



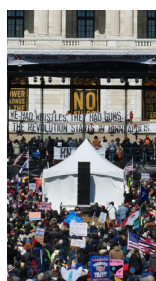
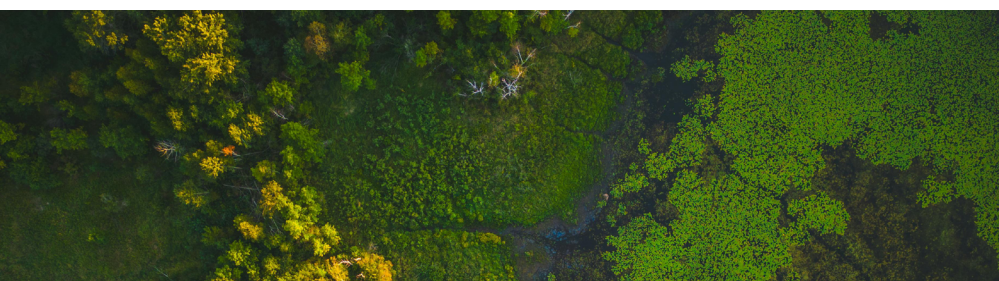
# RESILIENCE



# MATTERS

## From Crisis to Collective Action

A publication of the Island Press Short Form Program



## RESILIENCE MATTERS



## ABOUT THE KRESGE FOUNDATION'S ENVIRONMENT PROGRAM

The Kresge Foundation is a private, national foundation that works to expand equity and opportunities in America's cities through grant making and social investing in arts and culture, education, environment, health, human services, and community development, nationally and in Detroit, Fresno, Memphis, and New Orleans. In collaboration with its partners, Kresge helps create pathways for people with low incomes to improve their life circumstances and join the economic mainstream.

With a focus on migration, adaptation and wellbeing, Kresge's Environment Program helps cities combat and adapt to climate change while advancing racial and economic justice. The program's vision is that people in cities are protected from the short- and long-term impacts of climate change because their communities have transitioned to renewable energy, prepared for climate impacts, and elevated equity as a priority to ensure that everyone benefits.

The foundation advocates that cities address climate change mitigation and adaptation concurrently; strengthens community power; resources the capacity and effectiveness of changemakers within local government who are committed to equitable climate action; and fosters connections among public sector staff, community leaders and urban practitioners to advance equitable climate action.



## ABOUT THE SUMMIT FOUNDATION

Since 1991, The Summit Foundation has supported organizations working to improve our world and the quality of life for its inhabitants. Our programs seek to promote the health and well-being of the planet—its people and its natural environment. The Sustainable Cities program aims to significantly reduce carbon emissions and pollution through city-led, transformative climate action.



# **Resilience Matters**

## **From Crisis to Collective Action**

Edited by

**Laurie Mazur**



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# Introduction



# A World Worth Saving

## CLIMATE CHANGE CALLS US TO CONSIDER WHO WE ARE—AND WHO WE WANT TO BE

LAURIE MAZUR

2025 was a year like no other. And at year's end, Americans found themselves angrier and more divided than at any time in recent memory.

Beneath that widening divide lies a debate as old as history, about who we are as human beings and who we want to be. On one side are the “realists” and social Darwinists who see humans as selfish actors locked in a perpetual struggle for power. In their view, might makes right and domination confers success—as the Athenian historian Thucydides put it, “The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.” Or as presidential advisor Stephen Miller has said, “We live in a world, in the real world ... that is governed by strength, that is governed by force, that is governed by power.”

On the other side are those who believe in the fundamental goodness of humanity, in the vein of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, from the humanists to mainstream religious groups. It's a view that embraces cooperation, compromise, and care for the vulnerable. A contemporary expression of this perspective comes from Zohran Mamdani, mayor of New York City, who calls for “the warmth of collectivism” to replace “rugged individualism.”

There's an echo of this debate among environmentalists, too. In the 1970s, the ecologist Garrett Hardin warned that human selfishness would degrade shared resources, causing a “tragedy of the commons.” Privatizing resources, he said, would harness selfishness to preserve environmental health. Hardin also counseled against helping the world's poor, comparing nations to lifeboats in a

churning sea. The wealthy nations' boats were amply provisioned, while those of the poorer nations were quickly swamped. If the wealthy plucked refugees from the sea, he argued, they too would go under. In short, let the weak "suffer what they must."

Thankfully, Hardin's bleak view has largely been superseded by a new generation of environmentalists who see cooperation and equity as essential to a sustainable future. The environmental justice movement exposes the disproportionate effects of pollution on low-income communities and people of color and calls for a more equitable distribution of benefit and risk. New frameworks emphasize the rights of all people to resources such as food, water, health care, and energy, and the need to meet human needs sustainably. Some of this thinking flows downstream from the Nobel Prize-winning work of Elinor Ostrom, whose research showed that people often transcend narrow self-interest to successfully manage shared resources through trust and reciprocity.

Indeed, there's plenty of evidence that cooperation is what enabled humans to survive evolutionary "bottlenecks" that threatened our extinction. From hunting to farming and trade, humans have long cooperated across large groups of genetically unrelated individuals. These collaborative efforts have enabled our species to build the complex societies we now inhabit.

Nor was "survival of the fittest" the key to our success. The anthropologist Margaret Mead once said that the earliest sign of civilization was a skeleton with a broken and healed femur. While a broken leg is a death sentence for a wild animal, human society thrived and grew by caring for those unable to fend for themselves.

So, who better describes us: the realists or the humanists? Let's just say they both have a point. Humans are capable of staggering selfishness and brutality, as well as cooperation and compassion. Our dual nature means that we can choose the world we make. And right now, there's a lot riding on that choice.

## **A New Bottleneck**

Today, we may be staring down another evolutionary bottleneck. Human activity has boosted atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> to levels not seen in two million years, raising global temperatures by about 2 degrees Fahrenheit. Unless we make major changes, the Earth could warm by 5.6 to 7.9 degrees Fahrenheit by the end of the century—an outcome the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change says "would be catastrophic to human civilization."

And climate catastrophes are increasing. In 2025, campers were tragically swept away in a Texas flood, and wildfires reduced parts of Los Angeles to smoking rubble. All told, 2025 ranked as the third-highest year for billion-dollar climate

disasters in the United States (after 2023 and 2024), with twenty-three disasters costing a total of \$115 billion in damages. Some 276 people lost their lives. Our failure to bend the curve of carbon emissions guarantees more of the same—and worse.

The good news is that the practices of cooperation and caring that saved us in the past could pull us through again. Research shows that it is our “social capital”—our networks of connection and support—that can literally mean the difference between life and death in a disaster.

For example, sociologist Eric Klinenberg studied a devastating Chicago heat wave that killed nearly eight hundred people in 1995. He found disproportionately high mortality rates in low-income Black neighborhoods, where many lacked air conditioning. But one neighborhood was a shining exception: Auburn Gresham, a poor Black neighborhood on the city’s South Side, had fewer deaths than even Chicago’s wealthiest areas. That’s because Auburn Gresham’s dense web of community organizations and social networks created a culture where residents checked in on the elderly, sick, and vulnerable.

In these pages and elsewhere, you’ll find many examples of people working to nurture social capital and build resilience in a changing climate. Librarians bringing people together across social divides. Health care workers preparing their patients for heat and extreme weather. Neighborhood leaders organizing mutual-aid groups and community-owned solar cooperatives. And countless ideas for how we can build a fairer, greener future for all.

At the same time, these pages contain an unflinching assessment of the threats we face. The Trump administration has undercut vital programs to mitigate the climate crisis. Funding for climate research has been halted, environmental agencies have lost critical expertise, and pursuit of renewable energy resources has regressed with a return to drilling and fossil fuel dependence. Programs that help Americans deal with climate disasters *today* are also eroding, and inequities are surging. A \$4.5 billion program that helps hard-hit communities protect themselves from flooding has been canceled, and funding for satellite storm surveillance has been cut, imperiling Americans’ ability to anticipate and survive climate disasters.

## **Decision Time**

The age-old struggle over human nature has new poignance in the era of climate change. Our understanding of who we are, fundamentally, determines how we live and govern. Accepting a world where “the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must” would lead to incalculable human suffering as the

planet bakes and the seas rise. To build resilience in the era of climate change, we must choose instead to embrace humanity's better nature, to weave stronger webs of cooperation and mutual support, and to care for those who cannot care for themselves, knowing that that may someday be us. This is the way we save our world—and build a world worth saving.

SECTION I

# **Climate Adaptation & Resilience**



# The United States Is More Vulnerable to Disasters Under Trump

JONATHAN MINGLE

Originally published February 11, 2025 in *The Progressive*.

President Donald Trump's recent executive orders and actions pose a threat to the long-term physical and economic security of vulnerable communities across the country. By erasing any consideration of climate risks from federal policy, the Trump administration is undermining communities' ability to prepare for and recover from severe weather and other climate-related shocks.

On his first day in office, Trump repealed a Biden administration rule that required flood-safe design, siting, and construction of any infrastructure or development projects that receive federal funding, such as affordable housing projects and hospitals. The rule made good fiscal sense: Why waste taxpayer money on facilities that will have to be repaired or rebuilt in the event of a flood?

Repealing this rule will put only more people and property in harm's way. In my home state of Vermont, which suffered devastating floods in 2023 and 2024, federal funding has been critical to helping communities rebuild safely, and to moving homes and businesses out of flood-prone river corridors.

On January 29, Trump's Department of Transportation (DOT) revoked a previous policy that required all of its agencies to factor climate resilience into their planning. New DOT chief Sean Duffy also demanded the elimination of all policies that "reference or relate in any way" to climate change or greenhouse gas emissions.

This comes at a time when the nation's aging transportation infrastructure is in desperate need of upgrading. From undersized stormwater drains and culverts to dilapidated bridges and outdated flood-control dams, our infrastructure is already unable to meet the risks and pressures of today's climate. Without accurate data on climate projections, our infrastructure investments will be no match for the stormier future we face.

The Trump administration has also scrubbed the words “climate change” from government websites, including those of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. This is more than a matter of ideologically driven copy-editing; here, too, it will deprive decision makers of critical information. Health care providers will lose access to data about the spread of infectious diseases. Farmers will struggle to plan crop rotations and planting schedules without reliable information on extreme weather events.

Trump’s political appointees can delete the words “climate change” from federal policy documents. But they can’t erase the risks that a warming climate poses in the forms of more frequent floods, intense heat and explosive wildfires. This head-in-the-sand approach only makes Americans less safe. Reality, as the saying goes, always bats last.

While the federal government ignores climate risk, the insurance industry clearly sees the writing on the wall. The average homeowner’s insurance premium has already risen by a third in the last five years, and premiums are set to spike even higher as more insurers factor climate risk, from wildfire to windstorm exposure, into their rates.

A new report from First Street Foundation warns that climate risks will erase \$1.47 trillion in real estate value between now and 2055. Yet another Trump order revoked a Biden administration policy at the Treasury Department to study how climate risk could affect the housing market. The American dream, which has long promised a path toward financial security through home ownership, has never looked more precarious.

Amidst all the uncertainty and chaos of the new administration, one thing is certain: Extreme weather events and other climate-driven disasters will batter the United States during Trump’s tenure. But there is little evidence that the President plans to do anything about it.

Instead, during a recent visit to North Carolina communities still recovering from Helene, Trump suggested getting rid of the Federal Emergency Management Agency. This tracks the Project 2025 plan to shrink FEMA, privatize its core functions, and shift much of the burden of paying for disaster response and recovery to states. But FEMA was born out of recognition that states couldn’t handle those tasks on their own, and that federal coordination would save lives and money in the long run.

By directing federal agencies to ignore the mounting threats posed by climate change, Trump’s “America First” agenda is already putting Americans’ safety last. To protect our lives and livelihoods, we must restore a reality-based approach to governing.

# Invading Greenland Won't Protect Us from the Climate Crisis

KIERAN MULVANEY

Originally published May 24, 2025 in *Common Dreams*.

Greenland does not, on the face of it, seem to be the kind of place that a superpower like the United States would regard as a vital component of its security. With fewer than 60,000 inhabitants in an area roughly one-quarter the size of the contiguous United States, it is the least densely populated nation on Earth. Its only industries of note are fishing and, to some extent, tourism, and its northernmost point is as close to the North Pole as Los Angeles is to Denver.

Yet President Donald Trump insists the United States needs Greenland “very badly,” to the extent that he won’t “rule out” using force to attain it.

Such covetousness almost certainly owes at least something to the prospect of access to the mineral resources, including lithium, that Greenland is believed to harbor. But Trump himself has suggested a different motivation, musing in an interview about “Russian boats and ... Chinese boats, gunships all over the place ... going up and down the coast of Greenland.”

Trump’s obsession with annexing Greenland is a confounding solution to a problem that doesn’t even exist.

Moscow and Beijing undeniably have an increasing number of vessels operating year-round in Arctic waters. In Russia’s case, that’s hardly surprising: Russia accounts for 53% of the region’s coastline. But its interests, and indeed those of China’s, have little to do with Greenland and a lot to do with its own Arctic waters, specifically the seaway along its north coast that Russia refers to as the Northern Sea Route (NSR). As sea ice decreases in thickness and extent as a result of climate change, the NSR is slowly opening up. As a result, Moscow sees this passageway as a potential source of riches and national pride and even a way to reorder international trade.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has declared that the NSR will ultimately “replace the Suez Canal” as the favored transit route between Atlantic and Pacific.

It is presently a long way short of that: Just under 40 million tons of goods shipped through the NSR in 2024, almost exclusively on Russian and Chinese vessels, compared to 525 million tons that transited Suez. But it is far more than the 7 million tons that traveled the passage in 1987.

The Northwest Passage—the frequently narrow, shallow, and twisting pathway through the islands of Canada’s High Arctic—tells a similar story on a smaller scale. From the 16th through the 19th centuries, multiple expeditions perished in the ice of the Northwest Passage; after it was finally navigated for the first time in 1906, there were just 67 further transits over the course of the 20th century. Thanks to melting sea ice, there were 41 transits of the Northwest Passage in 2023 alone.

While both the Northwest Passage and NSR are more navigable than in the past, both are still challenging to sail through during all but the very warmest weeks of the year. Even as the Arctic heats up four times faster than the rest of the globe, its seas are unlikely to be consistently ice-free during summer before mid-century at the earliest. The anticipation of such an eventuality, however, has led to a jockeying for position and influence, and a rumbling discord among Arctic powers.

Canada and Russia regard the Northwest Passage and NSR respectively as their national waters, and they intend to dictate who can use them and when. Moscow requires any vessel that wants to transit the NSR to apply for permission up to four months in advance and mandates icebreaker escorts for most ships—often at a cost of several hundred thousand dollars.

The United States chafes at such restrictions, arguing that both waterways are international straits, open to vessels from all nations.

“We’re concerned about Russia’s claims to the international waters of the Northern Sea Route,” said then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in 2019, adding with a swipe at Canada that “we recognize Russia is not the only nation making illegitimate claims.”

Interestingly, China is broadly in accord with the U.S. position; but, as is its wont, the country is playing the long game. Notwithstanding Trump’s talk of Chinese gunships off Greenland, Beijing’s interest in the Arctic thus far appears to be entirely mercantilist. Particularly since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, China is the only country whose commercial vessels transit the NSR with some regularity. In 2012 the Chinese icebreaker *Xue Long* even explored the feasibility of crossing from Atlantic to Pacific across the Arctic Ocean via the North Pole.

It is of course possible that further melting will lead to increased tensions in which Arctic territory becomes an especially valued possession. But other threats

are far more urgent. While the rest of the world is not heating up as rapidly as the Arctic, it is still warming. And a world that has warmed enough for the Arctic Ocean to be truly ice-free is a world that will be experiencing even more droughts, heatwaves, wildfires, and other extreme weather events, at the potential cost of millions upon millions of dollars in damage and extensive loss of life.

It is, to put it mildly, unfortunate that Donald Trump continues to insist that climate change is a “hoax.” Because reducing emissions rapidly is a far better way to protect Americans than idle threats to invade an ice-covered island.

# It's Time to Move Beyond Boom-and-Bust Cycles of Support for Local Climate Action

JENNA TATUM

Originally published July 9, 2025 in *Inside Philanthropy*.

In today's race to transition to clean energy, cities have emerged as the true engines of progress. Unlike the federal government, which is mired in political gridlock, cities can act quickly, innovate boldly and deliver tangible results. Cities are on the front lines of climate impacts and solutions alike, and with sustained philanthropic support, they can drive the transformative, equitable climate action that the moment demands.

The climate is already changing. Floods, wildfires, and deadly heat waves have become regular headlines. And yet, instead of surging forward, climate progress in the United States is under grave threat. Federal rollbacks and attacks on climate policies are threatening to derail years of environmental momentum.

Here's the good news: Local governments have not lost the plot.

Local governments across the country continue to press forward with climate action. In the face of federal inaction and outright hostility, cities have doubled down. From San Diego, California, to Burlington, Vermont, local leaders are redesigning energy systems, decarbonizing transportation, retrofitting buildings, and engaging front-line communities in the work of climate justice to ensure that no communities are left behind.

Cities are uniquely powerful actors because they sit where policy meets daily life. Local leaders don't have the luxury of delay when streets are flooding, or residents are at risk of heat-related illness or worse. Philanthropic support helps cities move more quickly, take risks, and serve as proving grounds for climate solutions that often scale up to higher levels of government. This makes cities one of the most strategic investments for philanthropic funders in the fight against climate change.

This isn't just theory—it's happening. Denver is investing tens of millions in local funding to retrofit buildings and accelerate zero-emissions transportation options. Philadelphia is investing in whole-home repair programs that reduce energy bills, provide much-needed cooling and help keep people in their homes. New York City launched its congestion pricing program that is already reducing traffic and driving down emissions. Even smaller cities—like Burlington, Vermont, which passed a carbon fee for buildings that will help fund low-income incentive programs—are proving that local governments can go all in on innovative climate policymaking when given the resources and flexibility to do so.

In this era of federal retrenchment, cities are our best hope for turning bold visions into actual results. But they can't do this alone.

Philanthropy has long played a catalytic role in advancing climate action. Hundreds of millions of philanthropic dollars invested in innovative local policymaking over the last two decades have led to a proliferation of beneficial local policies such as building performance standards, more-stringent energy codes, congestion pricing and bus rapid transit. Many of these policy innovations helped inspire and model components of the Inflation Reduction Act.

However, over the past decade, philanthropy's support for local climate efforts has too often followed a damaging "boom and bust" cycle. Many foundations ramp up funding for local and state action when national leadership falters, only to pull back when a climate-friendly administration takes office in Washington. While it was critical to focus on passing and implementing the once-in-a-generation Inflation Reduction Act, some funders simultaneously cut support for state and local work, starving governments and advocates of resources at exactly the time when it would have been helpful to build coalitions and policy momentum on the ground to meet the challenges we face today.

This kind of reactive funding whiplash undermines the long-term, foundational work that cities need to build and sustain lasting climate policy and community partnerships, particularly with chronically under-resourced front-line communities that experience climate impacts first and worst. Climate change is not a four-year problem. Local efforts can't be paused or abandoned depending on who's in the White House.

Steady support for local climate action is essential for the health of the planet, and it's also crucial for the future of American democracy itself. Local governments are the level of government most accessible and accountable to the people. When philanthropy backs community-driven climate solutions, it helps build civic trust, empowers residents to shape the decisions that affect their daily lives, and strengthens the democratic process from the ground up. In an era of rising

polarization and public distrust, enabling local leadership can foster transparency, participation, and a more resilient, responsive democracy.

I have three recommendations for funders who want to break the boom-and-bust cycle to sustain climate progress and invest in democracy—building from the ground up:

1. **Make bold bets on state and local government climate action.** Not every effort will be successful, but forward progress on multiple fronts generates momentum and keeps our fossil-fuel-industry-funded opponents on their toes. Funders like Barr Foundation, BQuest Foundation, Denver Foundation and Climate Imperative have invested in this theory of change, with ups and downs along the way, but great success when measured at a national level and across multiple years or decades.
2. **Provide long-term, unrestricted funding for place-based advocacy and community-based organizations** committed to achieving meaningful local affordability, health, labor, and quality-of-life gains. These community representatives and advocates need resources to build movements and create the space for coalition-building around shared issue areas. And they need funders who measure success over multiple years and decades, rather than limited grant periods. Funders like Hive Fund for Climate and Gender Justice, Freedom Together Foundation and Clif Family Foundation are leading the way on this trust-based model of philanthropy.
3. **Invest in the connective tissue that helps local and state climate innovation scale.** Networks and organizations that connect practitioners, facilitate learning and sharing, provide technical assistance, and lift up successful models allow state and local actors to leapfrog isolated pilot projects and implement proven, bold, integrated actions at greater scale. Funders like Bloomberg Philanthropies, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, The Kresge Foundation and the Summit Foundation have long understood this and continue to invest in building and sustaining such impact-amplifying networks.

Local governments are doing the hard work of climate leadership, often with inadequate resources and under constant political pressure. But they remain our best hope.

In the absence of consistent national direction, it is city halls—not state capitals or D.C.—that keep the flame of equitable climate action alive by piloting

on-the-ground solutions while also engaging in the work of democratic accountability. Philanthropy must keep fueling that flame, and not just when local action is the only option.

The stakes are not abstract. They are measurable in dollars, degrees, and human lives. Local climate action isn't a niche strategy. It is the front line of the climate fight and a proving ground for democratic resiliency—where sustained philanthropic investment can both keep equitable climate action going and build trust in democratic governance, no matter who is in the White House.

# Climate Denial Paved the Way for the Texas Flooding

LAURIE MAZUR

Originally published July 15, 2025 in *The Progressive*.

Some people might say it's too soon to blame the management of Camp Mystic in Texas for the deaths of dozens of little girls in their care. It feels wrong to point fingers when the camp's director, Dick Eastland, died trying to save his charges from the floodwaters that engulfed their cabin. And blame does nothing to relieve the searing agony of those children's families.

But now we know that the youngest campers at Camp Mystic were housed in bunks in the Guadalupe River's "floodway"—a strip of shoreline that is virtually guaranteed to flood. Other cabins were built in "flood zones," an only slightly less dangerous location.

That was always a terrible idea. In the era of climate change—which brings stronger, wetter storms and more flooding—it borders on criminal negligence.

But the negligence can't be laid at the feet of Camp Mystic alone. The camp is situated in a county, state, and nation that have cemented climate change denial into policy and practice. The result is a death toll that continues to climb as the planet warms—the ten hottest years on record have all occurred during the past decade.

Kerr County, Texas, which is home to Camp Mystic, officially limits construction in floodways. But when Camp Mystic embarked on a \$5 million expansion and overhaul six years ago, the county signed off on a plan to build more cabins in the flood zone, while the floodway cabins remained in use.

