see problems with new eyes and fresh determination. As has become my tradition, for my final Climate Law and Policy class at UCLA Law last semester I asked my students to tell me what they are thinking about the future of climate policy in light of today's global circumstances, keeping in mind lessons we've learned through the semester.

Here are excerpts from some of their answers. (All are shared with permission.) The responses range significantly in tone — some hopeful, some angry, some resigned. But all see a way forward, for which I'm grateful.

Alex W.:

It increasingly seems like keeping temperature change below 1.5 degrees C with all 8 billion of us on board is a long shot. With less than all of us on board, this effectively becomes an impossibility. [T]he paradigm needs to shift. . . .

We talked a lot this semester about the public relations effect of litigation. Many of us will go into careers bringing losing cases. Hopefully some win, but the reality is many won't. We should take heart in the fact that bringing publicity to the issue is still helpful.

Sophie B.:

What we truly need is a broad cultural shift in how we think about climate change. Maybe such a shift will emerge naturally as climate harms worsen and more people recognize the necessity of acting. However, it's hard to ignore how deeply entrenched oil and coal interests remain in U.S.

politics. To make space for real change, we need to hold fossil fuel companies legally accountable and reduce their political influence. Whether through stronger state and federal requirements for corporate disclosure or through litigation, we need far greater corporate accountability if we want any chance of achieving that cultural shift.

Shezain D.:

One major obstacle that emerges from both the semester and today's news is the political refusal to confront fossil fuels directly, which creates a credibility gap between climate goals and actual policy. The Climate Overshoot Commission warns that the risk of overshooting 1.5°C is "high and rising" and insists that rapid emissions cuts and a phasedown/phaseout of fossil fuels must be the foundation of any rational strategy, with removals and solar radiation modification strictly supplementary. Yet COP30 in Belem just delivered another outcome that tiptoes around this core issue . . . [C]ountries still failed to agree on a binding roadmap to phase out fossil fuels, with producer states blocking strong language. That disconnect is dangerous because it invites overreliance on future carbon removal or hypothetical solar geoengineering instead of near term structural change.

Ian B.:

I think we are at the point where advocates must seriously consider all possible solutions, even actions that have not been historically appealing like geoengineering and carbon capture. Some advocates have shied away from these solutions because they have been embraced by the fossil fuel industry because they may allow for continued extraction of fossil fuels in the future. Fossil fuels should obviously be phased out, but exploring these more controversial solutions may be necessary to mitigate the human suffering climate change will cause.

Talia B.:

Prospects for addressing climate change are in this weird, uneasy middle space. At this point, the science is clear: climate change harms will only accelerate and people are going to suffer immensely if nothing is done. However, political and economic motives often surpass this threat,

leading those in power and influence to outright ignore our planet's lived reality. The inherent lack of enforceability in our international climate protocols, such as the Paris Agreement, only serve to bolster this conflict. There are no true guardrails for countries to reduce their emissions and contribute to the fight against climate change. . . .

[But] our most recent reading focusing on carbon dioxide removal brings me a lot of hope, and I believe if local governments begin to change the climate change narrative to focus on this, it will bring more people on board. Instead of climate regulation being one of penalties and guardrails, it can be about creating incentives for companies and researchers to create scalable carbon dioxide removal methods. This can bring many companies that once cowered from climate change policy to champion it, bringing money and influence to the table.

John M.:

As science becomes more sophisticated and able to make causal climate attributions with more accuracy and nuance, I believe that many environmental organizations will gain traction in combatting popular narratives, including those saying that warming is natural or does not exist.

María Paula H.:

The fact that developing countries are the ones pledging to take action while other countries advocate for regression is simply outrageous. In that sense, overcoming this fossil fuel lock-in will require a combination of strong legal, regulatory, and financial instruments. These must not only accelerate and prioritize emissions reductions but also change the policy foundations in each country, regardless of whether there is an agreement at the U.N. It is clear that developing countries will need international funding and that developed countries should honor their Paris Agreement commitments. However, after an event like COP30, countries must meanwhile: (i) innovate their domestic regulations to address climate change at the level they would propose internationally, and (ii) seek partnerships in the international arena with those countries that have shown a commitment to this issue.