Kerr County lies deep in the heart of Texas, a state beholden to the oil and gas industry. This is a state whose governor refuses to acknowledge that human activity—notably, the burning of fossil fuels—has anything to do with the changing climate. A state that refuses to do business with firms that divest from oil

and gas. A state that has made it illegal for local governments to protect outdoor workers from increasingly extreme heat by requiring shade and water breaks.

Last year, Americans elected a President who has called climate change a “hoax.” During the campaign, Donald Trump promised fossil fuel executives that he would roll back former President Joe Biden’s landmark climate policies in exchange for a \$1 billion contribution. He is now making good on that promise by blocking funds to address climate change, gutting environmental agencies, and scrapping cleaner, cheaper renewable energy in favor of fossil fuel dependence.

Trump is also coming after programs that help Americans deal with ever-more-frequent climate disasters. For example, he has called for the elimination of the Federal Emergency Management Agency “as it exists today,” and cancelled a \$4.5 billion program that helps protect hard-hit communities from flooding. Trump has even cut funding for satellite storm surveillance, making it harder to predict when deadly weather is coming.

Cuts to climate science and disaster preparedness mean we are essentially flying blind in a hotter, more dangerous world. Under the reign of Trump’s former best buddy, Elon Musk, the so-called Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) gutted federal agencies charged with studying climate change and predicting the weather—actions that may well have contributed to the tragedy that unfurled in Texas. In the National Weather Service office that serves Kerr County, a seasoned “warning coordination meteorologist” left his post in April, taking the early retirement package offered by DOGE that was designed to cull the federal workforce. His position was left unfilled.

Which brings us back to Camp Mystic. Before the flood, the camp’s owners successfully appealed to remove the “flood zone” designation from parts of the camp—a move that allowed them to proceed with construction and avoid taking out costly flood insurance. Details are still emerging, but it is possible that Eastman did not fully understand the growing threat—living as he did in a county, state, and nation that has doubled down on climate denial.

The perpetrators of that denial—the fossil fuel executives who lied about climate change, and the corrupt public officials who took their money—are guilty of criminal negligence. They are the ones who must answer for the lives of those little girls, and for so many others swept away in deadly floods—now and sadly, in the floods to come.

# Hurricane Katrina Revealed Why Climate Justice Must Include the Right to Free Movement

FAYE MATTHEWS  
AND ANDREI GREENWOOD

Originally published August 29, 2025 in *Resilience*.

August 29, 2005, is a day that lives in infamy in the Gulf South. On that day, Hurricane Katrina slammed onto shore at the Mississippi/Louisiana state line. Twenty years later, it remains the costliest hurricane in U.S. history. For both of us, August 29 was the day that changed everything.

The storm forced us to make the heart-wrenching decision to leave our homes, businesses, and families, uncertain if we would ever return. Today, that experience shapes the way we look at and participate in conversations around immigration and the artificiality of borders. We saw in real time what it meant to have the right to remain, to migrate, and to return.

Both of us left New Orleans shortly before the storm made landfall as the city warned us that they “did not have enough body bags.” We went in two different, but equally uncertain directions. In the last hours before traffic was cut off, Andrei boarded up his windows, left behind his thriving graphic design firm, and headed to Atlanta. Faye, who was on the cusp of her sophomore year of college, piled into the car with her immediate and extended family and embarked on what they expected to be a nine-hour car ride to Dallas, Texas. It turned out to be a 24-hour journey.

After the storm, like everyone else, we saw the gut-wrenching images of a city flooded, people stranded, and infrastructure toppled. Faye watched her own family members wade through the waters in an attempt to make it to safety right before communication was completely cut off. We listened with horror as people who left after Katrina were labelled as “refugees” in their own country and armed blockades prevented some from crossing into a neighboring city. They

were criminalized simply for seeking safety and resources. They were labeled “looters” for taking food, clean water, and diapers from the ruins of abandoned stores or shot at on the Danziger Bridge.

When we eventually returned after the storm, we faced the difficulties of picking up the scattered pieces. Andrei’s business was ruined, both physically and financially. Like many others, he did not have flood insurance, so there was no mechanism to recover his loss. Faye’s family home was destroyed and, as renters without rent insurance, they lost pretty much everything. Still, like many others, we tried to put things back together again, as best we could.

We also worked to create the conditions that would allow so many others displaced by the storm to return home. Katrina launched a wave of gentrification and “poverty deconcentration” efforts, such as the emptying and demolition of public housing projects. These initiatives made it effectively impossible for lower-income families—the very heart and soul of New Orleans, some would argue—to return.

We’re now part of Taproot Earth, a frontline climate justice organization that was born in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. We work to create conditions where those of us on the frontlines of the climate crisis can lead with our own knowledge and vision. The wisdom we carry from surviving Katrina created a vision of collective freedom. By centering frontline leadership, we move closer to a place where communities are powerful enough to shape the just future we deserve.

Taproot Earth also believes that the right to remain in your generational and ancestral home, to migrate out of harm’s way, and to return to your home are basic, inalienable, human rights. In our framework, migration is not a climate problem, but a solution. As such, we believe that political borders have no place on a warming planet, and that the abolition of such barriers is critical for ultimate climate justice.

To this day, the migration that took place before and after Katrina remains one of the largest movements of people in American history. It is still the largest diaspora of climate-displaced people in the country, as 40 percent of those who left New Orleans have not returned. This is a pattern that did not stop with Katrina. Massive migrations followed Hurricane Maria, the Camp Fire, and the earthquake that ravaged Haiti in 2010.

This summer, the island nation of Tuvalu started the process of evacuating its entire population due to the rising seas. Here in South Louisiana, the United Houma Nation is grappling with questions about how to maintain their culture as their land disappears. We live in a world where the seas will keep rising, and

people will keep moving. We need to make it a world where people can do so with safety and dignity, and with their cultures and traditions intact.

Among a long list of lessons, Katrina taught us that climate migration is not a distant possibility, it's already here. We were among the first in recent history to be displaced by a storm of its magnitude, but we absolutely will not be the last. As survivors of Katrina, and as organizers today, we carry the lesson that migration must be understood as a fundamental human right. Twenty years later, the grief remains, but so does the will to rebuild, resist, and reimagine.

# Climate Resilience Won't Save Us—but Indigenous Peoples' Sovereignty Might

LALA FORREST

Originally published September 8, 2025 in *ICT*.

I'm tired of being called—and hearing the term—resilient.

I am *wawá acúmmááwi*, an original inhabitant of the lands now commonly referred to as northeastern California. My people have been called resilient after genocide, relocation, poverty, and grief. The word is meant to be a compliment—but these days, it feels more like a dismissal.

“Resilience” has become a buzzword—celebrated in climate plans, public health programs, and mental health grants. But in Indian Country, resilience is not what we need more of. The word now praises us for surviving trauma while ignoring the systems that caused it: colonialism, environmental racism, disinvestment, extractive economies, and violence.

The burden to recover is placed on those most harmed, while the structures that created the harm remain intact. Survival and adaptation should not be the measure of success. Justice should.

Too often, resilience language justifies underinvestment: ‘They’re tough. They’ll survive.’ That same logic fuels chronic underfunding of IHS, inadequate mental health care, and climate policies that prioritize survival strategies instead of systemic change. Indian Country doesn’t need more resilience. We need repair, equity, and sovereignty.

On climate, especially, there is a better way.

A growing body of evidence supports Indigenous land return and custodianship. A recent report on the State of Indigenous Peoples’ and Local Communities’ (IPLC) Lands found that 91 percent of lands owned and governed by IPLCs—regardless of legal status—are in good or moderate ecological condition. IPLC lands also contain 36 percent of the globe’s Key Biodiversity Areas. This is

not coincidence—it's the result of Indigenous guardianship rooted in relational, spiritual, and ecological responsibility.

Indigenous peoples are on the frontlines of climate advocacy and conservation. This role often comes at great cost: in 2019, 40 percent of those killed defending the environment were Indigenous. Yet their resistance has real impact. Fossil fuel resistance blocks high-emission projects, land defense prevents deforestation and emissions, traditional fire practices reduce catastrophic wildfire risk and promote biodiversity, and the recognition of Indigenous Peoples' sovereignty enables adaptation strategies rooted in deep ecological knowledge, restoring ecosystems through regenerative practices.

Yet despite recent investments, funding across U.S. agencies still overwhelmingly emphasizes “resilience” and “adaptation” while sidelining Indigenous traditional ecological knowledge. Federal climate–health investments—across NIH, CDC, EPA, and HHS—sideline Tribal governance and Indigenous custodianship, reducing climate justice to endurance rather than sovereignty.

Urban planning discussions often focus on how Indigenous communities can build their resilience to environmental threats like flooding—but rarely ask how historical displacement, neglect, and infrastructure inequity created that vulnerability in the first place. That's not just inaccurate—it's dangerous. When resilience becomes the goal, we lose urgency to transform the systems that cause harm. We stop asking harder questions: who benefits from the way things are? Who continues to profit off Indigenous land while promoting the very ‘resilience’ demanded of those surviving on its margins?

To move toward true climate justice, we must restore Indigenous land and governance rights as foundational to climate solutions, not as charity or inclusion, but as reparative justice and ecological necessity. We must invest in Indigenous data sovereignty, including tools like the Native Land Information System, to strengthen environmental protections and redistribute decisionmaking power. And we must resource grassroots movements like the Indigenous Environmental Network and NDN Collective, not only to defend sacred lands but to enable long-term systems change rooted in relational, place-based knowledge.

What Indigenous communities offer is far more powerful than resilience. We offer worldviews rooted in ecological harmony, which stem from accountability to land, people, and spirit. Our responses to trauma are not about bouncing back—they are about re-rooting in who we are. As Estelle Thomson, President of the Native Village of Paimiut, tells us, “As long as we're able to continue to practice our traditions, tell our stories, we will always have the basic building blocks to maintain the culture and to continue to grow it.”

# It Can Happen Here

JANELLE WHITE

Originally published September 22, 2025 in *MedPage Today*.

“I’ve lived here all my life, and I’ve never seen anything like this.”

Those were the words of a 73-year-old resident of Buncombe County, North Carolina, whose home was destroyed by Hurricane Helene in September 2024. Stranded in an emergency shelter without his medicine, he confided in a doctor who was volunteering: “I don’t know what to do.”

He was not alone. Some 4.6 million North Carolina residents, or 40% of the state’s population, lived in areas ravaged by the record-breaking rainfall and devastating flooding from Hurricane Helene—the deadliest hurricane to strike the U.S. mainland since Katrina. Of course, hurricanes are not new to the state of North Carolina. But they are new to many living in the non-coastal, mountainous areas located on the opposite side of the state from the stormy coast.

And it’s not just hurricanes. After each unprecedented environmental disaster, news stories feature a stunned community member saying something like: “This doesn’t happen in my neighborhood.”

As healthcare providers, we need to accept that it *can* happen here—and we need to be prepared.

Weather disasters—tornadoes, flooding, hurricanes, and wildfires—can damage healthcare facilities, disrupt the supply chain of critical resources, force migration, overwhelm emergency departments, and shut down communication channels. Along with our patients, medical providers find ourselves responding to unfamiliar extreme weather events, unprepared and lacking the necessary support and education needed to meet patients’ needs.

Extreme weather events can impact every aspect of our patients’ health and involve every medical specialty—primary care, emergency medicine, behavioral health, women’s health, and oncology.

Moreover, extreme weather in one neighborhood can touch an entire country or region. For several weeks after Hurricane Helene, hundreds of thousands of providers across the U.S. received “Urgent IV Fluid Shortage” messages in our inboxes, urging us to implement conservation strategies. That’s because the plant

that supplies over 60% of IV fluids to the U.S. was destroyed in Helen's floods. In 2023, New York City saw a spike in asthma-related emergency department visits caused by smoke from Canadian wildfires hundreds of miles away. And, as the permafrost thaws, Alaskans are seeing more waterborne diseases, food insecurity, and radon exposure.

We can no longer mark ourselves safe from weather events that used to happen in other neighborhoods, counties, regions, states, countries, or hemispheres. A warmer world can exacerbate our patients' chronic health conditions, overrun healthcare facilities, increase mental health impacts, and disrupt ecosystems, leading to outbreaks of communicable disease.

The consequences will not affect all our patients equally. We know that certain populations—including children, the elderly, communities of color, pregnant women, and individuals with existing chronic mental and physical disease—are more vulnerable to suffering adverse health impacts of weather events.

But there is hope. In an ever-more polarized nation, healthcare providers remain among the most trusted voices. We can earn that trust by responding to the call and taking action on the growing threat of extreme weather.

We can educate ourselves, our patients, and our communities on the health impacts of climate change. We can utilize and distribute resources such as the American's Climate Resilience Toolkit. We can be active participants in our specialty associations and advocate to require competency in health impacts of weather-related events across all specialties and board exams. We can lend our voices and platforms to protect our patients through service on local school boards and city councils. We can remain abreast of current events and develop and strengthen existing relationships with community partners.

We can also use our voices to change the narrative. Yes, extreme weather events can and do happen here, in your neighborhood and mine. To save lives, we must educate, advocate, and prepare for an unpredictable future.

# Moving Beyond a Buzzword

## MAKING “RESILIENCE” REAL

LAURIE MAZUR

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The word “resilience” gets thrown around a lot. In Central Texas and elsewhere, disaster survivors are praised for their resilience as they mourn after storms and try to rebuild their lives. Meanwhile, marketers use the term to sell everything from face cream to cannabis oil. And fossil fuel companies—major perpetrators of the climate crisis itself—tout their commitment to climate resilience with an apparent lack of irony.

While the word may be overused to the point of meaninglessness, “resilience” does mean something. Properly understood, it can show us how to prevent disasters and recover from them. Research from various fields—ecology, the social sciences, disaster recovery—shows how people and communities can survive and thrive amid disruption.

And disruption is in our future. As humans have destabilized the climate and other natural systems, we can expect more deadly floods, fires, and heat waves. Last year alone, Americans endured 27 major weather disasters, which killed 568 people and cost more than \$180 billion

“The weather will never be better than this,” said Jeremy Hays, managing partner of Upright Consulting Services. “We’re going to look back on these crazy wildfire and storm seasons as the good times.”

In other words, we need to up our resilience game.

Hays was one of 30 leaders in climate, energy, health, urban planning, and social justice I recently interviewed for a new report, *Realizing Resilience: Toward a Fairer, Greener Future*, published by Island Press and The Kresge Foundation. The report offers guidance to funders and others working to build resilience in this time of urgent need.

## What Resilience Is—and Isn't

**Resilience is about coping with change.** Change is a constant in human and natural history. But we have entered an era in which the pace, scale, and impact of change may be greater than anything we have previously confronted. Resilience, in this context, is about the ability to anticipate, plan for, and mitigate the dangers associated with environmental and social change.

**There is no “techno-fix” for resilience.** Technical solutions—for example, a seawall to prevent flooding—can't build resilience on their own. That's because policy reflects deeply entrenched values and power structures. Which community gets the seawall, and what happens to those left unprotected? Who gets to decide, and who benefits from those decisions? Building resilience begins with deep understanding of the social and environmental dynamics that shape our communities.

**Resilience requires transformation.** Because so many of the systems we rely on are unsustainable and inequitable, resilience is not about “bouncing back” to the status quo. “We can't create resilience with what we're doing,” said Denise Fairchild, founder of the Ubuntu Climate Initiative. “We need radical shifts in consciousness and behaviors.”

Instead, true resilience calls on us to reimagine and remake the systems that supply our energy, transportation, water, and more. It calls us to live within planetary limits, to avoid further destabilizing natural systems. And—importantly—it implores us to eradicate the inequities that magnify vulnerability to disaster, while distributing opportunities more fairly.

**It's bigger than climate.** Resilience encompasses climate change mitigation and adaptation. But the qualities that promote resilience—including social cohesion and equity—can help communities weather a wide range of disruptions and challenges, from pandemics to financial crises.

**Resilience has its discontents.** Marginalized communities and those reeling from disaster can hear calls to be resilient as code for “you're on your own.” Resilience can be coopted or offered as a substitute for addressing the root causes of environmental and social problems.

**But done right, resilience can generate broad support.** Community-led resilience efforts that align with local values and concerns have been widely embraced. In New Orleans, for example, residents have implemented more than 150 green

infrastructure projects, using tree plantings and other natural features to sponge up some 50,000 gallons of storm water in flood-prone areas.

And, in a moment when “climate change” has become intensely politicized, the term “resilience” retains widespread support.

**Still, resilience is under attack.** In his second term, President Trump has undercut resilience in myriad ways. While the Biden administration made historic investments in climate change mitigation, the Trump administration has blocked climate funding; gutted environmental agencies; and scrapped plans for cleaner, cheaper renewable energy.

## How We Can Bolster Resilience

**Build community capacity.** Community-based organizations are the backbone of a resilient society. Groups that have earned trust by responding to local concerns are uniquely prepared to identify and solve community problems. They are also the first line of defense in any disruption, often pivoting to respond to urgent needs before public and private entities can react.

Foundations can sustain and grow these community organizations by providing stable, long-term, general support. They can build local groups’ capacity by networking them with similar groups, and by connecting them to national organizations that provide technical assistance, including legal, communications, and scientific expertise.

**Stay the course.** This political moment is a test of our collective resolve, as many advocates and funders are questioning their strategy and commitments. But investments in community-led, equity-centered climate resilience have produced outsized gains.

For example, in 2019, New York Renews, a coalition of over 200 community-based organizations, helped the state pass one of the world’s most ambitious climate plans, which later inspired the Biden administration’s signature climate bill. Now, as the Trump administration claws back federal funding, and some foundations pivot from this work, it is vitally important that others redouble their commitment to preserve gains and continue forward momentum.

**Keep equity at the center.** Working-class communities, people of color, and other vulnerable groups are hit first and worst by climate impacts and other disruptions.

Neighborhoods that were subject to racist redlining policies have received less investment in parks and infrastructure, for example, and as a result, they are more prone to flooding and extreme heat. Since inequity is deeply embedded in the problem, equity must be part of the solution.

**Support change at the subnational level.** In the vacuum left by federal support, funders and others can scale up local resilience efforts by supporting cooperation among stakeholders: community groups, advocacy organizations, local government, and the private sector. They can focus on policy change in municipal governments, state legislatures, and public utility commissions. And they can build powerful partnerships that span localities and regions, including those with shared geography and resources.

**Build connections across issues and movements.** In our complex, interconnected world, problems are often linked; for example, people living in poverty are disproportionately harmed by climate impacts, which further exacerbate poverty. But solutions are connected as well. A “multisolving” approach, which addresses linked problems simultaneously, can also amplify impact. For example, weatherizing homes can reduce cost burdens and create jobs while lowering carbon emissions. Multisolving has political benefits too, by forging new constituencies across sectors and movements.

**Support and protect leaders.** Leaders catalyze movements; they are nurturers of relationships, holders of institutional memory, and invaluable sources of wisdom and perspective. Funders can back them up by mentoring emerging leaders and convening veteran leaders to regroup and think creatively. It is especially important to support leaders of frontline organizations, who often carry unsustainable burdens.

“There’s so much that people are holding,” says Jacqueline Patterson, founder of the Chisholm Legacy Project. “We need to make sure someone is holding the holder.” And, amid a rising tide of hate and political violence in the United States, funders have a special responsibility to help keep leaders safe, both online and in person.

**Change the narrative.** Too often, advocates have failed to connect resilience with top-of-mind issues like health and the cost of living. “You have to be talking about people’s health or their pocketbook,” says Shamar Bibbins, managing director of The Kresge Foundation’s Environment program. “It has to make financial sense or health sense.” Funders and advocates can invest in communications

that emphasize these tangible benefits. For example: Subsidized solar energy can relieve cost burdens for low- and moderate-income homeowners while bending the curve of greenhouse gas emissions. Investments in cultural and narrative change can shift power, building durable support for equity-centered resilience strategies.

**Amplify the message—and multiply the messengers.** Fossil fuel interests have bankrolled a multi-decade effort to discredit climate change and build support for industry interests. Advocates of equitable climate resilience will need to mount a comparable effort, using legacy media as well as podcasts, influencers, social media, and arts and culture. Importantly, advocates must amplify the voices of community leaders and others who have earned the public’s trust.

**Step in, speak up, and spend down.** This moment, shaped by escalating climate disaster and political upheaval, is a full-on emergency. Funders can step in to help by filling some of the gaps left by the federal government and retreating foundations. They can speak up—in unison—for the values they hold and the work they support. And they can increase their grantmaking to levels commensurate with current challenges. “This is a moment of crisis on all these different fronts—climate, democracy, equality,” says Ayana Elizabeth Johnson, cofounder of the Urban Ocean Lab. “Funders need to give their money away faster, because 5 percent a year is not cutting it.”

**Envision (and create) the world we want.** Many of the leaders I interviewed predict dark times ahead: continued climate crisis and political chaos, a profoundly weakened democracy. But even in this moment, there are opportunities for transformative change. Disruption drives innovation, and communities continue to engage creative problem-solving at the local and regional levels.

It is critically important to build on that innovation, and craft a comprehensive vision of the world we want. That vision must include resonant values, as well as practical strategies to build resilience and improve human wellbeing.

# The U.S. Isn't Leading at COP30—But It Is Un-Damming Its Way to Climate Resilience

TARA LOHAN

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As delegates huddle in Belém, Brazil for the 30th United Nations Climate Change Conference, or COP30, they are considering how to prevent runaway climate change, and also how to bolster resilience to extreme weather. The United States won't have much to offer officially—the Trump administration has said it won't send any high-level delegates. And with President Donald Trump pulling the U.S. out of the Paris Climate Agreement earlier this year, the country is far from a climate leader these days.

But all is not lost. Local level climate work continues in the United States, with accomplishments worth cheering—and replicating. For the last few years, I've tracked one of the most overlooked: the removal of harmful and obsolete dams. The United States has been leading the global charge on dam removals. In just the last 25 years nearly 2,000 dams have been blasted and backhoed from our rivers and streams.

Dam removals, including the four-dam effort completed last year on the Klamath River, are often celebrated for helping imperiled fish, like salmon. But they also offer two important benefits for the climate.

The first is reducing emissions. A growing body of scientific research dating back to the 1990s has found that reservoirs from dams can produce greenhouse gas emissions, some on par with thermal power plants. The biggest culprit is methane, a potent greenhouse gas that traps 80 times more heat than carbon dioxide over 20 years. As organic material breaks down in a reservoir, methane is diffused from the water into the air.

As we take stock of our greenhouse gas emissions, an honest accounting of the input from dams could help us make reductions where dams are unneeded,

unsafe, or doing more harm than good. In some states there are thousands of “deadbeat” dams, which serve no purpose at all anymore, and should be put on the chopping block. And if you’re wondering if it makes sense to remove infrastructure that can produce “clean” energy, know that the vast majority of large U.S. dams—upward of 97%—don’t produce power.

The second is strengthening resilience. Many dams are outdated, dilapidated, or not designed to handle the onslaught of water that comes with climate-amplified storms. Some have already failed, risking lives and costing millions. After Hurricane Helene slammed North Carolina last year, 40 dams were damaged or destroyed. Expect to see more of that. A recent report from researchers at Utah State University found that incidents of dam failures or interventions needed to prevent failures are skyrocketing. From 1990 to 1999 we averaged two such incidents each year. That number jumped to an average of 50 per year from 2020 to 2023.

After two years of dangerous floods, Vermont has gotten the message. Last year the state passed a law to identify dams that worsen flooding and create a fund to remove them. Other states are also assessing dam removal to boost climate resilience. Removing damaging dams and helping rivers reconnect with their floodplains can help protect communities from severe weather and save money.

Dam removals offer other climate resilience benefits. Dams hold back water, but they also block the movement of sediment, which depletes coastal beaches and speeds erosion. One of the most notorious examples is the Matilija Dam near Ojai, California, a now-defunct dam that has corralled nearly 9 million cubic yards of sediment. Removing Matilija would reinvigorate downstream beaches in Ventura. As rising seas eat away at ocean beaches, upstream dam removals can help protect coastal communities.

Dams also change the temperature of rivers. As climate change pushes up the mercury, some reservoirs are becoming more like bathtubs. Higher water temperatures can foster toxic algal blooms that threaten human health and kill wildlife. Dam removals can flip the script, helping to restore more natural stream temperatures and flows, improving water quality in rivers that millions of Americans rely on for drinking water. Removals can also support biodiversity by enabling aquatic animals to find cooler upstream waters to better weather our changing climate.

Dam removals aren’t a climate cure-all, but the magnitude of the crisis we face will require all the tools we can muster—and master. Several decades of dam removals across the U.S. prove they work to restore rivers better and faster than anything else. Now let’s put them to use for climate action, too.

# Threatened by Toxics, Some Communities Look for a Buy-Out

## BUT WILL TRUMP'S FEMA PREVENT IT?

BRIAN PELLOTT

Originally published March 12, 2025 on Medium

In August 2016, Susan Liley stood on a hilltop as her hometown flooded below. She watched in horror but was no longer surprised. This was De Soto's fourth flood in three years. A crowded signpost memorializes each high-water mark. December 28, 2015: 12' 5". May 3, 2013: 13'. August 15, 2016: 14'. Last November, on Election Day, De Soto flooded again.

"You can't tell me this isn't a bad place to live," Liley said of the railroad town in eastern Missouri. Sure, its historic buildings are beautiful. Most of her neighbors are loving and kind. Even the train graffiti has its charm. But hundreds of homes in De Soto are no longer safe.

Fifteen dams dot the eight miles up creek. "The potential for disaster is right here, all the time," Liley said. And it comes.

In 2003, a young father trapped in his car was washed past a drainage tube and drowned. In 2013, flash floods swept an 80-year-old woman off Veterans Drive to her death. In 2016, a homebound woman was evacuated by boat only to suffer a heart attack and die the next day.

"This is ridiculous," Liley thought as the water cleared in 2016. "I got tired of looking and not doing anything." That's when she started the Citizens' Committee for Flood Relief (CCFR).

"Through flood sweat and tears, De Soto stays strong," is emblazoned across the group's blue T-shirts, but strength only goes so far in a flood plain surrounded by Superfund sites.

"We have lots of lead," Liley said, listing several old mines in and around Jefferson County. "People on the creek are always sick and dying of cancer." New

hazards aren't helping. A Union Pacific rail yard sits at De Soto's center. It used to flood contaminants into the creek. Now they wash towards Main Street.

As climate change brings more severe and frequent flooding to De Soto, the risk of catastrophic loss and flood-borne pollution grows. Many homeowners want out.

CCFR is working with Anthropocene Alliance (A2), Buy-In Community Planning, Climigration Network, and government experts to implement a floodplain management plan and secure "buyouts."

Buyouts are often the last best option for homes that repeatedly flood. They occur when homeowners voluntarily sell their properties to government entities at pre-disaster fair market value. In most cases, the acquired structures are demolished, and the land becomes open space to prevent new construction in the risk zone. Since 1989, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has partnered with local and state governments to buy out roughly 50,000 homes across the U.S.

"Buyouts are important because they provide homeowners an option that often isn't on the table," said A.R. Siders, director of the University of Delaware's Climate Change Science and Policy Hub.

"Without buyout programs, people can feel stuck, like their only option is to sell to another family and put them in the same position or stay in a home that repeatedly floods, maybe a home where people have lost loved ones, or where kids have PTSD from past flooding."

Last year De Soto received state and federal funding to buy and demolish five flood-prone homes, adding to the 19 properties it had already acquired and destroyed. According to the city's floodplain management plan, about 350 homes and more than 100 businesses remain at risk.

As of December 2024, 30 different federal agencies were authorized to support community recovery following natural disasters. Siders says this spider's web of programs can confuse homeowners and pose administrative burdens for local governments, but it also provides flexibility to acquire homes that face multiple risks.

Pascagoula floods—90 percent of the Mississippi city was under water when Hurricane Katrina came ashore in 2005—but high tides aren't the main reason A2 member Cherokee Concerned Citizens (CCC) wants buyouts. Founder Barbara Weckesser says her Cherokee Forest subdivision, which sits on the fenceline of an industrial hub, is polluted beyond repair.

"We get moolene, toolene, and boolene, all kinds of different chemicals," Weckesser jokes (of those only toluene, a toxic irritant, exists and affects the

community). “We can’t narrow down which company is polluting what because they use the same things. Benzene, sulfur, sulfuric acid, coke dust, paint fumes, sandblasting dust. Children’s toenails are testing positive for nickel.”

A massive Chevron refinery sits a quarter mile across the bayou from Weckesser’s home. Closer still are the Bollinger shipyard and building facilities. Other neighbors include the Destin gas pipeline, an Enterprise Gas plant that exploded in 2016, and the Mississippi Phosphates Superfund Site.

“People move in because they can’t afford to buy anywhere else,” Weckesser said. “Renters come, stay six months or a year, and then they’re gone.”

CCC was formed in 2013 to protect the community from pollution. After deciding their homes were no longer safe (and years spent running into walls with the City), members began working with Buy-In to explore relocation options including voluntary buyouts. In 2024, Buy-In received funding through the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation to help CCC develop a buyout strategy that would benefit the whole community and restore native Gulf Coast landscapes on acquired plots. The plan aims to improve ecosystem health and provide an ecological buffer to protect remaining homes and businesses from hurricanes, sea level rise, and ongoing industrial pollution. More pressingly, it aims to get people out.

In a recent survey, 90 percent of Cherokee Forest’s 120 households were considering buyouts.

“People are tired of being sick, tired of the noise, tired of getting hit with some smell that takes your breath away every time you go outside,” Weckesser said. “One woman told me, ‘Just buy me out, I’ll figure out where to go later.’”

Weckesser, 77, wants to return to Kentucky where she grew up and where her two sons still live. “My kids are throwing a fit for me to come ASAP,” she said. “I tell them, ‘Boys, I can’t come home.’ I live in a house I shouldn’t be in, I can’t sell, and I can’t rent. I’m forced to stay until we can get a buyout.”

“It’s not just about money and rehousing, but thinking about the whole person, the community, and their social well-being,” said Kelly Main, Buy-In’s Executive Director. “We’re trying to build a relocation assistance program grounded in people’s needs.”

To surface these needs, Buy-In and community groups design and implement locally relevant surveys together then analyze the data to determine how best to move forward. Sometimes this means working with homeowners and local governments to apply for grants and implement buyouts.

Other A2 members Buy-In works with include: Local Environmental Action Demanded (LEAD) Agency in Oklahoma where the Tar Creek Superfund Site floods Indigenous communities and other residents with hazardous mining waste; the Greater Birmingham Alliance To Stop Pollution (GASP) in Alabama where air pollution from steel mills and coke plants is pushing relocation plans; and Un Nuevo Amanecer (UNA) in Puerto Rico where flooding causes hazardous sewage water to back up in the streets.

David Southgate, an activist and volunteer with UNA, said his neighborhood Playa de Ponce has experienced buyouts and property acquisitions from various agencies in various forms since the early 1980s.

“There’s a long list of neighborhoods that no longer exist,” Southgate said. “In general, people don’t speak about these displacement programs that have ignored the social fabric they’re breaking up and that don’t make people whole.”

These oversights are what motivated Main to start Buy-In. “Traditional post-disaster programs ask, ‘Do people fit the eligibility of this program?’” Main said. “Buy-In asks, ‘Does the program fit the needs of the people?’” This holistic approach to relocation planning helps communities understand their overlapping risks and options.

In a promising sign the federal government might follow suit, the White House issued a first-of-its-kind report in December that addressed both climate- and pollution-driven relocation together.

“The [Biden-Harris] administration recognizes that not only are the risks and impacts of climate change and legacy contamination disproportionately concentrated in Tribal Nations and other communities with environmental justice concerns, but that these communities often face a steeper road to recovery when disaster strikes,” the report stated.

Published during the previous administration’s lame duck winter, the report is filled with “wills” (e.g. “The Federal government will use the following principles to support community-driven relocation”) and other promises the Trump administration looks unlikely to keep.

In early February, the report was no longer available on the White House’s website. Information about the Office of Environmental Justice and External Civil Rights (OEJECR) was still on the EPA’s site, but with 170 of its employees now placed on administrative leave, this may too become a broken link.

Purged web pages and chaotic closures spell uncertainty for the federal government’s commitment to environmental justice. When President Trump illegally froze then unfroze up to \$3tn in federal grants and loans in late January,

many nonprofits, including A2 partners and members, were left confused or in limbo.

“We get a lot of funding through the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, so if that gets cut, all of our programs would stop,” Main said. “I’d have to go out and fundraise.”

“The freezing and unfreezing has created so much uncertainty,” Siders said. “No one wants to spend money from a grant and then it gets recalled. I expect we’ll see delays in money being spent and lower spending rates while people wait for certainty.”

Whatever the new administration thinks about climate change, homes will continue to flood.

By 2045, more than 300,000 residential properties along the U.S. coast are at risk of chronic flooding from sea rise alone.

“That’s not once a year or every couple of years. We’re talking chronic, disruptive flooding. Roads washed out, properties in high-tide zones. You’re basically living in Venice,” Main said. “So, if FEMA has done 50,000 buyouts in the last 35 years, there’s no way to scale the current system to address even these most at-risk homes.”

With federal funding in flux, Main is exploring public-private partnerships, state and local grants, and philanthropic support to continue buyout planning with communities desperate to move.

“When we help people get out of harm’s way and find a secure and stable place to live, we break the disaster recovery cycle,” Main said. “When multiple actors ‘buy in’ to the buyout process, we can create a permanent solution for eliminating people’s flood risk.”

De Soto offers proof.

“There was a couple who lived with their grandchildren in a beautiful brick house along the creek,” Liley said. A couple of years ago, their grandson had an asthma attack at the Thanksgiving table. The doctor told the boy he could no longer live with Grandma and Grandpa—too much mold in their flooded house. The couple accepted a buyout last year and moved to a new home above the floodplain. In December, the whole family celebrated the holidays together, high and dry.

SECTION II

**Democracy & Civic  
Engagement**



# Don't Let Trump Usurp the “Power of the Purse”

JILLIAN BLANCHARD

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America’s founding fathers—having just won independence from a monarchy—designed the Constitution to prevent a dangerous consolidation of power. As James Madison wrote in the Federalist Papers, “The accumulation of all powers, legislative, executive, and judiciary, in the same hands, whether of one, a few, or many ... may justly be pronounced the very definition of tyranny.”

The Constitution guards against tyranny through the separation of powers. And the “power of the purse,” or federal spending, is unequivocally assigned to Congress.

But the Trump administration is attempting to snatch that power away.

On Monday, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) blocked trillions of dollars in grants, loans, and other federal spending. Programs already approved by the majority of Republicans and Democrats in Congress were paused to allow White House appointees time to decide whether they aligned with the new administration’s priorities.

Chaos ensued, as state Medicaid agencies were unable to access federal funds and countless federal grantees—from Head Start programs to food safety inspectors—wondered whether they could meet payroll. After the OMB order was temporarily blocked by the courts, the Trump administration rescinded the order on Wednesday. But the White House then announced its intent to use executive orders to pause funding for initiatives already approved by Congress, including the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, which collectively fund hundreds of thousands of jobs across America.

While the ultimate scope of this executive overreach is unclear, its immediate effects will be dire. Safe drinking-water projects, Superfund cleanup, post-disaster rebuilding, and energy-efficiency upgrades for low-income homeowners all face payment delays, and these programs could ultimately grind to a halt.

The result: more polluted air and water, more hardship, and higher costs for working people.

Recipients of federal funding face a frustrating catch-22. State and local governments that were promised funds will stop work (and hiring) for fear that they won't be reimbursed. But by stopping work on those federally funded projects, grant recipients will be "out of compliance" with their contracts—enabling the Trump administration to cancel those contracts permanently.

The bigger picture is even darker. To be absolutely clear: The OMB memo is part of a strategic, coordinated effort to consolidate power in the executive branch. That effort closely tracks the game plan laid out in Project 2025, the Heritage Foundation's blueprint for a second Trump term. One of the project's architects, Russell Vought, the former budget director, has again been nominated for that post.

These actions directly contradict the Constitution and the law. In 1974, the federal Impoundment Control Act prohibited the executive branch from deferring or delaying funding that Congress has appropriated for policy reasons. The law was part of a post-Watergate suite of reforms aimed at reining in presidential power and ensuring that the power of the purse remains with Congress, not the President. But in his Senate confirmation earlier this month, Vought vowed to defy the Impoundment Control Act.

This President, like all presidents before him, must wrangle with a democratically elected Congress to enact his agenda. That requires dialogue and compromise, the necessary work of governing a sprawling, diverse nation.

Part of the new administration's strategy appears to be to "flood the zone" with a torrent of words and legally questionable actions. For ordinary people with jobs and families, it's too much to follow, much less resist. We struggle to separate the signal from the noise, the merely symbolic from the truly dangerous. This administration's move to snatch the power of the purse from Congress falls into the latter category. It is a bold reconfiguration of power that could have a far-reaching impact on our lives and our government.

If you've been tuning out the firehose of news from this administration's first days, it's time to sit up and take notice. These efforts will impact everyone who benefits from government programs: veterans, teachers, health care workers, low-income communities, and more.

Urge your Senators to resist this unconstitutional expansion of presidential power by opposing the appointment of Russell Vought, mastermind of Project 2025, as Trump's budget director. And remember that "the accumulation of all powers" in the hands of an individual or branch of government is the "very definition of tyranny."

# Address Science Misinformation Not by Repeating the Facts, but by Building Conversation and Community

ANNE HELEN TOOMEY

Originally published February 12, 2025 in *The Conversation*.

Misinformation about scientific topics, including falsehoods such as “vaccines cause autism” and “climate change is an entirely natural phenomenon,” is an issue scientists have been discussing more often. Widespread misinformation can lead to confusion about public health and environmental issues and can hinder those working to solve societal problems.

As an environmental social scientist who researches how science can have an impact on society, I seek effective ways to address misinformation.

There are many approaches that can work to some extent: for example, counteracting erroneous information with statements about scientific topics based on quality research, and “inoculating” people by preparing them to spot the fallacies in misinformation before they are first exposed to it.

But one of the most important ways to counteract misinformation is less about the facts and more about how those facts move within social networks and communities. In other words, it’s not enough for science to be right—it has to be accepted within people’s social circles to have any meaningful impact.

## Can facts change minds?

Most people tend to assume that their knowledge and ideas are based on a rational, objective analysis of information. And that’s sometimes the case—if it’s snowing outside, people don’t insist that it’s sunny and warm, no matter how much they might like it to be.

But rationality and the ability to embrace new information go out the window when it comes up against ideas that challenge one's preexisting worldviews or social identities. Such information can feel like a personal attack, leading the body to release cortisol, a hormone associated with stress. So, certain facts can feel threatening or offensive.

Compounding what is happening in the brain is what's happening in people's communities. Humans are social animals who turn to others they trust to help them understand what's what. People are attuned to what is considered normal or acceptable in their social environments, so if their social group holds a particular belief, they are more likely to adopt that belief too.

One's cultural and political identities often dictate how they interpret the same information, leading to disagreements even when presented with the same evidence.

These cultural identities explain why, for example, research finds that science-skeptical behaviors, such as vaccine hesitancy and climate denialism, tend to cluster in social and geographical pockets. In these pockets, people's skepticism is reinforced by others with similar beliefs in their social network. In such cases, providing more evidence on a certain topic won't help, and it may even result in people digging in their heels deeper to deny the evidence.

So, if facts don't necessarily change minds, what will?

## **Leveraging community networks**

Recent research provides a solution for scientists and agencies hoping to correct misinformation: Rather than fighting against humans' social nature, work with it.

When people see trusted individuals within their social networks holding a certain belief, that belief becomes more credible and easier to adopt. Leveraging those community connections can allow new ideas to gain traction.

One great example of using social networks to fight misinformation is how polio was eradicated in India. In 2009, India was the polio epicenter of the world, home to half of the world's cases. These cases were largely clustered in vaccine-hesitant regions of the country. But by 2011, only two years later, India had only one case, and the country formally celebrated the eradication of polio in 2014.

How did India go from having half of the world's cases to just one case in under two years?

Public health agencies asked volunteers from within vaccine-resistant communities to go on a listening campaign and become ambassadors for the vaccine. The

volunteers were trained in interpersonal communication skills and tasked with spending time with parents. They built trust and rapport through regular visits.

Because the volunteers were known within the communities, they were able to make headway where health workers from urban areas had not. As they established rapport, hesitant parents shared their concerns, which typically went beyond polio to include other health issues.

Over time, more parents decided to vaccinate their children, until there was a tipping point and vaccination became a social norm. Perhaps most notably, the campaign led to full routine immunization rates in some high-risk regions of the country.

India's incredible success emphasizes the importance of personal interactions for changing minds, which means moving beyond simply presenting the facts. Building trust, listening to concerns and engaging with communities in a meaningful way were integral to India's eradication of polio.

### **The power of conversations**

Another example of using the power of social networks to talk about controversial science topics comes from a method called deep canvassing. Deep canvassing is a unique communication method that involves going door to door to have conversations with members of the public.

But unlike traditional canvassing, which often focuses on rallying existing supporters, deep canvassing deliberately seeks to engage with those who hold different viewpoints, focusing efforts in communities where the topic is controversial.

Canvassers are trained to ask questions to better understand the other person's experiences and perspectives on the issue, and then they share their own personal stories. This helps to create a human connection, enabling both parties to feel heard and respected. This connection can help to reduce the negative emotions that may emerge when someone is challenged to rethink their beliefs.

One notable example of deep canvassing in action is the work of Neighbours United, an environmental nonprofit in Canada. They used a deep-canvassing approach to engage people in conversations about climate change.

They piloted the method in a rural, conservative community called Trail, home to one of the largest zinc and lead smelters in the world. Prior efforts to engage community members hadn't had much of an effect, as taking action on climate change was largely seen as conflicting with how many people made their living.

But the deep-canvassing method worked. Going door to door, the canvassers listened to residents' concerns, shared their own stories about the impact of climate change and highlighted local environmental successes.

As a result, 1 in 3 residents shifted their views about the importance of taking action to address climate change. This broad community support led the City Council to vote to transition to 100% renewable energy by 2050.

Sociologist Anthony Giddens describes interpersonal interactions between experts, such as doctors or scientists, and the public as "access points". He argues that these interactions are vital for maintaining trust in governmental and scientific institutions, such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention or the Environmental Protection Agency. Face-to-face interactions with experts can help people see them as kind, warm and professional, which can build trust.

These examples show that creating support for attitudes and behaviors based on science requires more than just presenting facts. It requires creating meaningful dialogue between skeptical groups and scientific messengers. It's also a reminder that while social networks may serve to propagate misinformation, they can also be an important tool for addressing it.

# Libraries

## VITAL SPACES FOR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN A POLARIZED WORLD

SHAMICHAEL HALLMAN

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Beyond serving as repositories of knowledge, libraries offer a unique venue to bridge community divides, providing inclusive spaces where individuals can come together, learn from one another, and build connections. As the challenges of misinformation and polarization mount, our libraries become more than just places of quiet study; they are essential civic pillars, fostering the kind of informed, engaged citizens that a healthy democracy requires.

### **The Unique Value Proposition of Libraries**

Libraries hold a unique value proposition in fostering good citizens, serving as “third places”—spaces outside the realms of home or work—where community members can interact. While communities may have many such places where residents can gather, libraries offer distinctive advantages that make them exceptionally effective for cultivating civic connections.

One of these advantages is equal access. Libraries provide a free gateway to a wide array of services, resources, and information, helping bridge social and digital divides within communities. Their commitment to friendliness enhances this role, as libraries offer welcoming, low-pressure environments where people feel comfortable engaging in open dialogue. They are inclusive—open to everyone, serving not only as hubs for community events but also as emergency shelters and trustworthy sources of authentic information.

Libraries also uphold a strong tradition of neutrality. By promoting open access to print and digital information and supporting diverse perspectives, they create a judgment-free environment where people can explore ideas without fear.

This neutrality enables libraries to facilitate discussions across different viewpoints, encouraging respectful discourse and deeper understanding.

Lastly, libraries play a tremendous role in cultural preservation. They safeguard historical documents, local archives, and host cultural events, connecting the past with the present and ensuring that communities retain a sense of continuity. In this way, libraries not only foster individual growth and civic engagement but also strengthen the social fabric of the communities they serve.

## **Fostering Civil Dialogue**

Increasingly, libraries recognize the importance of moving beyond a collection-centered model to an engagement-centered one, embracing their role as civic institutions. For example, the Baltimore County Public Library's 2023 *Be at the Table* program worked to foster democratic values through open dialogue and responsive local action. Born from the need to rebuild connections in the wake of COVID-19, the program brought together community members over shared meals, offering a structured yet welcoming environment for discussing a range of topics relevant to community life and personal perspectives.

A defining feature of the program was its emphasis on inclusive dialogue. Participants were intentionally seated with people they didn't know, exposing them to a range of perspectives. In this way, *Be at the Table* mirrored democratic society's need for spaces where people of all backgrounds can engage in civil discourse and problem-solving. Library staff played a crucial role, guiding discussions with open-ended questions and recording insights.

The impact of these dialogues goes beyond personal connections; it influences tangible, community-centered solutions. Feedback gathered from each session was used to enhance the library's resources, ensuring that programming reflects and addresses residents' priorities. Insights gained led BCPL to increase small business support and expand social spaces in underserved areas, demonstrating the library's responsiveness to real community needs and its commitment to accountability.

This responsiveness aligns with the democratic principle of addressing public issues through participatory input, transforming feedback into actionable change. In this way, BCPL has positioned itself as a civic institution vital to democratic life—a space where ideas are exchanged, mutual respect is fostered, and collective solutions are born.