Julianne F.:

I am most hopeful about the prospect of state and local government policy to push climate change solutions. While exploring strategies for local electrification through my paper research, I was inspired by the innovative policies of local governments to force or incentive electrification [consistent with] highly limiting federal laws and holdings. I was similarly inspired by the creative electrification and clean procurement strategies of CCAs. . . .

While I recognize the limits of state and local climate policy because climate change is a global problem, I also think that it is incredibly valuable because of how it serves as a laboratory for broader solutions. Additionally, because many states, cities, and counties have constituents with more aligned values, it is easier to have aggressive and creative solutions that are simply not possible at a broader scale. This semester has made me very grateful to be studying environmental law in California where the fight against climate change happens at a state and local level even with pushback from the federal government.

Mackay P.:

We will likely have to continue to rely on a patchwork of regulation to address climate change. Local action and state regulation will not solve or come close to stopping (or reversing) climate change, but it does have the ability to limit some of the harm. There is still enough disagreement on a national and global scale that widespread (enforceable) action seems a long way off. . . . Eventually, the cost of fossil fuel reliance in comparison to cheaper renewable energy sources may become strong enough to overcome the political dynamic and drive a more unified global regulation.

Willis J.:

Although subnational state-level action can yield some positive results, I continue with the view that enacting global policies would have far greater impact on global climate. Especially considering the complex interconnected nature of our climate-related problems, there must be streamlined harmony between global and local, sub-national policies and

actors. . . . Amidst times of international conflicts and wars, I believe the world can at least come together to not only recognize the climate risks and push for a reasonable framework that would stimulate both global and local climate actions.

Kanmani P.:

A key takeaway for me is that every effort down to the most local level matters in addressing climate change. I walked into the class wanting to believe that change starts from each individual (thinking what can I do to address problems posed by climate change) and I believe I leave this class with evidence and concrete ways to mould this belief into action. . . . To have a greater impact at any level I also feel that policy makers must recognize the interwoven nature of climate concerns. What the ICJ's advisory opinion brought to light is the interwoven nature of climate change with International Environmental law, Law of the Sea, Biodiversity conservation and most importantly human rights. Wherever necessary, one has to prioritise the incorporation of Environmental Justice objectives into climate change policy and these must not be seen as two separate realms.

Hayden F.:

To address the harms of climate change, we must invest in mitigation, adaptation, and new technologies. But where does this money come from? . . . We have seen several potentially promising funding sources: the cap-and-trade program (now cap-and-invest), a climate superfund bill, litigation based on deceptive marketing, and others. And yet, the pushback to these efforts remains substantial. For instance, despite efforts in the California legislature to pass a climate superfund bill (as Vermont and New York have already done), a bill of this kind has yet to pass here in California. Oil and gas producers have pushed back extremely hard, given the billions of dollars at stake if a bill like this passes. If we cannot get funding through climate superfund legislation, litigation has also shown to be a potentially promising avenue. By holding polluters accountable through the courts, we may be able to get valuable funding directed at mitigation and adaptation efforts.

Camila F.:

A central barrier remains financing, especially ensuring that resources reach developing countries, which cannot accelerate mitigation or adaptation. In a political landscape where public funding is likely to diminish—a trend made visible by the U.S. stepping back from negotiations but increasingly evident elsewhere—the role of private capital becomes even more critical. As the Overshoot Commission notes, private investment must be massively scaled up through de-risking tools, co-financing, carbon markets, and other innovative mechanisms. This reinforces a central lesson from the semester: decarbonization is impossible without the private sector. But firms need regulatory certainty, clear incentives, and policies that internalize environmental externalities.

Given that international commitments are often unenforceable, domestic regulation becomes essential. Countries must develop practical frameworks that turn private actors into allies. Instruments such as green bonds, blended finance, and transition mechanisms can mobilize private resources at scale. Storytelling also matters: climate policy must be framed as an economic opportunity, especially as climate risks increasingly disrupt industries.

Gleyra H.:

I think our prospects depend less on science and more on political will, global cooperation, public education of the consequences and social justice efforts to protect the marginalized communities that are most immediately impacted. If countries act more quickly and share the burdens more equitably, there is still room to limit the consequences of climate change. I am not optimistic, considering our current political administration and the bilateral split over climate change concerns, but I am not hopeless either. The window is narrow, but it is still open, and what we do in the next decade will determine how much of the future remains livable. I think that remaining positive and continuously searching for innovative solutions is just as important as educating the public and restructuring the political divide over climate change science.