Similar initiatives are proliferating across the U.S. For example, Salt Lake County Library's *Let's Be Neighbors* program provides a platform for residents to gain insights on pressing community issues directly from local experts. Each

session dives into topics relevant to public life—ranging from housing and environmental concerns to public safety and health—seeking to equip participants with a comprehensive understanding of the issues affecting their community. A unique feature of *Let's Be Neighbors* is its commitment to accessibility; by hosting these sessions virtually, the library removes barriers for those who may not be able to attend in person.

At the end of each session, participants receive actionable steps—usually three to five practical suggestions—that empower them to contribute meaningfully to their communities. This action-oriented approach transforms passive learning into active citizenship, making participants feel like integral parts of the solution to local challenges. And, to further foster a sense of unity and purpose, *Let's Be Neighbors* distributes “take-and-make” kits that invite residents to craft items like scarves and mittens, which are then donated to individuals in need. This tangible act of giving extends the program's impact beyond education, creating a hands-on way for participants to connect with and support their community.

The Memphis Public Library, where I served from 2017 to 2022, is working to help reconcile diverse viewpoints and experiences in a way that strengthens decisionmaking. The library strives to create an environment where different cultural norms and perspectives not only coexist but flourish—while minimizing vulnerability to physical and emotional threats. The result is a wide-ranging series of programs and events that place the library at the heart of civic life.

For example, *CitizenFEST: Memphis* was a free, festive learning summit designed to empower citizens to exercise civic power. Hosted in partnership with Citizen University and The Fourth Bluff in 2018, this event brought together activists, artists, and community residents for creativity and skill-building workshops. The goal was to make civic life accessible to all, regardless of legal status, because the work of building a better society requires everyone.

*CitizenFEST* participants engaged in spirited conversations and workshops about the role of libraries and parks in fostering civic life, the power of arts to heal divisions and unite communities, and the importance of inspiring new civic leaders to step into public office. Attendees created mutual aid networks, sharing what they had to offer, what they needed, and how they could take what they learned back to their communities.

Also in 2018, the *Fourth Bluff Civic Hack* provided a space for Memphians to collaborate and tackle pressing social issues. Over two days, participants focused on three key areas: chronic homelessness, cultural fragmentation, and civic engagement. The event kicked off with a community dinner, setting the stage for inspiration and networking. Participants then worked in small groups to address challenges like restoring dignity to individuals experiencing homelessness, using

technology creatively to bridge societal divides, and fostering trust across diverse cultural, political, and social perspectives.

And in 2019, we partnered with The Fourth Bluff on a creative initiative, *SwingVote Memphis*, designed to spark conversations about voting and civic involvement. We placed a swing emblazoned with “I’m Voting” in high-traffic locations across the city, including parks, libraries, and even the local NBA arena. Over three months, the swing provided a unique opportunity to engage with people about the importance of voting and other ways to actively participate in shaping Memphis’s future. By combining a playful installation with meaningful conversations, we showed residents that civic engagement doesn’t have to be intimidating—it can be personal, accessible, and even fun.

## Building Bridges

Libraries across the U.S. are engaging in creative bridgebuilding programs, which create safe spaces for sharing perspectives across cultural, generational, and social divides. Through these initiatives, libraries help strengthen the empathy and understanding necessary for cohesive communities.

In Mississippi, for example, the Columbus-Lowndes Public Library’s *Bridging Cultures* series celebrates diversity and fosters mutual understanding. In Ohio, the Conneaut Public Library’s *Generations Café* brings seniors and youth together through shared stories, promoting intergenerational respect and connection. Missouri’s Daniel Boone Regional Library facilitates *Community Conversations* that encourage respectful discussions on polarizing topics.

Other initiatives emphasize education and civic responsibility. Kansas City Public Library’s *Civic Saturday Fellowship* inspires active citizenship through dialogue, while the *Race Project KC* in Johnson County Library educates high school students on racial history, empowering them as advocates for equality. Similarly, the North Liberty Library in Iowa addresses cultural and wellness issues through its *Lighthouse in the Library* program, fostering collaboration and informed community action.

Despite these successes, libraries face challenges to their bridgebuilding work. Many cite threats to intellectual freedom, including censorship and restrictions on information access, which compromise their mission to provide resources critical to open democratic discourse. Libraries also experience financial constraints, particularly in economically disadvantaged communities, where civic engagement programs are urgently needed. The need for consistent, sufficient funding is clear. Furthermore, many libraries acknowledge the lack of standardized methods for

implementing and measuring the impact of bridging programs. This gap makes it difficult to assess long-term success and advocate for sustained support.

To address these challenges, libraries and library associations can develop communities of practice, sharing best practices in bridgebuilding, and creating toolkits that equip staff to foster civic engagement and social cohesion. Data collection is essential for measuring program outcomes, demonstrating success, and securing ongoing support. Philanthropic organizations can establish a national trust dedicated to funding libraries' foundational and bridging initiatives. And facilitating connections between libraries and specialized civic organizations would enable libraries to expand their resources and expertise.

### **Addressing Criticism**

Some argue that civic engagement lies outside a library's traditional mission. However, I counter that libraries have always been more than places to borrow books. They are institutions of learning, empowerment, and community engagement. To remain essential in their communities, libraries should keep this community-oriented approach at the forefront.

Another argument I sometimes hear is that librarians lack the expertise to facilitate sensitive discussions, especially on complex topics like race, politics, or economic disparities. But the reality is that librarians don't need to be experts on every topic. They can act as conveners, partnering with local organizations or bringing in experts to ensure productive, well-facilitated discussions.

With civic engagement in decline—evidenced by record low voter turnout in recent local elections and reduced participation in community activities—the role of libraries has never been more critical. Libraries provide the spaces, resources, and trust necessary to rebuild connections, foster mutual understanding, and inspire collective action. In an era where political rhetoric often sows division—from debates over election integrity to polarizing narratives about public health—libraries stand as steadfast spaces for bridging divides, nurturing dialogue, and inspiring constructive action. By offering neutral ground where diverse voices can be heard and understood, libraries counteract the fragmentation caused by such rhetoric and foster a shared commitment to democratic values.

In Memphis and across the U.S., libraries embody democratic ideals, offering everyone a seat at the table regardless of background, beliefs, or political affiliation. Supporting libraries means recommitting to the foundational work of fostering civic health and ensuring that every community has the tools to rise above division, building a more inclusive, informed, and democratic society.

# Democracy's New Danger Zone

## IMPEACHING JUDGES FOR UPHOLDING THE LAW

KHADIJAH SILVER

Originally published March 6, 2025 in *The Hill*.

In recent weeks, we've witnessed an alarming and accelerating trend: elected officials brazenly filing articles of impeachment against federal judges—not for corruption or misconduct, but for the “crime” of upholding the law against executive overreach. This represents a profound threat to judicial independence that should concern everyone, regardless of political affiliation.

Earlier this week, U.S. District Judge John Bates, a George W. Bush appointee, was targeted for ordering federal agencies to comply with the Paperwork Reduction Act before purging transgender health information from government websites.

The act requires government agencies to justify and document major changes to public information—ensuring that data collection and dissemination serve the public interest, not political whims. The rushed removal of information that benefits a vulnerable community violated this basic safeguard.

Yet Rep. Andy Ogles (R-Tenn.) outrageously claims that Judge Bates's ruling was “utterly lacking in intellectual honesty and basic integrity.” In reality, Bates's opinion was a straightforward analysis of longstanding law and practice.

Less than 48 hours later, Ogles was back on the attack, filing articles of impeachment against District of Columbia U.S. District Judge Amir Ali for ordering the administration to restore funding to USAID. In his resolution, Ogles used a classic right-wing dog whistle in using Ali's Arabic name, arguing the judge's order was “corrupt” based on spurious and bigoted assertions about the agency's relief efforts in Syria and Gaza.

Judges Ali and Bates did not issue radical rulings—they simply ordered federal agencies to follow the law.

Judicial impeachment was never intended to punish a judges' determination of law and fact. Of the 15 federal judges impeached in 250 years—only eight of whom have been convicted by the Senate and removed from the bench—the grounds for removal have always involved serious misconduct, not legal disagreements.

Throughout U.S. history, judicial impeachment has been reserved for crimes, bribery and corruption—not for decisions that anger those in power. As Chief Justice William Rehnquist documented, the failed 1804 impeachment of Supreme Court Justice Samuel Chase established the crucial norm that judges should not face removal over their rulings.

Republican lawmakers have similarly moved to impeach Judge Paul Engelmayer of the Southern District of New York and threatened to file against Judge John McConnell of the District of Rhode Island for temporarily halting administration policies on Treasury Department access and federal spending freezes—rulings that upheld clear legal limits on executive power.

These impeachment attempts transform a vital safeguard against corruption into a political weapon against judicial independence. Our constitutional architects deliberately insulated the judiciary to prevent this exact scenario: judges facing professional consequences for applying laws that restrain power.

If judges can be removed merely for upholding established law, judicial independence crumbles. The separation of power that safeguards our republic collapses, leaving all constitutional protections vulnerable to political manipulation.

The gravest threat comes from the executive branch openly declaring war on judicial independence. President Trump's statement that "maybe we have to look at the judges" is a direct threat from the head of one branch of government against another.

Even more troubling is Elon Musk's call for "an immediate wave of judicial impeachments," demanding the removal of judges who rule against his interests. Despite having no elected office or constitutional authority, Musk has positioned himself as an enforcer, pressuring lawmakers to punish judges who rule against his interests.

The pattern is unmistakable: These impeachment efforts don't target judges based on misconduct or corruption, but on whether their rulings inconvenience those in power. Judges have been singled out for upholding transgender health resources, enforcing government transparency and stopping unlawful funding freezes.

This is not about the rule of law—it's about punishing judges for applying it.

When judges must look over their shoulders before ruling against the powerful, equal justice becomes impossible. This threatens not abstract principles, but

tangible protections for everyday people—from civil rights to consumer protections to environmental safeguards that we all depend on.

The impeachment power was created as a shield to protect democracy from corruption—never as a sword to punish judges who faithfully uphold the law. And yet an unelected billionaire is weaponizing his outsized and inappropriate influence to issue social media decrees against federal judges, with elected officials scrambling to comply. This is not normal and we must not normalize it.

History has shown time and time again that once judicial independence falls, all other rights and liberties quickly follow. The weaponization of judicial impeachment isn't merely wrong—it represents an existential threat to the American system of government itself.

We must defend our independent judiciary from baseless attacks so it can protect us from abuses of power.

# The Environmental Movement You Probably Already Agree With

DANA ZARTNER

Originally published August 5, 2025 in *The Environment*.

In recent debates surrounding the budget reconciliation bill, one proposed provision—the required sale of public lands—generated bipartisan backlash across the western United States. As a result, a joint effort in the House of Representatives to remove the provision from the bill, led by Representatives Ryan Zinke (R-MT) and Gabe Vasquez (D-NM), won praise from hunters and fishermen, environmentalists, and many others who cherish the natural heritage of their communities or rely on nature for their livelihoods, recreation, and sustenance.

Senator Mike Lee (R-UT) restored the provision to the Senate version of the bill, despite the fact that in an April 2025 YouGov poll, 71% of 4,000 people surveyed oppose selling public lands and 74% oppose closing public lands. Ultimately, however, the public land sale provision was struck down as a violation of Senate rules and removed from the final bill.

The fate of our public lands is not the only issue that has united nature lovers in the past few months. There is widespread opposition across the political spectrum to the efforts of the federal government to gut services at our national parks. Additionally, threats to hiking trails, ski resorts, beaches, and traditional hunting and fishing grounds are bringing together groups ranging from the Sportsmen's Alliance to the National Parks Conservation Association to Trout Unlimited in opposition to the government's efforts.

## The Value of Nature

In this time of political polarization, nature has emerged as a unifier. People from all walks of life respect and love the diverse array of natural beauty we are lucky enough to have at our doorsteps. And while there may be disagreements over environmental policy details, a fundamental belief for many Americans is that nature is important to us as part of our heritage: we value it, we are nourished

by it, and we have family and cultural traditions surrounding it that we want to carry forward into the future.

As it turns out, these core beliefs also form the foundations of the “rights of nature” movement that has gained traction around the world and has slowly been making inroads in the U.S. While the movement’s name sometimes causes confusion, its underlying principles are *not* about giving nature the same rights as humans. Rather, it is about recognizing the inherent value of nature and developing laws to protect it for its own sake, not just as a commodity for use and abuse by human beings.

While rights of nature laws have been passed in countries such as Bangladesh, Colombia, New Zealand, and Ecuador, the movement has met more resistance in the United States. This is largely because the U.S. legal system has very specific rules govern legal standing, which is the ability to bring a case before a court. This can make it difficult to file a complaint if, for example, someone wants to sell public lands against community wishes. Rights of nature law creates a new mechanism for standing, allowing nature to be represented in legal proceedings to protect its interests. While it might sound strange, this strategy has been used before in U.S. law, in cases where standing was given to non-human entities such as corporations, churches, and states.

The key to bringing this movement to the U.S. is paying attention to how the law is developed. Good rights of nature law doesn’t overreach, create unattainable goals, or usurp other rights; rather, it supports existing community values and creates a mechanism to protect those values through the law. It does not take away our ability to use natural spaces, to hunt and fish, or even to engage in development. It simply requires that, in doing so, we protect what we value most so that future generations can enjoy these national parks, public spaces, and natural beauty as much as we have.

### **Following the Path of Aotearoa New Zealand**

An example of “good” rights of nature law is seen in Aotearoa New Zealand, a country that shares a common law tradition, as well as a number of political and social characteristics with the U.S. Earlier this year, the New Zealand Parliament enacted legislation recognizing the rights of Taranaki maunga (Mount Taranaki), protecting its intrinsic values and its right to exist and flourish. This is the third such law passed in Aotearoa New Zealand, with earlier legislation recognizing the rights of the Whanganui river and the Te Urewera forest.

While Mount Taranaki already had some protections as a national park, the new legislation goes further and emphasizes the value of the mountain to local communities. Developed in a collaborative process with all relevant stakeholders, the resulting law does not infringe on pre-existing rights to use and enjoy the park; it simply enhances the value of the mountain to the community with the power of the law. A similar approach should be taken in the United States, building on this moment of bipartisan recognition that we all care about our nation's natural heritage and don't want to see it destroyed, because, once it is gone, it is gone forever.

### **Protecting Nature, Now and for the Future**

People may fear that rights of nature laws will encroach on their own rights and prevent them from enjoying the natural spaces they love. The reality, as seen in New Zealand, is the opposite. Rights of nature law works in balance with other rights and protects something valuable: for the environment, for us, and those who come after us. People across the U.S. are already showing how much they value nature through opposition to the recent attempts to encroach upon it. Codifying this recognition into law is just the next step in protecting what we hold so dear, in the face of efforts to destroy it.

# Trump's Dangerous War on Information

KEITH KOZLOFF

Originally published April 11, 2025 in *The Progressive*.

As an economist, I know that information is key to our free-market system. If a business makes a good product sold at a fair price, it makes a profit. If it sells an inferior product or charges more than competitors, buyers turn away. Businesses must be responsive to consumer demands.

A democratic political system operates similarly. In this case voters act as consumers, providing positive or negative feedback to politicians, who adjust their conduct accordingly. But today, voters are not getting the information they need to make informed choices.

Having worked for the federal government under both Republican and Democratic presidents, I've had a front-row seat to policy swings between administrations. This time, what's happening is different: The Trump administration is using a wide range of tools to block, limit, or distort the flow of information that would otherwise serve as feedback to voters.

The administration has shuttered multiple government information websites, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's disease outbreak tracker. It barred the Associated Press from the White House press room for not recognizing the "Gulf of America." Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth expelled legacy media, including NBC News, *The New York Times*, National Public Radio, and Politico, from the Pentagon press room in favor of primarily conservative outlets. Trump fired 18 inspectors general, who served as independent watchdogs that uncover waste, fraud, and abuse at federal agencies.

Trump has deployed lawsuits and regulatory actions against media entities that sometimes report unfavorable news, suing ABC, CBS owner Paramount, *The Des Moines Register*, and the Pulitzer Prize Board for honoring journalists covering Trump's 2016 campaign. Trump previously sued Facebook parent Meta for blocking him after the Capitol riot and CNN for defamation.

In February, Brendan Carr, head of the Federal Communications Commission, announced investigations of NBC, ABC, CBS, PBS, NPR, and KCBS radio over what he claims is biased content. Elon Musk is suing Media Matters for America, a nonprofit that tracks extremism in the media. For both Trump and Musk, the goal is not necessarily to win cases, but to hobble and intimidate independent news sources.

When President Trump speaks, he is often untruthful, and it is the media's job to point that out. But Trump wants to impede that function as much as possible. Early in Trump's first term, adviser Kellyanne Conway coined the phrase "alternative facts" regarding situations that called for falsehoods. *The Washington Post's* fact-checker team documented more than 30,000 false or misleading claims made by Trump during that term.

This time around, Trump is demanding loyalty on key untruths. Candidates for national security positions must say "yes" when asked whether the 2020 election was stolen. Vice President J.D. Vance complained about fact-checking during the vice-presidential debate when he falsely claimed that Haitian immigrants were eating neighbors' pets. He justified this falsehood as a way to bring attention to the border issue.

Finally, Trump and Musk are using their bully pulpits on social media to disparage disfavored outlets. Musk falsely accused Reuters news service of "social deception" after it reported that his federal government cuts are based more on political ideology than cost savings.

In the face of criticism and financial pressures some embattled media companies, including *The Washington Post* and the *Los Angeles Times*, preemptively capitulated by withholding endorsements of Kamala Harris. Meanwhile, ABC News agreed to pay \$15 million to settle a defamation suit they would likely have won. And social media platforms like Facebook and X have pulled back on fact-checking initiatives.

Autocratic politicians depend on their ability to lie without facing accountability. Elections based on disinformation may not reflect true voter preferences. Thus, it is not just important but patriotic to use fact-checking websites to verify claims, avoid relying on one type of media, and learn how to recognize misinformation. Voters can also financially support groups that conduct investigative journalism or advocate for press freedom.

For their part, media company owners must recognize that preemptive capitulation to nuisance lawsuits and bully pulpit harassment encourages such behavior. If we don't protect our First Amendment rights, an increasingly constricted information environment will lead to an echo chamber society ripe for manipulation by leaders who promise simple answers to complex issues.

# Instead of “Abundance,” Let’s Have a Conversation About “Shared Prosperity”

ALVARO S. SANCHEZ

Originally published May 9, 2025 in *Common Dreams*.

Those of us who care about building a healthy, thriving, and prosperous future are reeling. The Trump administration’s attacks on our people and our planet plus the outright evisceration of government by Elon Musk and his corporate army are forcing us to reflect on how we got here and to ponder how we move forward.

As believers in the government’s ability—and in fact responsibility—to do good, we are having to face the extremely uncomfortable fact that the government does not work for the majority of people. So, it makes sense that many are talking about how government can work better to create “abundance”—and the recent release of Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson’s book of the same name—as the solution to our despair. Klein and Thompson argue that America’s inability to build and the reason why liberals are losing is the result of excessive red tape, deliberate policy decisions, and bureaucratic inertia, which must be eliminated.

For over a decade I have worked to craft, implement, and evaluate strategies that leverage private, public, and philanthropic investments to deliver tangible and substantial benefits to formerly “redlined” communities. In plain terms, I’ve been fighting like hell to get resources—actual dollars—back into communities of color. And I’ve borne witness to the growing frustration with the perceived inability of all levels of government to deliver results. All too often, regulations have become the scapegoat that some argue drive up the cost or slow the development of essential infrastructure like housing, renewable energy, and transportation networks.

Don’t get me wrong, I completely agree that we must urgently build more housing, transportation networks, and clean energy—the ingredients that people need to live healthy and prosperous lives. But just building more by eliminating regulations is not the silver bullet. “Abundance” without an eye for who the

abundance serves runs the risk of exacerbating the problem at the core of our economic challenges—the hoarding of power and wealth by the people that already have a lot of, well, abundance.

Just building more—“abundance” as a goal in and of itself—will not allow us to deliver solutions to the thorniest and extremely interconnected challenges we face, like climate change, a widening racial wealth gap, extremely low levels of confidence in the public sector, eroding governance structures, and dwindling public financing due to rising costs and constraints on raising new revenue.

These problems were not created because we don’t build things; rather, they are the outcomes of an economic system built on fabricated scarcity and the doctrine of maximizing profit, exploiting communities of color, and concentrating political and economic power.

It’s our inability to share in abundance, our overconsumption, and the belief that in order to have more abundance you need to hoard as much of it as possible that truly hurts our planet and our people.

Take this example. Several years ago, California’s investor-owned utilities were planning to invest hundreds of millions of dollars in charging infrastructure to support the state’s transition to electric vehicles. But the majority of the investment was planned for wealthy communities where electric vehicles were already being used. The utilities claimed that low-income families would not use the chargers because they didn’t own electric vehicles, but we argued that investments in charging infrastructure at multifamily housing and in low-income communities were essential to creating the conditions for families to consider switching to clean vehicles. In the end, the utilities agreed that a percentage of chargers should be deployed to low-income communities and over the years those percentages have continued to increase as the stigma that low-income communities would not use chargers was dispelled.

And this lesson is replicable. By focusing on who the benefits of vehicle charging stations were going to, we were able to scale the clean energy transition even faster by opening the option up to more Californians—not just those who already had access.

And so, I propose that to really tackle our complex challenges we must not work toward “abundance,” but instead work toward the goal of “shared prosperity,” of which abundance is a key strategy to achieving that goal.

Shared prosperity first and foremost is rooted in people, not markets, and meets the needs of all people, including those who have suffered the most under our current paradigm, creating an economy in which all communities can thrive. It ultimately recognizes that we are part of an interconnected system and that we are only as strong as our ability to care for the most vulnerable among us.

What shared prosperity requires is a shift away from profit maximization and toward affordability. By definition, it's prosperous for all, meaning that jobs with good benefits and worker protections are ubiquitous, and so are opportunities to build generational wealth and community resilience to climate, social, health, and economic crises.

The most vulnerable among us need to know that they can count on being able to bounce back. And to do so, our governments, our community-based organizations, and our people must have the capacity and resources to meet the call for support when needed.

Reading *Abundance* I get the sense that the authors think that people are often the obstacle to progress. Government, community leaders, environmental justice advocates, and environmentalists are not antagonists toward a healthy and prosperous future; they are the force that will ultimately help us achieve it.

Let me give an example of how a pivot from an “abundance” to a “shared prosperity” paradigm can function.

Take the Transformative Climate Communities (TCC) Program, a California state program which has delivered 400 units of affordable housing, planted 13,000 trees, installed over 600 solar panels on homes, deployed 26 electric buses, and placed people into approximately 800 jobs—all thanks to the vision and voices of the communities and their local governments who have been at the center of decision-making that impacts their daily lives. The eight communities—notably formerly redlined communities—where this work is taking place previously had an “abundance” mindset, they just needed the right support and government interventions. TCC is successful precisely because it shifted from this abundance mindset and toward a shared prosperity mindset, putting communities in the driver's seat to determine how best to build thriving neighborhoods, fight climate change, and determine their own economic futures.

The challenge before us is to design a government that has new and better tools to scale our progress, from financing mechanisms that generate the revenue necessary to do this work, to governance practices to steer our progress, to, yes, revisiting the laws and regulations that govern our built environment to eliminate those that no longer fit our moment and to update those that require retooling.

Above all, we must focus our attention on building abundance and prosperity where it is hardest to achieve, where decades of disinvestment and a legacy of injustice have locked in poverty and pollution. Otherwise, “abundance” is just a new version of trickle-down economics, which not only never trickled down but continued the grotesque hoarding of wealth and power among the people that already had it to begin with.

# Stronger Together

## THE BENEFITS OF JOINING NONPROFIT NETWORKS

LAURIE MAZUR

Originally published December 2, 2025 in *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*.

These days, many nonprofits are facing existential threats—including the loss of funding or tax-exempt status. Many organizations are turning to nonprofit networks for community, shared expertise, and a unified response to these challenges.

Networks bring together people from organizations with diverse skills and perspectives, inspiring creative thinking and sparking opportunities to share resources for maximum impact. They also provide stability, moral support, and financial aid to leaders and organizations at the forefront of social change.

“The Trump administration is using a divide-and-conquer strategy,” says Robin Katcher, founder of Katcher Consulting. Networks offer a way for nonprofits to band together and present a unified front. Nonprofit leaders can find networks by reaching out to peer organizations and donors or by searching databases including GuideStar or Charity Navigator.

Many networks do not charge membership fees. Others charge on a sliding scale: For example, the Southeast Climate and Energy Network charges an annual fee of \$50 for organizations with budgets under \$150,000, and \$2,500 for those with budgets over \$5 million.

Here are a few valuable benefits of a nonprofit network.

### **Tap into members’ expertise and build partnerships.**

Often, philanthropic funding allows networks to provide services to members at little or no cost. That’s a boon for leaders like Anthony Diaz, executive director of the Newark Water Coalition.

“I’m so in the trenches,” says Diaz, “that sometimes all I can see is the trench.” But after joining the 190-member U.S. Climate Action Network, Diaz can access technical, legal, and tactical expertise to supercharge his work at the local level.

“I don’t have to be the expert in everything,” says Diaz, “because there are people in the network who have studied this or worked in these fields, so partnering with them makes our organization stronger.”

Partnerships within networks are a two-way street, which benefits larger, national organizations as much as frontline groups. Diaz’s group is one of few organizations in the U.S. Climate Action Network that serves people directly, providing safe drinking water to those with lead-contaminated service lines. That connection provides invaluable insight into the concerns and needs of people at the community level—a perspective that is often lacking in policy circles.

Many networks provide grant support to their members as well. For example, when the Trump administration cut funding for climate-related work, the U.S. Climate Action Network stepped up with a rapid-response fund that provides small grants to member organizations and leaders. Those grants have been used to pay for rent, disaster assistance, and back-office functions like accounting and legal advice. While grants of \$5,000 may not be enough to support an organization in the long term, they can serve as a critical stopgap until other funding sources can be secured.

### **Build community around a cause.**

Networks cultivate a powerful sense of belonging and shared identity, which combats the isolation and burnout that can plague nonprofit organizations and leaders. For Analyah Schlaeger dos Santos, who serves as environmental-justice youth program director and global climate-justice coordinator for Minnesota Interfaith Power and Light, the U.S. Climate Action Network is a “movement home,” where members can “get grounded and cover each other’s backs and learn from each other.”

“In difficult times, these connections are what sustain and propel the work forward,” says Shamar Bibbins, managing director of The Kresge Foundation’s Environment Program.

### **CEOs can find peers to serve as sounding boards.**

The community offered by networks is especially helpful for executive directors. Leading an organization can be isolating, says Melissa Gavin, CEO of RE-AMP, a network of Midwestern climate groups. “You can’t talk to your staff about

everything that's going on, you can't always talk to your board about personnel issues, you can't talk about your angst around fundraising and making your budget."

That's why RE-AMP launched an executive directors' peer learning circle a few years back. Participants receive a stipend to hire an executive coach and participate in monthly group calls. They also are assigned a partner who has confronted similar challenges.

"It keeps people in the movement and keeps people from burning out," says Gavin. "People can do almost anything as long as they feel they are not alone."

### **Access immediate aid during a crisis.**

In times of crisis, networks serve as first responders. When Hurricanes Helene and Milton tore through five southern states a year ago, the Southeast Climate and Energy Network leveraged its contacts throughout the region and quickly raised more than \$115,000 for disaster relief.

The network prioritized vulnerable groups that are often overlooked in traditional disaster-recovery efforts, re-granting to partners on the ground to support mutual-aid hubs. In hard-hit areas of western North Carolina, those funds provided hot meals, clean drinking water, and other essential supplies—as well as a mobile micro-grid for emergency power.

Networks respond to political crises as well. When the first Trump administration sought to withhold green cards from immigrants who might require public benefits, advocates realized this "public charge" rule would discourage immigrant families from using benefits to which they were legally entitled.

In response, the National Immigration Law Center and the Center for Law and Social Policy forged the Protecting Immigrant Families Coalition: a network of immigrants' rights and antipoverty organizations. By combining expertise in both realms, the coalition has emerged as a powerful advocate for immigrant families.

Now spanning 44 states, the coalition brings together diverse constituencies: grassroots organizers, policy groups, lawyers, and service providers. Such varied perspectives allow the network to track developments in real time and respond quickly.

"National networks are essential infrastructure and a core part of our grant-making strategy," says Bibbins of the Kresge Foundation. "They enable our grantees to ideate, collaborate, and push the boundaries of innovation."

# The Presidential Power Grab That Should Terrify Every American

TRACI FEIT LOVE

Originally published February 25, 2025 in *Newsweek*.

On Feb. 18, the Trump administration issued an executive order that would strip independence from agencies Congress designed to operate free from presidential control, while declaring the president alone can interpret federal law. Simultaneously, the administration demanded 2.3 million federal employees justify their work to political appointees or be “resigned,” fired military lawyers providing independent legal advice, and dismissed thousands across agencies from Veterans Affairs to the National Park Service.

These actions are at odds with our nation’s system of laws and they must not stand.

As executive director of the nation’s largest grassroots organization of attorneys, I have watched with mounting alarm as each new executive order and action pushes us closer to autocracy. I have a duty to explain why these actions, culminating in the Feb. 18 executive order, cross a line from which our democracy may never recover.

Imagine a country where agencies created by Congress to protect investors, workers, and consumers must submit all their decisions to the White House for approval, where a billionaire political appointee can threaten mass terminations through a weekend email, and where independent regulators must either bend to the president’s will or resign, even when his demands violate clear congressional mandates.

This isn’t some dystopian fiction—it’s exactly what this executive order would create: transforming our constitutional democracy into an elected autocracy where basic protections depend entirely on one person’s whims.

Section 7 of the order declares that all federal employees—including independent agency commissioners appointed to fixed terms by Congress—must follow only the president’s interpretation of any law.

This goes far beyond any previous expansion of executive power by attempting to seize control of independent agencies like the Securities and Exchange Commission and Federal Trade Commission—agencies that Congress deliberately insulated from presidential control to prevent political interference in their oversight of financial markets and fair competition. It’s not just unconstitutional—it’s anti-constitutional, directly contradicting Congress’s constitutional authority to structure the government.

Consider what this could mean in practice:

- When the president orders the Federal Trade Commission to stop investigating his business allies for antitrust violations, enabling monopolistic control over American markets
- When the president directs the Securities and Exchange Commission to ease enforcement of securities laws for favored companies, letting political allies defraud investors with impunity
- When the president commands independent regulatory agencies to rewrite their rules according to his personal interpretation of the law, replacing professional expertise with political loyalty tests

**Here’s what every American needs to know:** our Constitution created three co-equal branches of government because the founders feared concentrated power in any single person’s hands. They had just overthrown a monarch who, like this president, claimed the authority to interpret and enforce laws as he pleased. Now, we face an executive order that would create exactly that kind of unchecked power.

The legal profession now faces its defining moment: will we remain silent while the fundamental principles of our democracy are dismantled? Or will we honor our oath to the Constitution and lead our fellow Americans in defending it?

**For attorneys, the path forward is clear.** We must immediately challenge this and every unconstitutional executive order in every possible forum and support our courageous colleagues who have been bringing cases since week one. We must educate our communities about why this order threatens their fundamental rights and we must unite across political lines to defend the basic principle that no one—not even the president—is above the law.

**But lawyers alone cannot save democracy.** We need every American to understand what's at stake. This isn't about right versus left—it's about preserving the last barriers between American democracy and one-man rule.

The choice before us is stark: either we draw a line in the sand now, or we accept that America's experiment with democracy ends not with a bang, but with a pen stroke. There is no safe middle path, no room for hoping this will resolve itself. As attorneys, we took an oath to defend the Constitution precisely for moments like this, when the entire structure of American democracy hangs in the balance. As citizens, we all bear the burden of ensuring that future generations inherit a democracy, not a dictatorship wrapped in the thin veneer of democratic language.

The time for polite disagreement has passed. This is more than a constitutional crisis—it is an attempt to fundamentally remake our government into an autocracy. Every day we delay brings us closer to where independent watchdogs become instruments of presidential power and democracy's guardrails are irreparably destroyed.

SECTION III

# **Resilient & Equitable Systems**

ENERGY, HEALTH, WATER



# Water Quality Protections Now Depend on State and Local Governments—And Voters

ROYAL C. GARDNER

Originally published January 28, 2025 in *American City & County*.

President Trump promised to ensure that the U.S. has the “cleanest air and water on the planet.” But his administration’s policy blueprint, Project 2025, called for eliminating federal water protections. One particular target is “waters of the United States”—or WOTUS.

If a body of water is classified as a WOTUS, it is protected by the federal Clean Water Act. Project 2025 called for stripping WOTUS protection from wetlands, though these marshes and bogs are critical for water quality and flood control. The U.S. Supreme Court, however, has already delivered on this front.

Shortly after Project 2025 was published, the Supreme Court decided *Sackett v. U.S. Environmental Protection Agency*. In a 5–4 decision, the court definitively declared that the Clean Water Act covered only relatively permanent, standing or continuously flowing bodies of water such as oceans, rivers, streams and lakes. Wetlands were notably absent from that list. The court did not even recognize wetlands as “waters;” rather, in its view, the Clean Water Act covers only those wetlands that have a continuous surface connection to a water that qualifies as a WOTUS, and the wetland must be “indistinguishable” from that body of water.

The court stated that “indistinguishable” means that it is difficult to determine where the “water” ends and the “wetland” begins. Note that this standard has no basis in statute (the term “indistinguishable” does not appear in the Clean Water Act) or science (scientific research demonstrates that even wetlands without a surface connection contribute to the integrity of larger water bodies). Moreover, as a practical matter, almost all wetlands can be delineated and thus distinguished from other waters. Yet “indistinguishable” is what the Supreme Court has decreed.

It is difficult to understate *Sackett’s* effect on Clean Water Act protections for wetlands and other waters. Because only “relatively permanent, standing or

continuously flowing bodies of water” are covered, ephemeral streams—which flow for only short durations after rain or snowmelt—are eliminated. It also calls into question whether jurisdiction exists over intermittent streams, which by definition, are not continuously flowing. The most significant impact will be in the arid West, where more than 80% of streams are ephemeral or intermittent.

The EPA reports that up to 63% of wetlands could lose protection. But this figure is almost certainly an underestimate, because it does not take into account the indistinguishable requirement. Although the EPA may wish to portray the repeated “indistinguishable” references in *Sackett* as mere rhetorical flourishes having no independent utility, the lower courts are disagreeing. For example, in August 2024, a U.S. District Court in Idaho dismissed an EPA enforcement action because the agency had failed to explain how the wetlands were indistinguishable from the river. Similarly, at the end of December 2024, a U.S. District Court in Florida dismissed a wetland enforcement case in part because the wetland was distinguishable from other waterbodies.

An initial analysis applying the indistinguishable test to wetlands in Wisconsin found that nearly 90% would lose protection. Researchers at Stetson University in Florida found that almost all freshwater wetlands in the greater Everglades watershed are no longer WOTUS. A nationwide study by the Environmental Defense Fund revealed consistent results across the country, when taking the indistinguishable requirement into account.

In short, *Sackett* is a near-extinction event for Clean Water Act protection of freshwater wetlands.

What more damage might the incoming Trump administration inflict? It could codify the “indistinguishable” requirement in regulation, but these losses are already locked in. More significant, the Trump EPA could seek to redefine WOTUS to exclude intermittent streams. The first Trump administration considered such a step but ultimately backed down. But the Supreme Court decision in *Sackett* will only embolden the new administration.

In response, clean water advocates and concerned citizens must play both defense and offense.

At the federal level, Congress will be hostile to strengthening federal water quality protections. Here, a defensive posture is required to prevent further erosion, such as eliminating intermittent streams from WOTUS. But the real action moves to the state and local level.

*Sackett* only dealt with the authority of the federal government under the Clean Water Act. It did not touch the authority of state, tribal and local governments to regulate activities affecting waters within their jurisdictions. States

continue to have the general police power to regulate conduct within their borders. Tribes generally have the same authority, and local governments may as well.

Some states, such as Colorado and New York, have enacted legislation to fill some of the gaps. And efforts continue elsewhere, such as in Illinois and New Mexico. But other states, including North Carolina, have moved in the opposite direction, reducing state protections.

Some local governments too have sought to diminish wetland protections. In Manatee County, Fla., the county commission voted to reduce buffer requirements for developers, despite widespread public opposition. In the subsequent election in August 2024, however, five county commissioners were voted out of office, and the new commission is moving to reinstate the wetland protection policy.

As Manatee County demonstrates, the integrity of the nation's waters depends on informed, engaged citizens who vote—and vote in every election, from municipal to county to state to federal.

# Protect Floridians from Deadly Utility Shutoffs

CHERYL HOLDER

Originally published February 11, 2025 in *The Invading Sea*.

Anna Mae faced an impossible choice: either pay her electric bill or pay for her medication. An elderly woman with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and asthma, she came to me because she couldn't afford to refill her inhaler.

Miami was in the grip of a miserable heat wave, and Anna Mae (whose name has been changed to protect her privacy) had been running her air conditioning unit night and day. Now the electric bill was due, and she was in my office looking for help.

For many clinicians, Anna Mae's story is sadly familiar. Many people with fixed or low incomes are still feeling the impacts of post-pandemic inflation and cannot afford to cover their expenses, including energy costs.

As temperatures rise, this budget gap is becoming a matter of life and death. Losing electricity during an extreme weather event, including heat waves, exacerbates the threat to life. We need to consider a more overarching solution to protect patients.

Extreme heat is the deadliest effect of climate change, killing more Americans than hurricanes, floods and tornadoes combined. Worldwide, heat is responsible for nearly a half million fatalities each year. In addition to causing heat exhaustion and heatstroke, extreme heat can worsen health risks from cardiovascular, mental health, respiratory and diabetes-related conditions.

And it's getting worse. The summer of 2024 was the hottest in recorded history, in the hottest year yet. Last July saw eight of the 10 hottest days on record; the other two were in 2023.

In Miami, heat season now runs from May 1 through Oct. 31. The city sees 51 more days where temperatures top 90 degrees than it did 50 years ago. I fear for

my patients, like Anna Mae, who simply cannot afford the air conditioning they need to stay alive in a hotter world.

But there is hope. Last year, a bill passed in Virginia (with bipartisan support) that prevents utility companies from shutting off electricity when temperatures are at or above 92 degrees Fahrenheit and at or below 32 degrees Fahrenheit—protecting community members during the hottest *and* coldest days of the year. Temperature-based shutoff protections exist throughout the South, with states like Texas, Louisiana and Mississippi implementing such policies in the past decade.

Here in Florida, a statewide group called Clean Energy for All (CEFA) has been working to promote similar legislation. The Residential Utility Disconnections bill has been filed in the Florida Senate by Sen. Lori Berman and is soon to be filed in the House of Representatives by Rep. Debra Tendrich. If passed, the shutoff protections would go into effect when the “feels like” temperature (heat index) is forecast to be 90 degrees Fahrenheit or higher, when the temperature is forecast to be below 32 degrees Fahrenheit, or during a governor-issued state of emergency.

Floridians are especially at risk of deadly shutoffs. Before the state government stopped requiring utilities to disclose disconnection data in 2021, we knew that Floridians faced the highest number of shutoffs in the nation. These disconnections leave community members—like the elderly, children, pregnant people, people with preexisting health conditions and those who depend on medical devices—vulnerable to dangerous weather conditions. This bill could offer the Sunshine State life-saving access to energy during the most dangerous days of the year.

This legislation is urgently needed because existing protections aren’t working. The federal Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program provides assistance with energy costs; however, its funding is limited and often runs out in the early part of heat season.

Patients who are very ill, or who depend on medical equipment (like ventilators), can ask their doctor to complete a Serious Medical Condition Certification Form to prevent utility shutoffs, but here too, protection is inadequate. A nationwide doctor shortage means that even eligible patients would struggle to see a doctor within the limited window before an extreme weather event hits.

Moreover, a medical condition is deemed “serious” only if the patient is not stable. That wouldn’t have helped Anna Mae, who was stable while using her inhaler but risked becoming destabilized—and possibly hospitalized—if she lost access to her medicine. Given the enormous personal, social and financial costs

of hospitalization, it's clearly good preventative medicine to make sure that no one has their utilities cut off during a heat wave or other disaster.

### **How can you help?**

Clinicians can try to protect our patients by identifying those in need, using tools like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's CHILL'D OUT vulnerability questionnaire. We can help patients develop their own heat action plans and deploy existing protections at the state and federal level on their behalf.

We can also launch or get involved with existing local outreach efforts. My organization, Florida Clinicians for Climate Action, works with our county's heat task force to inform, prepare and protect residents from heat-related illness. To that end, we educate health care practitioners and reach out to vulnerable populations. As a result of this team effort, Miami-Dade County had a relatively low rate of heat-related emergency department visits in 2023—despite being in the hottest part of the state.

And finally, we can all advocate for comprehensive solutions, like the Residential Utility Disconnections measure. In this way, we can keep Anna Mae—and our own family and neighbors—safe in a dangerously hot world.

# A Yellow Warning

## THIS YEAR'S POLLEN SURGE WAS MORE THAN JUST A NUISANCE

BENJAMIN WIBONELE

Originally published June 4, 2025 in *MedPage Today*.

If you live almost anywhere in the U.S., you've probably noticed it: the dusting of yellow powder on your car, your windowsill, and even your eyelashes. This spring, Americans have been engulfed by an overwhelming wave of pollen—not just an inconvenience, but a historic high.

As both a physician and a lifelong allergy sufferer, I've experienced this season not only through my own congestion and watery eyes, but through the struggles of my wife and patients as well. And I can tell you: something is different this year.

The numbers back it up. Across the country, cities have recorded some of the highest pollen counts in decades, with daily readings soaring well above what used to be considered extreme. In major metro areas from Atlanta to New York to Los Angeles, pollen counts have exceeded thresholds that send emergency departments and urgent care centers into overdrive. For instance, in mid-March, metro Atlanta saw multiple days where the pollen count exceeded 4,000—a level that, just a few years ago, would have been considered almost apocalyptic for allergy sufferers. Pollen season is starting earlier, lasting longer, and hitting harder.

This year, my wife—who has never needed more than over-the-counter allergy medications—found herself unable to sleep due to sinus pressure and a persistent cough. I had to prescribe her stronger antihistamines and even a short course of steroids just to help her get through the week. As a physician, I've seen the same story echoed in my clinic, where patients with well-controlled seasonal allergies are now showing up with asthma flare-ups, sinus infections, and fatigue.

This isn't just a bad allergy year. It's the new normal, shaped by climate change.

Studies have shown that rising global temperatures and increased carbon dioxide levels are supercharging the plants that produce pollen—especially trees, grasses, and ragweed. Warmer winters and earlier springs extend the growing

season, while higher CO<sub>2</sub> levels act like fertilizer, prompting plants to grow faster and release more pollen. It's not just more pollen, it's more potent pollen. That's why people who've never suffered from allergies before are now experiencing symptoms, and why long-time sufferers are seeing their medications fall short.

According to a 2021 study published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, pollen seasons in North America are now starting 20 days earlier and lasting 10 days longer than they did in 1990, with pollen concentrations increasing by over 20%. In regions across the U.S., from the Midwest to the South and coastal areas, these changes are becoming alarmingly routine.

Allergy season is becoming a climate health crisis. What used to be a manageable few weeks in spring now stretches into summer, impacting our quality of life, productivity, and even safety. For people with asthma or chronic respiratory illness, the consequences can be life-threatening.

As a doctor, I prepare for allergy season every year. But this year has felt like fighting a wildfire with a garden hose. And as a husband, watching my wife struggle to breathe at night and lose energy during the day has been heartbreaking. Our 5-minute walks in the neighborhood turned into wheezy slogs. The windows in our house stayed shut despite the beautiful weather outside. And our toddler? We're already thinking about what his allergy future might look like.

Climate change is often talked about in abstract terms—melting glaciers, rising sea levels, distant disasters. But for Americans, it's settling in our lungs and sinuses. It's coating our homes and cars. It's keeping our children inside and turning simple outdoor activities into respiratory risks.

We need to address this at every level. Patients should stay informed about pollen counts, use HEPA filters indoors, and see their physicians early when symptoms escalate. But we also need policy-level action. Expanding green space in urban areas with low-allergen trees, investing in public health resources for allergy and asthma care, and supporting climate-resilient infrastructure are crucial steps. Most importantly, doctors and nurses—who are among the most-trusted professionals in the U.S.—have a critical role to play. We must acknowledge the root cause—climate change—and advocate for comprehensive environmental policies that reduce carbon emissions.

As we brace for hotter summers and more erratic weather patterns nationwide, we must see this pollen surge not as an isolated event, but as a yellow warning flag—a sign that the climate is changing around us in real time, and our health is already paying the price.

This spring's pollen storm was historic but if we don't act, it won't be the last. And next time, we may not just be sneezing. We may be gasping for air.

# Energy Bills Are Crushing Low-Income Families

## HERE'S HOW STATE AND LOCAL POLICYMAKERS CAN HELP

ROXANA AYALA

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High prices for housing, food and other essentials are top of mind for many Americans. Energy costs, which have risen along with others in recent years, are a big part of the problem. While state and local policymakers can't do much about the price of eggs, they can lower energy bills for their most vulnerable constituents. With a new administration that has pledged to roll back energy efficiency programs that reduce utility bills, actions taken by state and local government to address energy costs are more important than ever.

Those actions are badly needed. Recent research from the American Council for an Energy-Efficient Economy (ACEEE) shows that a quarter of low-income households in the U.S. spend more than 15% of their income on energy bills, compared to the overall median of just 2.9%. Black and Hispanic families carry the heaviest energy burdens.

In some metropolitan areas, it's even worse. Across both low-income renters and homeowners, the Baltimore area has the highest energy burdens among the regions ACEEE analyzed, with one in four paying more than a quarter of their income on energy bills. In Boston, New York, and Rochester, N.Y., metropolitan areas, energy burdens for these low-income households top 20%. And in San Jose, low-income homeowners spend an astonishing 31% of their income on energy bills.

Crushing energy burdens mean that families face impossible choices: should we refill that prescription or keep the lights on? Should we turn up the heat—or eat?

Part of the problem is that low-income families are more likely to live in older and less energy-efficient homes that have inadequate insulation, drafty air leaks, and outdated heating and cooling systems. These households are also least able to afford the upfront costs of weatherization and efficient appliances.

There are a variety of approaches that states and cities can take. They can offer low-cost, energy-saving appliances (including heating or cooling systems) or other energy efficiency upgrades. They can collect and analyze data on households' housing characteristics, income and energy expenditures to identify areas with disproportionately high energy burdens for more targeted assistance. State and local governments can build on the success of utility-run programs that offer rebates for installation of a range of energy efficiency products and offer free energy audits.

Local governments and utilities are working to reduce energy use while preserving housing affordability. For example, Fort Collins, Colorado's municipal utility administers a one-stop shop for energy efficiency upgrades for owner- and renter-occupied single-family homes. The program offers streamlined energy assessments and on-bill financing that allows households to pay for improvements like insulation, air sealing, and new windows, without the burden of upfront costs.

There's more that policymakers and utility regulators can do. Several states have adopted "percentage of income payment plans" (PIPPs), which cap monthly utility payments for income-eligible households at an affordable percentage of a household's income—often 6%. These programs got started in the 1980s and have now been adopted by 10 states.

Debt forgiveness is another option. For example, the New York Public Service Commission forgave more than \$1 billion in energy bill debt for extremely low-income households in 2021 and 2022. The commission also created an Energy Affordability Guarantee—essentially a PIPP—that limits energy bills for 20,000 low-income households.

Increasingly, states are combining cost relief with energy efficiency. New York's EmPower<sup>NY</sup> program links debt forgiveness and income-based limits on energy bills with energy efficiency and electrification investments. And Virginia—the latest state to offer a PIPP for low-income households—requires participants to reduce electricity consumption through weatherization or energy efficiency programs.

Right now, energy costs are high, and winter is still here. But there's much that policymakers can do to ease the burdens of their low-income community members. Reducing energy bills is critical, and it should be paired with energy efficiency to ensure that households in marginalized communities are not left in inefficient, uncomfortable and unsafe homes with needlessly higher utility bills. Policymakers can provide both short-term relief and long-lasting energy affordability for struggling families.

# Mental Health Is Melting

IFEANYI OLELE

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Imagine your patient describing how oppressive the heat feels in their neighborhood. The pavement radiates heat, and there are no trees in sight to offer shade. The humidity feels like a weight on their body. Inside their home it's no better, failing to offer refuge from the inferno. Perhaps they have an inefficient air conditioner or fan, or none at all. Or maybe they forgo air conditioning because they can't afford to pay their soaring electric bills.

This is not just your patient complaining about their life; this is psychological distress laid bare.

## The Impact of Heat on Emotional and Psychological Well-being

We know that heat is the deadliest climate impact, killing more Americans each year than floods, hurricanes, and tornadoes combined. But the mental health impacts of heat are less well-known.

As a psychiatrist who has worked in low-income neighborhoods in Washington, D.C. and Maryland, I have seen the mental health effects of heat firsthand. Rising temperatures can fuel anxiety, sleep disturbances, restlessness, and emotional exhaustion. Heat stress can intensify already present psychiatric symptoms for those struggling with disorders such as bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, and schizophrenia. The heat may be more than just uncomfortable for your patients; it can be destabilizing.

This is not just a public health issue, but a mental health emergency that has been driven by history, policy, and design.

## Why Are Some Communities Hotter than Others?

The emergency is acute in "urban heat islands," which experience significantly higher temperatures compared to surrounding regions. Many of these areas are found in low-income and historically marginalized communities.

These heat patterns are not by accident. Unfortunately, they reflect historical systemic disinvestment, discriminatory housing policies, and environmental neglect. Racist practices such as redlining left Black neighborhoods with more concrete and fewer green spaces, so those neighborhoods are often much hotter than more affluent areas. And, as climate change turns up the heat, those neighborhoods will suffer even more. As psychiatric providers, we may not fully realize how these policies can continue to shape the lived experiences of our patients in these communities.

Extreme heat can jeopardize the mental health of our patients living in urban heat islands. Elevated temperatures can lead to increased stress, aggression, cognitive impairment, and anxiety. Excessive nighttime heat can disrupt sleep patterns. One study found that a 1° C increase in monthly average temperature correlated with a 0.7% increase in suicide rates in U.S. counties. Another study examined the association between hot days and substance-related suicides in British Columbia, Canada, revealing that heat exposure significantly increased the risk of suicide via self-poisoning. If extreme heat can bother an emotionally stable person, imagine how it can negatively impact a person already dealing with trauma, financial stress, and moderate-to-severe psychiatric conditions.

### **Short-Term Fixes Versus Long-Term Solutions**

Purchasing air conditioners (AC) for residents in affected communities is a necessary short-term fix. However, it is not a long-term solution for heat exposure and climate injustice. The price of staying cool with AC can become a financial burden due to rising electrical bills; in fact, Black households already face energy burdens 43% higher than white households. For many families, running the AC can mean cutting back on groceries, medications, or gas. That choice creates a kind of emotional taxation and constant calculation under pressure. And what happens when the power goes out during a heat wave? Box fans and window units are just band-aids for a bigger problem.

These stressors do not show up on intake forms but may show up in our patients presenting as overwhelmed, dysregulated, and exhausted. We need long-term, climate-informed mental health solutions. The good news is that we are not powerless: intentional investments can yield meaningful solutions.

## **How Can Communities and Mental Health Professionals Help?**

Local government leadership can invest in tree-planting programs in historically redlined and heat-burdened zip codes. A 2019 study of 97 U.S. cities found that urban tree cover helps avoid 245–346 deaths annually. Urban areas with sufficient tree cover also prevent some 100,000 heat-related doctor visits per year. In addition to tree-planting programs, there should be investment in heat island solutions, such as cool pavements and green and cool roofs.

We, as providers, should advocate for public health policies to view climate threats as mental health risks. This would provide cause for local health departments to train and equip us with additional skills and education to serve our patients in environmentally vulnerable communities. Mental health professionals should be part of resilience planning and serve as frontline responders to heat events, similar to the support given during floods and fires.

Psychiatric providers should also be included in resilience planning at the city and county level. We can assist in shaping solutions that integrate emotional support with environmental adaptation. For example, city and county officials can invest in resilience hubs in the hottest and most under-resourced neighborhoods. These facilities can offer cool air and emotional support during heat waves.

Mental health is melting. It's past time we treat climate change not only as an environmental issue, but as a threat to the mind, body, and spirit. Imagine residents of former urban heat islands enjoying shaded areas and cool air during summer heatwaves; that is climate justice. Proper resources for vulnerable communities can contribute to fewer medical and psychiatric emergencies, lower energy costs, and less discomfort in extreme heat. Climate justice isn't just about keeping places cool; it is about restoring dignity and peace of mind to our vulnerable patients.

# Arizona Town Fears Becoming a Clean Energy Sacrifice Zone

BRIAN PELLOT

Originally published July 29, 2025 in *Earth Island Journal*.

Ben Villagran lives on a picturesque ranch in the foothills of Southern Arizona's Patagonia Mountains. Two years ago, trucks started rumbling past.

"It doesn't end, bro. It's heavy duty. At 3 a.m. I see them up there. The light floods my bedroom. I put a blanket over my window and soundproofed my house, but it's not enough. This place is ruined," says Villagran, who works in the construction industry.

"Them" are the truckers from South32, a \$10 billion Australian mining and metals company with a spotty environmental record. "Up there" is South32's Hermosa project, a mining site rich in zinc and manganese, both federally designated as "critical minerals" for the nation's clean energy transition—and its "defense industrial base." "This place" is Villagran's ancestral home and the wider sky islands ecosystem, a biodiversity hotspot.

Residents in downstream Patagonia worry South32's industrial mining operation will ruin their water supply, starve native flora and fauna, and kill the fragile mountain ecology. They are concerned manganese processing could coat the region in hazardous dust, as it has around South32's Gemco manganese mine in Australia, and bring Parkinson's-like symptoms with its plume. They fear their home is becoming a sacrifice zone.

South 32 began developing the Hermosa project back in 2018, after purchasing it from Arizona Mining Co. They started drilling tunnels and dewatering the mountain in 2023 and expect to begin mining operations in 2027. President Pat Risner says mining the zinc-lead-silver deposit at the site will "reduce America's reliance on foreign countries and transform the local economy. It's a win for Arizona and the nation."

Not for Patagonia, says Joni Stellar, board chair of Patagonia Area Resource Alliance (PARA), a community-driven nonprofit that works to protect the

Patagonia Mountains and local waters and wildlife from mining projects. “We need to transition to renewable energy, but we need to do it wisely,” Stellar says. “Mining in a biodiversity hotspot and a town’s watershed is not wise.”

The Patagonia Mountains, a small mountain range spanning only 15 miles, are home to more than 300 species of birds, 600 species of native bees, 300 types of butterflies and moths, and 100 threatened, endangered, and sensitive species, according to the U.S. Forest Service and Fish and Wildlife Service. The town of Patagonia sits in one of the most mining-friendly jurisdictions in the world, and more than 100 old mine sites pockmark the surrounding mountains. Many continue to leak toxic sludge.

Local residents founded PARA in 2011 to protect the Patagonia and Sonoita Creek Watershed from further destruction by modern industrialized mining. To their dismay, South32 has already begun pumping, treating, and discharging groundwater into Harshaw Creek, a normally dry creek bed that flows toward Patagonia, on to Sonoita Creek, and into the Santa Cruz River. Like many creeks in the region, Harshaw already contains hazardous arsenic, boron, manganese, and lead from legacy mining operations.

“The constant flow of water is pushing those heavy metals towards town. We’re sitting ducks for having our groundwater withdrawn and polluted,” Stellar says.

Steven H. Emerman, a groundwater and mining expert who served as an expert witness in PARA’s 2022 appeal against an aquifer protection permit given to South32 by the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality, says this phenomenon has a name. “It’s called the chemical time bomb,” he says. “Contaminants could be attached to stream sediments, but if you introduce underground water to the creek, they could flow to Patagonia and infiltrate the aquifer.”

Residents are also concerned about flooding. South32’s permit allows up to 6.5 million gallons of treated groundwater to be discharged each day. Current levels being discharged from the site, though far below this upper threshold, are already impacting roads according to Astral, a community organizer who leads cycle tours in the region and who asked to be referred to by this name. “Everything is changing, but the main thing we’re seeing is the water,” Astral says. “When I take groups out, we now have as many as 14 water crossings, some a foot deep. Before there were seasonally maybe two crossings. Anybody who needs access to the land is affected.”

A promotional video by South32 says by the time the Hermosa project’s discharged groundwater reaches the Sonoita Creek Bridge on the edge of town “the water level would rise across all scenarios by only a fraction of an inch.”

“We call this the ‘Don’t worry, little girl’ video,” Stellar says. “It’s absurd. Saturating Harshaw Creek with perpetual flow eliminates this major drainage’s capacity to absorb precipitation during heavy rain events, making flooding more likely.”

South32 says the Hermosa project could create “up to 900 good-paying jobs and support investment in the community,” but at what cost to the local ecosystem and the region’s existing nature-based economy? Mountain biking, horseback riding, hiking, birdwatching, and other ecotourism activities paired with conservation, restoration, and preservation supported 779 jobs and contributed \$31.1 million in county GDP and \$76.6 million in sales to Santa Cruz County’s economy in 2019 according to a University of Arizona study.

“These two economies are in direct competition,” Stellar says.

Villagran used to camp and hike in the hills above his home where miners now drill. “Before, you used to walk a couple of miles and see deer. Now you don’t even see a squirrel out there. They’ve destroyed the whole area,” he says.

South32’s promotional video assures viewers, “Based on biological studies in the area, we don’t anticipate that wildlife would be negatively affected.” The company’s website says it is “committed to protecting wildlife and biodiversity” and “work[s] hard to be responsible stewards of the environment.” Elsewhere it touts its corporate social responsibility commitments.

Tribal relations? Check. Community investment? Check. Sustainability? Check.

Since 2019, South32 has awarded nearly \$1.2 million to more than 130 local organizations via the South32 Hermosa Community Fund. Grantees include the Girl Scouts of Southern Arizona, Santa Cruz Elementary School District #28, and the Boys & Girls Club of Santa Cruz County. The company sponsors everything from bicycle races to spelling bees, and company representatives hand out balloon animals and toy miner’s helmets at local events.

“This isn’t philanthropy, it’s clever marketing to children. And much of it’s happening without parents’ knowledge or permission,” PARA wrote in its August 2024 newsletter.

“[But the] money hasn’t blinded our town council at all,” Stellar says, citing a recent survey by the town planning committee that showed 85 percent of Patagonia residents are worried about the mine. “They understand it’s an attempt to buy their favor, and it isn’t working.”

By any math, \$1.2 million is a drop in the bucket for South32. Last year the company invested \$2.16 billion to “develop the zinc-lead-silver deposit” at Hermosa and announced receiving federal grants of \$166 million from the U.S.

Department of Energy and \$20 million from the Department of Defense for its manganese operations.

“The 800-pound gorilla is getting all the breaks and walking all over us,” Stellar says. “We’ve become a sacrifice zone.”

According to Ryan Juskus, assistant professor at the University of Notre Dame’s Institute for Social Concerns, the term “sacrifice zone” often emerges when “environmental harms are concentrated in some places [ostensibly] to protect the environmental health and sustainability of other places.”

Conservationists reject the concept as morally invalid. “Even if we say we need these minerals for energy transition, this whole idea of a sacrifice zone—that ecosystems and communities have to be sacrificed for some ‘greater good’—is pretty ugly,” Emerman said.

Ugly but not uncommon. Global attempts to transition to a less harmful, renewable energy future means the demand for minerals that are critical for renewable energy technologies like solar panels, wind turbines, and electric vehicles is ever on the rise. According to UN Trade and Development, there are currently at least 110 new mining projects worldwide working to meet this growing demand. (And that’s just a tiny fraction of the hundreds of thousands of mines extracting all kinds of minerals across the world.) To many, the environmental and socio-cultural damage such mining causes is an acceptable cost.

A past president of the Geological Society of America, for instance, once wrote this in an online forum: “I accept the degradation of part of our environment for the betterment of the whole to get sufficient energy production to keep our society functioning, and bring health, electricity, and better living conditions to the rest of the world. ... Environment will necessarily be lost. Landscapes, seascapes, and sight lines all.” (Emerman shared this quote in a 2023 webinar on “the myths of clean mining.”)

But such arguments offer little comfort to those living near mining sites.

Back on Harshaw Road, dust clouds Villagran’s view of the mountains. Constant noise and light pollution bring sleepless nights and anxiety.

“I moved out here to relax. Now I hide inside my house. There’s no privacy. I’m out in the woods and have more traffic than Interstate 40,” Villagran said. “There’s no peace anymore, man. They’re stepping all over me. It’s like they’re saying, ‘We’re the billion-dollar company. Let him eat dust.’”

# A Heated Discussion

## MENOPAUSE, CLIMATE CHANGE, AND THE ENVIRONMENT

KEISHA R. CALLINS

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*“Is it hot, or is it just me?”*

It’s a question that perimenopausal, menopausal, and postmenopausal women frequently ask themselves and those nearby. As our world is transformed by climate change and extreme weather, the answer could be both—you *and* your environment.

It is getting hotter: 2024 was the hottest year in recorded history, followed only by 2023. And emerging research suggests that extreme heat and other climate change impacts can affect the health and well-being of menopausal women. While more research is urgently needed, clinicians would be wise to consider climate impacts as they diagnose and treat patients going through menopause.

The systemic hormonal alterations of menopause are part of a natural and normal process that usually occurs around age 50, along with the cornerstone cessation of the menstrual cycle for 12 consecutive months. Menopause manifests in classic symptoms that range from barely noticeable to debilitating. While it is usually triggered by diminishing female hormones, this climacteric period can also be induced by medications such as Leuprolide (Lupron) and Tamoxifen (Nolvadex), surgical removal of the ovaries, or radiation and chemotherapy.

Among the most problematic symptoms of menopause are vasomotor changes such as hot flashes and night sweats, which can affect up to 79% of women; sleep disturbances including insomnia and night awakenings (40–60%); anxiety and depression (15–50%); and genitourinary issues including vaginal discomfort, urinary symptoms, and painful intercourse (40–54%). Nearly two thirds of menopausal women report cognitive symptoms, such as “brain fog.”

Extreme heat and other climate impacts can exacerbate these symptoms. For those struggling with insomnia, higher temperatures can worsen already poor sleep quality. And of course, poor-quality sleep can cause a wide range of mental and physical health problems.

Climate change exerts negative effects on mental health through direct pathways, such as the trauma of natural disasters, and less-direct pathways, such as impacts on housing or livelihood. Especially when combined with the hormonal changes of menopause, these stressors can amplify the risk of mental health challenges. And “brain fog,” which manifests as problems with memory, focus, and concentration, can increase vulnerability and decrease the ability to cope with environmental changes.

While climate-related changes in the genitourinary symptoms of menopause have been less studied to date, there appears to be a potential effect of heat on the vaginal microbiome which could modulate the lack of estrogen on the vaginal epithelium.

As the planet warms and extreme heat becomes more common, rising temperatures may act as a core stressor for women in the menopausal transition. And while exposure to extreme heat is partly a matter of geography—it’s more of a problem in Atlanta than in Anchorage—it is also determined by the ability to access and afford the means to combat extreme temperatures, such as air conditioning. Clinicians should consider seasonal fluctuations and socioeconomic factors, as well as environmental ones, when treating patients in the menopausal transition.

In the United States, approximately 6,000 women enter menopause each day, about 2.2 million each year. While menopause remains under-studied and under-addressed, it is known to be a vulnerable period which can have significant impacts on women’s health and well-being. It is likely that those impacts will be exacerbated by climate change. That means health professionals should consider climate change when treating women throughout the menopausal transition while addressing their unique needs. And, given the far-reaching impacts of climate change on public health, we must lend our support to multidimensional efforts to mitigate climate impacts, and advance collective action to integrate climate resilience strategies in our communities.

# Thermal Energy Networks Are Helping Cities Take Back Control of Their Energy Futures

JOHANNA PARTIN

Originally published August 19, 2025 in *Next City*.

At a business park under development in northwest Colorado, the town of Hayden is revolutionizing its energy system by delivering low-cost heating and cooling to businesses through an innovative, fossil fuel-free energy system that is locally owned.

Hayden is wresting control of its energy future thanks to thermal energy networks, or TENs, a state-of-the-art clean energy solution growing in popularity across U.S. cities. Unlike gas furnaces and water heaters, TENs use thermal resources—such as waste heat, lakes, rivers and the Earth’s underground temperature, along with a network of interconnected pipes, to efficiently heat and cool entire neighborhoods without fossil fuels.

Already, 12 states have passed legislation authorizing or enabling TENs projects, helping cities and towns gain democratic control over their energy systems while meeting climate goals.

## TENs in the Trump era

While the recently passed federal budget bill includes several setbacks for cities and clean energy, there is some good news. The bill preserves two key provisions that support local ownership of TENs, so local governments can maintain control as they pursue a cleaner, more democratic energy future.

First, the bill maintains Direct Pay, a mechanism that allows cities, which are typically tax-exempt entities, to receive the full value of clean energy tax credits as a direct payment from the federal government. This provision enables municipalities to directly benefit from federal incentives without relying on complex tax equity financing.

Second, the bill upholds the 30% federal Investment Tax Credit for commercial clean-energy projects—including utility-scale solar, wind, standalone storage, nuclear, hydropower, and importantly, ground-source geothermal. To be eligible, these facilities must satisfy key requirements such as prevailing wage and apprenticeship rules and begin construction by 2033.

Together, these provisions create momentum for cities to invest in clean energy infrastructure. And TENs present a particularly promising path forward. A recent report I co-authored outlines how TENs present a unique opportunity to advance energy democracy: the process of empowering local governments and communities to control, govern and benefit from their energy system.

### **Local control, local benefits**

By owning their energy systems, local governments can control their energy future, lower energy costs and create well-paying jobs. TENs allow cities and towns to circumvent their reliance on investor-owned utilities while meeting climate and energy goals.

Nonprofit agencies, public-nonprofit partnerships and community-owned initiatives are developing TENs projects across the U.S. In Chicago's South Side, for example, the environmental justice group Blacks in Green is developing a community-driven TENs project that will provide clean, affordable energy to more than 200 households. The City of West Union, Iowa, owns a TEN which it leases to a user-run nonprofit LLC to operate, serving 12 buildings and delivering significant energy savings over natural gas.

These cases show that the benefits of energy systems don't have to go to fossil fuel companies—instead, they can be directed straight to local governments and communities. And with greater control of energy systems comes greater benefits for local governments.

Municipalities have long felt that they had little oversight over many energy decisions, often being at the mercy of for-profit utility corporations. That's starting to change as locally owned thermal energy networks allow cities to chart their own energy future in a democratic way. That means a focus on ensuring that the energy infrastructure aligns with community priorities and serves the public instead of corporate interests.

For example, to meet its 2030 carbon neutrality goal, the town of Ann Arbor, Michigan, is exploring a thermal network that will serve 262 households, an elementary school, and nearby businesses via a newly created municipally owned Sustainable Energy Utility.

Local control of TENs also allows governments to pass along the economic benefits of clean energy technologies directly to their residents. These systems are nearly six times more efficient than gas equipment, translating into lower operational costs and cost savings for consumers. Upgrading to clean heating and cooling also reduces reliance on fossil fuels that are subject to volatile price spikes, especially during peak demand periods.

The transition to TENs also creates a need for skilled jobs in engineering, construction and systems maintenance, providing new clean energy jobs and a just transition for impacted fossil fuel workers.

Locally owned projects can prioritize hiring from underrepresented groups in the clean energy sector, supporting workforce diversity. Local initiatives can also support workforce training programs in communities that have historically been overlooked.

## **Power to the people**

Of course, realizing these benefits requires addressing barriers that currently stifle local control. We need to reform pro-gas mandates that lead to wasteful spending on costly, polluting fossil fuels and prevent communities from accessing clean energy technologies. Local governments must be able to tap into financing and grants to lower the upfront costs of TENs development.

Equally important, local governments must share solutions and work with technical experts, policymakers and community organizations to address gaps in knowledge, community engagement and planning.

These challenges may seem daunting, but the benefits of locally controlled energy systems are worth it. The ability to make decisions by and for the community, to secure lower energy costs, and to create a pipeline to clean energy careers will be best achieved when cities have control and ownership of the clean energy systems of the future.

The clean energy transition is not just about swapping renewables for fossil fuels. It's about who controls and benefits from energy systems.

TENs are about giving power back to the people—not just the kind that heats and cools your home, but the kind that strengthens our democracy.

# Katrina Was Bigger Than a Hurricane

AUDREY L. TANKSLEY

Originally published August 25, 2025 in *The Progressive*.

When Hurricane Katrina touched down near New Orleans twenty years ago on August 29, 2005, I was just beginning my journey as a first-year medical student. I remember watching the footage of families stranded on rooftops, hospitals submerged, and the bodies of people and pets floating in the floodwaters.

I had not yet developed the language of public health or trauma-informed care, but I felt that something bigger than a hurricane had happened. I didn't know then that my future patients—many of them plagued by poverty, violence, and environmental injustice—would share similar pathology to the survivors.

Today, as an addiction medicine physician, I care for patients whose lives are shaped by trauma, displacement, and loss. Many of them were children at the time of the hurricane. As adults now, they speak of depression, abandonment, and the silence of systems that failed to ask how they were doing. “They just wanted us to survive,” said one of the interviewees in the 2022 documentary film “Katrina’s Babies.” But surviving isn’t the same as healing.

Katrina was not only a climate catastrophe. It was also a mental health emergency. In its wake, studies revealed spikes in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and substance use among evacuees. The disaster helped accelerate the overdose epidemic, a public health crisis that rages on to this day.

Clinics and recovery centers were destroyed. Providers were displaced. Support systems disappeared. A study of low-income mothers affected by Hurricane Katrina found that nearly half met the criteria for PTSD and twelve years later; one in six still exhibited symptoms that met criteria for the diagnosis. Another study linked displacement to increased drug use among survivors. Parents, workers, and youth struggle to cope in the absence of care.

And the disasters keep coming. Wildfires in California. Heat waves in Phoenix. Hurricanes in North Carolina. As climate disasters become more frequent, so does the trauma.

In poorly resourced communities, especially Black and brown ones, disaster recovery often means rebuilding roads before rebuilding lives. When trauma is untreated, substances become survival tools. When care is disrupted, recovery becomes unreachable.

If we are serious about ending the overdose crisis, we must prepare for trauma the way we prepare for storms. That means funding long-term, culturally grounded behavioral health services, embedding addiction and mental health professionals into disaster response teams. We must ensure access to medication-assisted treatment and harm-reduction tools, listening to and uplifting community wisdom in recovery planning.

This year, the twentieth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina falls just two days before International Overdose Awareness Day (August 31), and the kick-off of National Recovery Month in September. It's more than symbolic. It's a reminder that climate trauma and addiction are intertwined, and recovery must be intersectional.

"Katrina's Babies" reminds us that the children of that storm are now adults, many raising families, working, grieving, and striving. Some are still fighting for stability. And some are gone.

As a young medical student, I learned that healing takes more than medicine. As a physician today, I know it takes justice.

Let's not wait for the next disaster to act. The levees may have broken twenty years ago, but our obligation to rebuild with care, dignity, and equity remains.

# Make America Healthy Again?

## LOOK TO THE STATES

SUSAN KAPLAN

Originally published September 22, 2025 in *Governing*.

Some of Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s plans to improve the nation's health are based on solid evidence. His observation about children's increased rates of chronic disease is correct, as are some of the likely contributors he points to, such as pesticides and microplastics.

However, the Health and Human Services secretary appears unable or unwilling to implement plans to address that issue. While he previously criticized the country's "chemical-industrial agriculture" model, RFK Jr. has not proposed actions to reduce pesticides in food. In fact, he recently gave assurances to industry representatives that backpedaled on his past statements. And the Environmental Protection Agency, which has the primary authority to reduce pesticide use, has been approving new pesticides and aiming to bring back others that had been banned or restricted, like dicamba.

But policymakers at the state level aren't waiting for federal action. Across a wide political spectrum, lawmakers—shored up by concerned parents—are making significant progress.

The National Caucus of Environmental Legislators reports, for example, that so far in 2025 lawmakers in 37 states—from Alabama to Iowa to New Jersey—have proposed legislation aimed at reducing perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl substances, or PFAS. Added to items from cookware to firefighting foam and known as "forever chemicals" due to their persistence in the environment, PFAS are linked with a range of serious health problems.

There are many more examples of state action across the country and across political perspectives. Arkansas, for instance, now requires warning labels on hair relaxer products that contain certain toxic chemicals.

This action at the state level is not new. For several decades, Congress has been gridlocked on environmental health protections, while lobbying and lawsuits have halted most regulatory actions. To fill these gaps, some statehouses have taken up the slack—and this pattern is growing.

State-led efforts have appeal across the political spectrum. For those who dislike federal intrusion into local matters, this movement prioritizes the preferences of states' residents. For those troubled by the inadequacy of federal protections, state action offers an alternate route to protecting communities from pollution and toxic chemicals.

States that are starting to take steps in this direction can learn from successful policies elsewhere. When it comes to protecting children from pesticides, Texas was already in the lead, with a farsighted law that requires every school district to implement policies and practices to reduce pesticide use. It girds this mandate with extensive education, technical assistance and enforcement.

Massachusetts' Toxics Use Reduction Act requires industrial facilities that manufacture, process or otherwise use certain toxic chemicals to report their use and develop strategies to reduce harm. As with Texas' pesticide law, a partnership among state agencies, a university and industry ensures that the latest know-how is developed and applied.

State efforts to protect their residents' health are by no means limited to regulating harmful chemicals. In Tennessee, representatives of 24 state agencies, departments and commissions that impact health—from environment, conservation and agriculture to education and human services—meet regularly to get to know each other's work and identify opportunities for collaboration.

A leading example of what is known as "health in all policies," Tennessee's effort breaks down silos that are often found in government. Cross-departmental collaboration aims to coordinate services for food, housing and transit. Transportation staff work with health officials, so opportunities for safe walking and bicycling are included in road planning.

Regional efforts are on the rise too. When a group of states that share climate and culture join forces, they can accomplish more than they can singly. The Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative of northeastern and mid-Atlantic states has successfully reduced warming emissions through a structure in which participants share resources, achieving greater efficiency and cost-effectiveness. And the Southeast Regional Partnership for Planning and Sustainability brings together environmental and military officials from six states to sustain both natural resources and national defense assets in the region. The program has leveraged

private funding to protect and restore more than 1.3 million acres of land while preserving mission-critical infrastructure and capabilities.

Many of these best-practice policies have been evaluated, so information on outcomes and lessons learned is available. Common contributors to successful state initiatives include environmental health education and analyses that examine a broad range of costs and benefits of policies.

RFK Jr. talks a good game about “making America healthy again.” But governors and state legislators are actually getting it done.

# Government Shutdown Could Worsen Environmental Safety and Public Health in Hard-Hit Communities

SACOBY M. WILSON

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When the federal government shuts down, images of furloughed workers and closed museums and monuments dominate the headlines. But hidden beneath these surface disruptions are quieter, more insidious consequences: weakened public health safeguards and heightened risks for communities of color already facing disproportionate burdens of pollution and climate hazards. For these “environmental justice” (EJ) communities, a shutdown is more than a bureaucratic inconvenience; it can be a direct threat to their health, safety, and dignity. That is why Congress and state leaders must keep environmental safeguards in place, even when the government shuts down.

EJ communities are defined primarily by their disproportionate burden of environmental hazards (including landfills, incinerators, power plants, refineries, and industrial animal operations); their disproportionate exposure to toxicants (air pollution, contaminated water); and their differential health impacts (high rates of asthma, stroke, heart disease, cancer, and lower life expectancy). These disparities resulted from centuries of racist policy and practice that concentrated industry in Black communities. As a result, Black Americans today are 75 percent more likely than others to live near facilities that produce hazardous waste. And, across all regions and income levels, people of color breathe more particulate air pollution.

Federal agencies such as the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and Department of Health and

Human Services (HHS) serve as the frontline guardians against toxic exposures, emerging environmental health risks, and disasters like chemical spills or wildfires. During a shutdown, many of these agencies are forced to halt “non-essential” activities. That category often includes inspections at hazardous facilities, enforcement of pollution permits, monitoring of air and water quality, and community engagement initiatives.

These interruptions create gaps in oversight at precisely the facilities most likely to harm vulnerable neighborhoods (refineries in fenceline communities, concentrated animal feeding operations near rural towns, or incinerators adjacent to low-income housing). Without inspectors on the ground, violations can go undetected, and small problems can fester into large-scale health emergencies.

### **Public Health at Risk**

At the CDC, shutdowns often stall surveillance programs that track environmental health indicators, from asthma hospitalizations to food and vector-borne disease outbreaks tied to climate change. When the machinery of environmental governance slows down, pollution continues to accumulate, diseases continue to spread, and contaminated food continues to circulate.

Shutdowns do not suspend environmental hazards. Air pollution monitors do not stop measuring elevated levels of particulate matter; water systems do not stop carrying lead or forever chemicals like PFAS. What halts is the government’s ability to respond.

Laboratory testing, data reporting, and public alerts may be delayed or paused entirely. For families living in asthma corridors along highways, or agricultural workers exposed to pesticides, this means vital early-warning systems go silent when they are needed most.

In previous shutdowns, programs like PulseNet and the Foodborne Diseases Active Surveillance Network faced delays in identifying and responding to outbreaks of diseases such as *E. coli*, *Listeria*, and *Salmonella*. Even short lapses in reporting can mean the difference between a localized issue and a nationwide public health crisis. Delays in tracking and response create blind spots in our public health system, leaving communities without the timely information they need to protect themselves.

Shutdowns also deepen inequities and have a disproportionate impact on EJ communities. Wealthier communities often have local resources, advocacy networks, and private testing capacity to fill temporary gaps. EJ communities,

predominantly low-income, Indigenous, and communities of color, rarely do. These neighborhoods rely heavily on federally funded programs and technical assistance to identify hazards, enforce accountability, and amplify their voices in policy decisions. When federal services pause, EJ communities lose crucial lifelines. Industries may push through permits with limited oversight, while enforcement actions are stalled, perpetuating cycles of unchecked pollution. For example, a study found that coal-fired power plants blatantly increased their release of fine particulate matter by 15 to 20 percent when EPA inspections were paused. Once enforcement resumed, pollution levels dropped.

During shutdowns, community science and EJ mapping projects dependent on federal partnerships lose momentum, eroding trust between agencies and residents. Federal funding streams that support grassroots EJ initiatives can be delayed, leaving organizations understaffed and under-resourced. The result is a widening of already deep health inequality gaps. Children, whose lungs are still developing, suffer more asthma attacks, missed school days, and long-term respiratory impairment. On a macro scale, this keeps children and their families in an intergenerational cycle of poverty—with children missing school and falling behind due to illness and parents/caregivers missing work to care for them. Older adults face increased risks of heart attacks, strokes, and premature death as fine particulate matter levels rise unchecked, epitomizing the analogy that zip code is more of a predictor of one's health than their genetic code.

### **Climate Resilience Put on Hold**

The shutdown's ripple effects also extend into climate resilience. As extreme weather events intensify, federal agencies are central to disaster preparedness and recovery. Yet during a shutdown, critical resilience programs face disruptions. At the Federal Management Agency (FEMA), chronic vacancies in disaster response and mitigation programs mean fewer staff available to process recovery funds or update resilience plans when communities are hit by hurricanes or wildfires.

The EPA faced similar challenges in 2018: recurring shutdowns hollowed out inspection and enforcement teams, leading to postponed site monitoring, delayed Superfund cleanups, and slower responses to contamination events. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), too, suffers from disruptions in climate modeling and coastal forecasting, with furloughed scientists unable to update critical datasets that inform everything from hurricane tracks to flood-risk mapping. After the 2018–2019 shutdown, the longest in U.S. history, these agencies collectively reported significant backlogs and lapses

in interagency coordination, taking months to recover. In flood-prone or heat-vulnerable communities, particularly in the Mid-Atlantic and Gulf Coast regions, delays in resilience planning could replicate what was observed in 2018–19: lives lost and property destroyed.

### **A Call for Accountability and Preparedness**

Congressional gridlock should not hold public health hostage. Shutdowns have often been justified with rhetoric about “fiscal responsibility” and “cutting government waste.” But the logic collapses under scrutiny. Shuttering the federal government does not save money; it costs billions in lost productivity, delayed projects, and crisis-driven cleanups when preventable problems spiral out of control. For instance, unchecked violations at a chemical plant could lead to a spill requiring millions in cleanup and medical costs. In 2019, explosions released millions of pounds of hazardous substances, causing evacuations and millions in property damage. Violations of safety protocols were central. While this is not directly tied to a government shutdown, it is illustrative of what unchecked risks look like when regulatory enforcement fails. Both medical costs and environmental impacts are borne disproportionately by fenceline and frontline residents.

Beyond simply ending the shutdown, Congress should create legal protections that maintain regulatory enforcement, continuous environmental monitoring, and community technical assistance—even during budget disputes—to prevent catastrophic failures. With the push for more fast-tracked reviews that supposedly eliminate red tape, EJ communities will be even less protected during shutdowns. To prevent agencies from rushing through delayed permits, Congress should require that EJ communities are prioritized for additional review, not rubber-stamped to “catch up.” Fast-track processes should be halted and a moratorium placed on permit reviews during shutdowns.

### **Beyond Politics, Toward Justice**

Government shutdowns are often portrayed as temporary political standoffs. But for communities living on the frontlines of environmental hazard, their effects are immediate and enduring. Every day without monitoring, enforcement, or data support increases the risks borne disproportionately by low-income communities of color. Moving forward, environmental and health safeguards must be treated as essential services immune from the politics of shutdowns.

Across the U.S., states face critical decisions in the coming years around data centers, highway expansions, and industrial permitting. These decisions must be informed by reliable environmental and health data. Therefore, EPA inspections, CDC health monitoring, and disaster resilience programs should not be discretionary—they are foundational to public safety and security. For EJ communities, stronger contingency measures are needed. This could include establishing state-level backup systems for monitoring and enforcement when federal oversight lapses, guaranteeing that EJ grants and technical assistance programs remain funded during shutdowns, and enhancing partnerships with local universities, nonprofits, and community groups to provide continuity in data collection and public alerts.

Environmental justice demands more than rhetoric. It requires resilience in our governance systems. If we are serious about narrowing health gaps, then our environmental protections must be safeguarded against political stalemates. Lives, quite literally, depend on it.

SECTION IV

**Transportation, Infrastructure,  
and Built Environment**



# LA's Traffic Ordinance Went into Effect 100 Years Ago

## IT CHANGED STREETS ACROSS AMERICA

ALISON SANT

Originally published January 24, 2025 in *Next City*.

The city of Los Angeles has rightfully gripped the nation's attention this month as wildfires rage on. While the devastation induced by our changing climate demands superhuman effort to squelch it, the transportation sector (stubbornly responsible for the greatest share of U.S. emissions) is ironically observing a significant milestone. January 24, 2025, marks the centennial of the implementation of the Traffic Ordinance for the City of Los Angeles. This 35-page bureaucratic document redefined the use of America's streets, tailoring them to the benefit of the automotive industry.

American streets were once dominated by people. A documentary travelogue of New York City captured by Scenska Biografteatern from 1911 is crowded with pedestrians crisscrossing streets in their daily routines. Trollies, carriages, and the occasional automobile jostle by, unhindered by traffic signals or centerlines. To us today, it can seem chaotic, but the pace of the street is slow, and people navigate each other with fluency. "A Trip Down Market Street," shot in San Francisco just a year before the 1906 earthquake, shows the view from a streetcar, picturing the Ferry Building at the street's end obscured by intertwining streetcars, horses, bicyclists, cars, and people. Pedestrians stand undaunted in the center of the street, waiting to board the slow-moving streetcar. A boy playfully darts in front of the train, as if he is challenging it to a game of tag. Growing up in American cities meant playing in the streets, even in the country's most dense neighborhoods.

Back then, people shared the roadway with streetcars and bikes. In the early 1900s, Los Angeles had the most extensive electric streetcar system anywhere. From Minneapolis and Chicago to Washington D.C. and New York City, bicycles were used by women and men commuting to work in the 1890s. And they were not alone. As Evan Friss chronicles in *The Cycling City*, people rode bikes in U.S. cities as much as they now ride in Amsterdam and Copenhagen, the best cycling cities in the world.

This was all before the Los Angeles Traffic Ordinance was passed. The Ordinance was written by Miller McClintock, then a doctoral student of municipal government at Harvard University, who was recruited by a champion of the automobile industry, Paul Hoffman. Hoffman had dropped out of the University of Chicago to sell Studebakers at 18 years old. At 33, he was close to making his first million dollars in the industry and had been appointed chairman of the Los Angeles Traffic Commission—a body responsible for regulating streets. For the first time, the Ordinance prioritized cars on the city’s increasingly congested roadways. It quickly became the template for the cities across the country.

With a contemporary eye, the provisions created by the Ordinance may seem more logical than they were to city dwellers at the time. Historian and author Peter Norton has spent his career researching the automobile era and has well documented it in his books *Fighting Traffic: The Dawn of the Motor Age in the American City* and *Autonorama: The Illusory Promise of High-Tech Driving*. Norton has scoured letters to the editors of local newspapers, written by everyday people who passionately argued for their place on American streets, just as it was being usurped. With the anniversary of the Los Angeles Traffic Ordinance approaching, I interviewed him to understand its significance.

Norton says that sharing streets always required negotiation, but before the Ordinance, “the pedestrian had the absolute right to the street, to stroll into it at any point, and to cross it anywhere she chose ... even a child had the right to the street.” This was a social norm, but as Norton’s research suggests, it was also defended by judges in U.S. courtrooms throughout the country. For example, in *Fighting Traffic*, he cites a Philadelphia judge who, in 1924, lectured drivers in his courtroom, saying, “It won’t be long before children won’t have any rights at all to the street.” He determined that motorists deserved restraint if they could not assume the responsibility of ensuring children’s safety and resolved, “Something drastic must be done to end this menace to pedestrians and to children in particular.”

It may be hard to imagine today, in a country where the vast majority of people commute by car, but in Los Angeles and many U.S. cities in the early 20th century,

most people didn't use cars to get around. The majority of American women didn't get driver's licenses until the 1960s, and if a family owned a car, men usually monopolized the use of it. People generally walked, rode streetcars, or biked. Norton argues that while the transition to auto-dominated streets is often seen as the arc of progress stimulated by consumer demand, it was actually a well-crafted campaign produced by those with an interest in selling automobiles.

The Los Angeles Traffic Ordinance gave cars the priority on city streets. Between 1914 and 1922, the number of cars on the streets of Los Angeles quadrupled. To continue to boost sales, the automobile industry required an edge over its competition with the streetcar and one of its advantages was speed. At the time, a streetcar traveled at approximately 10–15 miles per hour, and without dedicated lanes, at even slower speeds when they were blocked by cars. In the Ordinance, McClintock imposed a 35-mile-per-hour threshold almost everywhere except for a few limited cases. But 35 miles per hour was unprecedented in the early 20th century. According to Norton, most cities held motor vehicles to 8–10 mile per hour speeds. In his words, the automotive industry realized that “If drivers cannot go faster than a streetcar, then they're not going to buy a car, especially if they have a streetcar service available to them .... So, we cannot afford to let speed be the culprit in traffic safety.”

Instead of focusing on speed, the Ordinance decried recklessness. Most importantly, it pinned “reckless behavior” on pedestrians rather than speeding cars. The Ordinance calls out “jaywalkers,” criminalizing pedestrians who do not “obey signals” or who walk outside crossings. “Jaywalking,” once used as derogatory slang, was employed formally to fix attitudes against wayward pedestrians. McClintock writes that “High-speed motor traffic makes the practice known as ‘jay-walking’ almost suicidal” instead of questioning the imposition of hurtling motor vehicles on streets occupied by people. As Norton suggests, “You could use exactly the same facts that he's using to say that driving at speed is homicidal.”

In the 1920's, traffic injuries and fatalities were climbing. In *Fighting Traffic*, Norton observes that between 1920–1929 motor vehicles killed more than 200,000 people in the United States (approximately four times the death toll of the previous decade), long before most adults drove. Horrifically, many of those killed were the most vulnerable, including the elderly and children, especially in dense cities where the casualties were the highest. The public was naturally concerned about safety, and the Ordinance addressed their concerns about the dangers of mixing cars and pedestrians, saying, “These conflicts account for the great majority of the accidents and fatalities in Los Angeles and in every other city.”

However, the Ordinance co-opts safety concerns to make more room for cars. For the “control and protection of pedestrian traffic,” McClintock suggests restricting pedestrians to striped crosswalks, raised platforms on wide roads called “safety zones,” and even tunnels created to protect schoolchildren from motor vehicles. He overlooks the social life of the street and even requires that pedestrians “not stop or stand on the sidewalk except as near as physically possible to the building line” to remedy what he calls the “too frequent congestion of pedestrian traffic by casual groups gathering on the sidewalk.”

The Ordinance didn’t change city streets by itself. It was accompanied by a clever public relations campaign targeted at cultural norms and advanced by E.B. Lefferts, president of the Automobile Club of Southern California. Lefferts designed the campaign to succeed where other cities had failed. As Norton documents, Lefferts told an audience at the Chicago convention of the National Safety Council that the Ordinance worked because “We have recognized that in controlling traffic, we must take into consideration the study of human psychology, rather than approach it solely as an engineering problem.” As Norton summarizes, Lefferts’ tactics aimed to make people “feel embarrassed, perhaps ashamed ... to feel the sting of ridicule.”

Radio broadcasts aired a public education campaign about behavior on the street, the Boy Scouts were deployed to issue cards to offenders, letting them know they were “jay-walking.” Ultimately, the police were emboldened to blow whistles at anyone attempting to cross the street against the signal or outside marked areas—shaming them into submission. Norton discovered multiple cases where people were humiliated by police officers who “picked up pedestrians ... (mostly women) and put them on the curb.” Those who protested this new treatment were arrested.

The Los Angeles Traffic Ordinance established that streets would not be shared but dominated by cars. It was essentially a land grab. Once the roadway was secured for the benefit of motor vehicles, they were the heavyweight champions on streets that had once been for everyone. The Ordinance required that pedestrians were “subject to the same directions and signals as govern the movement of vehicles” without acknowledging that they were exceptionally vulnerable. Facing the mass of a speeding car, no other users of the roadway could compete in the physical battle to claim the streets.

By upping speeds on American streets and designing them for accelerating cars, motordom prevailed. Even today, Norton says “we still hold the view that you try to make fast driving safe instead of signaling to drivers that they need to be paying attention and slowing down.”

The logic of the Los Angeles Traffic Ordinance soon made its way into the Model Municipal Traffic Ordinance, which passed in 1928 under the direction of Herbert Hoover, then the Secretary of Commerce, in close consultation with the automobile industry. It became the template for similar ordinances throughout the country. As Norton maintains, “Just about everywhere you go when you’re dealing with the local rules ... they’re descended from this ancestor, the Los Angeles Traffic Ordinance.”

McClintock went on to author a proposal for “foolproof highways,” in the mid-1930s, promising safety through gradual turns, grade separations, and streets for the exclusive use of the automobile—again with the promise of increasing speeds. Those highways would ultimately bring more cars into the hearts of urban areas, with a growing human toll. Outpaced by cars, and bullied to the margins, bicyclists also lost their place on the road. Eventually, streetcar tracks were pulled up, some replaced by buses. However, mass transit was increasingly restricted as tax dollars secured by the Highway Trust Fund were unevenly divided by an 80–20 split favoring spending on highways.

Unfortunately, dedicating streets to cars did not guarantee safety. In 2021, more than 43,000 people died on U.S. roads. Cars have become larger, faster, and heavier, making them even more deadly, especially to children. In America, from the time a child can walk until she reaches adulthood, being hit by a car has been the number one cause of death for many decades (surpassed only recently by firearms).

Norton objects to our collective history told as if auto dominance was the inevitable direction of progress. He has uncovered numerous people who urged the country in a different direction. “It was ordinary Americans from all walks of life, rich and poor, Black, Brown and White, male and female who were objecting to their loss of the use of the street.” Among them was Philadelphian Barnett Wartell who, as the Model Municipal Traffic Ordinance was being deliberated, urged Hoover to protect people on roads. Wartell describes the appalling loss of his sons to what he identifies as “murderers.” Wartell’s 9-year-old was killed on his walk home from school by a truck that jumped the curb, and his 18-year-old was run over by a car while on his bike in a hit-and-run and left to bleed to death.

Wartell was one of many bereaved parents whose letters crowded the local papers. Their protests continued in the 1950s when women-led “baby carriage blockades” obstructed streets so children could play safely outside. Norton acknowledges that “it is incredibly helpful to recover these lost perspectives because then we can step out of the perspectives that we grew up in, and that

we were socialized into, and look at them afresh with new eyes and possibly see opportunities.”

As jaywalking laws are repealed in cities and states across the country, as congestion pricing removes automobiles from the heart of the largest U.S. city to pay for transit, as pandemic-era open streets evolve into new permanent urban parkways, and as a new administration hangs its hat on advancing “freedom,” Norton encourages us to reconsider the 100-year history ushered in by the Los Angeles’ Traffic Ordinance. He suggests a new version of our history that avoids the false advertising that Americans have always had a love affair with the automobile. Perhaps with the new space allotted on our streets, and the laws that govern them, we will reclaim the cultural history we gave up and the freedom of choice we once exercised so that at any age, we can walk, bike, and ride where we want to. “If we recover that history,” says Norton, “we empower ourselves in choosing alternative futures.”

# Urbanism in a Time of War

MIKAEL COLVILLE-ANDERSEN

Originally published January 29, 2025 in *Planetizen*.

I have learned that war is noise. The drums of war are deafening here in Kyiv and in other Ukrainian cities, with constant air raid sirens and explosions as the air defense shoots down incoming Russian missiles. Occasionally a missile makes it through, rocking the entire neighborhood and triggering shrieking car alarms. And there's the groan of military and aid vehicles rumbling through the streets.

But if you listen closely, below that thunderous percussion, a quiet orchestra of string instruments is playing.

I came to Ukraine in 2022 after receiving an appeal from urban planning colleagues asking me if I could bring used bicycles to the country. I responded immediately and eagerly. Little did I know that I would end up dedicating two and a half years—and counting—o helping the people of Ukraine with both bicycles and urbanism.

The music started with the arrival of used bicycles, which are now used to deliver humanitarian aid, food, water, and medicine to the most vulnerable citizens in the most devastated areas. Social workers and volunteers pedal tirelessly in over 35 cities and towns on bicycles laden with essential goods. A long list of urbanism and architecture projects now contribute to the orchestra.

I have seen the power of urbanism in my work shaping the urban landscape in over 100 cities around the world. Now I am using the skills and experience gained from that work to help the people of Ukrainian cities. My time in Ukraine, however, has been a continuous series of epiphanies, both personal and professional. It is at once inspiring and humbling.

I have learned that urbanism is about more than designing and building life-sized cities. It isn't just about designing streets or public spaces—it is an integral tool for survival. Amid the chaos of air raid sirens and missile strikes, something as simple as planting a tree with your neighbors becomes a pivotal act that removes you from the harshest of realities.

Urbanism can also help heal the wounds of war. Here in Kyiv, I designed and built the first Nordic therapy garden to heal mental trauma and PTSD and did so with over 1,000 volunteers over 11 weekends. Both work and garden therapy for a common, important goal is as essential for these friends of mine as it is for me.

Whether I'm designing pop-up temporary urbanism projects, trauma-sensitive parks, the typology for new homes using sustainable and traditional architecture or delivering the latest shipment of used bicycles to de-occupied regions, each and every moment is amplified. Our humble string orchestra reaches crescendos that sometimes rise above the bombastic noise.

Urbanism is not a cure for the brutality of this invasion, but I have learned that it can be a powerful medicine. It offers a sense of control and improvement, a moment of peace, purpose, and connection. Power cuts and missile attacks are gently pushed to the back of our minds as we make our street or neighborhood just a little bit better. These initiatives help people regain control of their lives.

I came to Ukraine because of a personal and professional appeal. I stayed because Ukrainians are dying to defend their nation and also, quite literally, Europe—including my children and my friends. I have learned what resilience means, taught by some of the strongest people I could ever hope to meet. The name of the urbanism non-profit I've started with Ukrainians is appropriate: DIY Ukraine.

I have no end game. I wake up every morning, seven days a week and get to work, which is far from finished. It is an odd existence but always rewarding, and the reality is harsh: 40 percent of Ukrainians still need regular humanitarian aid and soldiers are returning home with mental trauma and amputations. Ukrainians (including a growing number of friends) are dying while defending their nation.

For all my musical metaphors in this piece, I look forward to the day when we can remove three letters from Resilience and enjoy Silence. Until then, if my skills in urbanism and architecture can help, I will continue. Because I can. Because I must.

# Congestion Pricing Makes NYC Safer

MIDORI VALDIVIA

Originally published February 22, 2025 in *New York Daily News*.

Just more than a month ago, crossing the chaotic streets of Manhattan with my daughter meant taking a chance with her life, especially as she's a toddler who would rather run free. We live in the greatest city in the world, but from Broadway to Flatbush Ave., the streets are full of gridlocked drivers whose frustration often puts us in harm's way. Our walking adventures always felt risky, and the situation has become untenable for some families.

Thankfully, congestion pricing has helped diffuse this situation across our central business district over the last month and a half. As a member of the MTA Board, a New Yorker, and a mom, I cannot be silent when the federal government—an entity that once endorsed this policy—now seeks to undermine it.

At his confirmation hearing, Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy discussed his commitment to family and the importance of children's safety in transportation. More recently, he discussed his desire to “make people's lives better and spend time with the people we love, as opposed to going to the grind of our transportation system.”

I applaud the secretary's dedication to children's safety and getting people home to spend time with their families, but his actions on congestion pricing show that he isn't practicing what he preaches.

For years, gridlocked streets posed a serious safety risk to children and families. Combined with the horrors of emergency vehicles struggling to make their way through traffic, I sometimes wondered: who is New York really for? These days, households with young children are twice as likely to move out of New York City than those without young children, according to the Fiscal Policy Institute.

Congestion pricing prioritizes safety, public health, and community—essential for building a life for ourselves and our families and retaining New Yorkers. We say we want a New York City full of families, small businesses, and cultural institutions—congestion pricing helps us achieve this vibrant future.

We cannot afford to allow congestion to once again stifle our economy and endanger our streets when a proven solution is within reach. Our streets are now safer. There has been a 51% decrease in injuries and a 55% decrease in crashes in the congestion relief zone compared to the same period in January 2024. Calmer streets are a win for parents, who rush home to make it to pick up and dinner with the kids, which, in turn, builds stronger families and communities.

Safety has not come at the expense of travel times. Early data from the initial month of congestion pricing in Manhattan shows reductions in traffic volumes and improved travel times. Since Jan. 5, the Holland Tunnel has seen an average weekday reduction in travel times of nearly 50% compared to last year. We are also seeing travel time savings beyond the river crossings—traffic on the Long Island Expressway is moving smoother near the Queens-Midtown Tunnel and even on Flatbush Ave. to the Manhattan Bridge!

Congestion pricing means a more efficient city, with businesses operating more smoothly and workers arriving at their jobs on time.

At the same time, revenue generated from the program is projected to bring in \$1 billion annually, which will be reinvested directly into upgrading subway infrastructure, enhancing bus service across the city, and improving commuter rail systems that serve our suburban neighbors. Such investments are critical to families throughout the city and beyond who rely on robust public transportation systems for commuting, leisure, and more.

Opponents argue that this will hurt drivers, particularly working-class and middle-class families. However, New Yorkers know that most of us do not drive into Manhattan every day—those who get to work by car represent less than 4% of outer-borough commuters. The truth is that most working-class New Yorkers rely on buses and subways.

Delays, aging infrastructure, and accessibility gaps can make daily commutes unpredictable and exhausting, particularly for those of us in the outer boroughs—which take away from productivity and valuable time with our loved ones. Investing in transit is how we support working-class families.

I want my child to grow up in a safe, healthy, and efficient city. I want her to cross streets without fear, breathe clean air, and get to where she needs to go on transit. I want to raise her in New York. Congestion pricing is not just a policy—it's a promise to future generations of New Yorkers. And we must fight to keep that promise.

# Don't Cement Our Future

## RETHINKING LA'S LANDSCAPE AFTER FIRE (AND FLOODS)

OMAR BROWNSON

Originally published March 5, 2025 in *Planetizen*.

As Los Angeles faces the devastating aftermath of a historic wildfire disaster, we Angelenos find ourselves grappling with how to rebuild. As the flames subside, the smoke clears, and atmospheric rivers rain down, an emerging narrative dominates the conversation: we must “harden” our landscape to prevent future fires. This response—a technical reaction to the immediate threat of fire—relies heavily on concrete, steel, and other impervious materials. But we have seen this engineering-based playbook before, and it has failed us.

In my previous role as the founding executive director of RiverLA, I saw firsthand the repercussions of this bias towards hardening our landscape. Following the catastrophic floods of the 1930s, Los Angeles poured concrete into the Los Angeles River, attempting to control the flow of water and prevent future disasters. The total amount of concrete is staggering: over 2 million cubic yards, enough to fill the infield of Dodger Stadium about 59 times. While this approach provided a short-term fix, the long-term consequences were far more complex. The hardened river channel sends 70 percent of LA's precious rainwater rushing downstream, lost to the ocean rather than being captured for local use. Less water percolates into the soil, creating drier conditions that are more vulnerable to fire. Community groups and local agencies have spent the last 30 years trying to undo the damage caused by over-engineering our waterways.

We cannot make the same mistake with our landscapes in the wake of fire. Hardening the city to prevent wildfire may seem like an obvious idea, but it comes at a cost, both to the environment and to our communities. For example, hardened landscapes intensify the urban heat island effect and dry the soil, perpetuating the cycle of disaster. A 2024 study led by the University of Massachusetts

Amherst found nature-based solutions to be more cost-effective than conventional engineering solutions for reducing disaster risk, plus they contribute to the overall health of the ecosystem.

But this requires a shift in how we view the landscape itself. One lesson I've learned from working at the intersection of finance, nature and culture is that we need to embrace the fragility of our environments—not as a problem, but as a benefit. We cannot simply fortify our land and expect that people will endure. It's this fragility that makes us human; it's what connects us to one another, to our environment, and to the cycles of nature.

Rebuilding in the wake of disaster demands more than just restoring homes (and jobs and natural ecosystems); it requires us to rethink how we design our cities to withstand the challenges of the future. Yes, people are without homes, and our immediate priority must be to provide shelter. But we must also look beyond the immediate rebuilding effort and imagine a future that doesn't just survive fire and flood but thrives in the face of them.

One path to this vision begins with community-driven, regenerative, nature-based approaches. As the executive director of the LA Community Garden Council, I know that the strength of our city lies not just in its infrastructure but in its people and their connection to the land. Community gardens, for example, are a powerful tool for resilience. They provide food security, foster social cohesion, and promote environmental stewardship while also capturing water, reducing the urban heat-island effect, and providing much-needed green spaces.

As an advisor to the Ubuntu Climate Initiative, I've come to recognize a deeper truth about the way we approach both climate and community resilience. Change is a cultural belief, specifically how we choose to adapt and evolve.

That is what resilience invites us to figure out: how can we change our thinking, rather than rely on an old habit of control and order? True power lies in our ability to innovate and imagine the world we want to live in, not resist the one we fear.

The African philosophy of Ubuntu reminds us that “I am because you are.” Our resilience, our power, is tied to the world around us, including the language we use to describe the change we seek. We do not need to harden our landscape; we need to heal our relationship to it.

We are at a crossroads. The path we choose today will shape the future of Los Angeles and beyond. It's time for a new narrative: one where we rebuild not just for survival today, but for regeneration—for many generations to come.

# Going Underground

## CLIMATE RESILIENCE BENEATH OUR FEET

MAHAK AGRAWAL

Originally published March 10, 2025 in *The City Fix*.

Imagine stepping into a city where sustainability isn't just built upwards but also downwards. While cities worldwide grapple with intensifying climate risks—flooding, heatwaves and infrastructure strain—an untapped solution lies right beneath our feet. The underground isn't just for subways and parking garages; it holds immense potential for climate resilience, urban sustainability and even equitable development.

### **A Hidden Asset for Climate Resilience**

Underground spaces can serve multiple functions in cities across the world—beyond storm shelters and transport hubs. They offer natural insulation, reducing energy demands for heating and cooling. By moving utilities and industrial functions underground, cities can reclaim valuable surface land for green spaces, affordable housing and pedestrian-friendly design. This dual benefit of climate adaptation and urban livability is a win-win.

Cities worldwide are already pioneering underground solutions. Take Montreal's greenhouses, which harness geothermal stability to grow fresh produce year-round, insulating crops from extreme weather. In the Netherlands, underground transit hubs are designed to be flood-resilient, meaning they incorporate waterproof barriers, elevated entry points and advanced drainage systems to prevent inundation from rising waters while ensuring uninterrupted connectivity. Singapore's Deep Tunnel Sewerage System (DTSS) is another example of smart underground infrastructure. This massive, gravity-driven network of deep tunnels eliminates the need for multiple conventional treatment plants,

freeing up valuable land in the densely populated city. By channeling wastewater efficiently to centralized treatment facilities, the DTSS reduces energy demand, lowers operational costs and enhances Singapore's long-term water sustainability.

Despite these successes, U.S. cities have been slow to adopt underground solutions at scale. But there are glimmers of progress. New York City has already demonstrated the potential of underground spaces with its ambitious projects. The Oculus at the World Trade Center is not just a transit hub—it's a striking architectural landmark that houses a bustling shopping center, cultural events and public gathering space, all while being engineered to manage stormwater surges and extreme weather. The revitalization of Hudson Yards has transformed once-overlooked rail yards into a dynamic mixed-use district, featuring underground infrastructure that supports efficient transit connections and climate resilience. Meanwhile, Penn Station's redevelopment integrates modernized subterranean corridors, improved flood mitigation and expanded transit capacity, making daily commutes smoother while future-proofing the city's core. These projects showcase how the use of underground space can be a key component of larger climate adaptation strategies, balancing resilience with functionality and urban vitality.

## **Beyond Bunkers: The Future of Urban Development**

Helsinki provides a masterclass in subterranean urbanism. The city's underground master plan incorporates shopping centers, data centers and even a subterranean swimming complex—all designed to function efficiently while reducing land-use strain. Similarly, Hong Kong's rock caverns house reservoirs and waste treatment facilities, freeing up above-ground space for community use.

Meanwhile, Paris is planning to optimize its underground infrastructure to include pedestrian tunnels that connect key transit hubs and art exhibits, while Tokyo has built underground flood reservoirs that prevent urban flooding during typhoon season. These examples highlight how underground development is not just feasible but essential for future-ready cities.

## **The Potential of Subterranean Urbanism in the U.S.**

Despite clear benefits, U.S. cities face hurdles in adopting underground solutions for climate resilience. High construction costs, complex geological conditions and bureaucratic inertia slow progress. However, cities can learn from international models and take immediate action:

- **Policy reforms:** Update zoning laws to encourage underground development, as seen in Singapore and Helsinki. In the U.S., cities need more incentives to incorporate underground climate resilience strategies into urban planning.
- **Public-private partnerships:** Encourage investment in subterranean infrastructure through tax credits, grants and long-term planning frameworks. New York's Hudson Yards leveraged private funding to build sustainable underground infrastructure—this model can be expanded.
- **Technological innovations:** Advances in tunnel boring, geothermal integration and smart monitoring can reduce costs and enhance feasibility. Companies like Herrenknecht, a global leader in tunnel-boring machines, and Robbins, known for their innovative tunnel excavation equipment, are driving progress in making underground infrastructure more efficient. These companies have been involved in large-scale projects worldwide, such as high-speed rail tunnels and underground energy storage systems, demonstrating how advanced tunneling technologies can lower construction costs and improve the viability of underground solutions.

Moreover, cities should prioritize pilot projects that showcase the benefits of underground urbanism. For instance, Los Angeles could expand its underground stormwater capture systems—like the Tujunga Spreading Grounds—to enhance water resilience. Located in the San Fernando Valley, the Tujunga Spreading Grounds is a large-scale stormwater management project designed to capture and recharge groundwater. Originally built in the 1930s and recently upgraded, it now diverts millions of gallons of stormwater from the Los Angeles River into underground aquifers, helping to reduce reliance on imported water.

Expanding such infrastructure beneath urban areas could be a game-changer for drought-prone cities. Underground reservoirs, designed to capture and store excess stormwater, could provide a sustainable water source while preventing flooding during extreme weather events. Cities like Phoenix or Houston, which face both water scarcity and seasonal flooding, could adopt similar underground systems—integrating them with parks and public spaces to create dual-purpose, climate-resilient urban areas. By leveraging subterranean solutions, U.S. cities can build more adaptive and sustainable water management systems without sacrificing valuable surface land.

## **A Call to Action**

To truly future-proof U.S. cities, we must rethink urban space—above and below ground. By integrating underground spaces into climate resilience strategies, cities can create cooler, greener and more adaptable environments. The shift requires political will, investment and public engagement.

The future of cities may not be sky-high, but instead, deeply rooted—underground. It's time to dig into this opportunity, not just as a futuristic concept but as an urgent necessity for a climate-resilient future. Cities that embrace this vision will be better positioned to thrive in the face of climate change, urban density pressures and shifting sustainability demands.

# The Small Acts Building Urban Climate Resilience

MAHAK AGRAWAL

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Resilience in cities is often framed around large-scale infrastructure projects and sweeping policy shifts. We see headlines about billion-dollar climate adaptation plans, smart cities leveraging AI for disaster response and ambitious net-zero pledges. But some of the most impactful solutions emerge not from top-down planning, but from grassroots efforts—small, community-led initiatives that, when scaled, transform the resilience of entire neighborhoods and sometimes cities too.

## The Power of Local Interventions

In cities around the world, residents are proving that urban resilience isn't just about major initiatives and investments—it's about many small, replicable actions accumulating to create systems change. A single community garden might seem insignificant, but multiply that by a hundred, and suddenly, a neighborhood has enhanced food security, increased green space and strengthened community ownership.

For example, Havana, Cuba, offers one of the most remarkable examples of community-driven urban agriculture: Faced with severe food shortages and economic isolation following the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, Havana's residents transformed vacant lots, rooftops and roadside plots into productive spaces. What began as a grassroots survival strategy grew into a city-wide movement. Havana is now home to over 8,000 urban farms and gardens and annually produces between 50–100% of the city's fresh produce. Known as *organopónicos*, this system of urban farms now receives institutional support and continues to be a model of how small-scale, low-input urban farming can be both climate-resilient and empowering.

Another example is Bangkok's Bang Bua Canal initiative. Once a flood-prone and polluted area, the neighborhood's residents formed a cooperative to restore their local waterway. They built floating gardens, stabilized canal banks and created small-scale flood barriers. Their efforts not only reduced local flooding but improved water quality and revitalized local businesses dependent on the canal, increasing property values.

### **Micro-Level Solutions Can Lead to Macro-Level Impact**

Resilience isn't just about surviving disasters—it's about adapting and thriving despite them. Many successful initiatives rely on bottom-up local action.

In Jakarta, community groups, such as Ciliwung Merdeka, have taken the lead in building decentralized rainwater harvesting systems in flood-prone areas. By collecting rainwater for reuse, these micro-projects help reduce pressure on the city's overburdened drainage systems while providing clean water for households. Each household with a rainwater harvesting system could potentially save an estimated \$200 per year on water costs while reducing strain on the municipal supply. Scaling this across thousands of homes has prevented millions of liters of stormwater from overwhelming Jakarta's drainage system.

Similarly, in Barcelona, Superblocks have transformed congested neighborhoods into pedestrian-friendly zones. While the initiative started as a city-led vision, its success has depended on local buy-in. Residents have taken the lead in shaping public spaces, introducing greenery and organizing community events that enhance urban livability.

### **Lessons for U.S. Cities: Scaling Small Wins for Collective Resilience**

Despite international success stories, many U.S. cities still lean heavily on top-down, infrastructure—heavy resilience strategies, such as constructing massive seawalls to guard against rising sea levels or building billion-dollar stormwater tunnels to manage flooding. While these approaches can be effective, they are often costly, slow to implement and may overlook the needs and voices of local communities. A shift is needed—one that recognizes the value of bottom-up resilience-building. Here's how:

**Fund micro-grants for grassroots resilience.**

Many communities already have ideas and momentum but lack financial resources. Cities can establish micro-grants to support local projects like urban farms, rain gardens and community-led cooling hubs. Programs like New York City's Green Infrastructure Grant Program have already helped small businesses and community groups install green roofs and rain gardens, reducing stormwater runoff by millions of gallons annually.

**Leverage nature-based solutions at the neighborhood level.**

Programs like Philadelphia's Green City, Clean Waters show that small-scale green infrastructure—bioswales, tree pits and rain gardens—can collectively mitigate climate risks when adopted citywide. The initiative has helped support 940 jobs annually and generate \$48 million in tax revenues for Philadelphia.

**Make resilience participatory.**

Community-led adaptation planning ensures solutions are culturally relevant and sustainable. New Orleans' Gentilly Resilience District integrates local voices into stormwater management, making adaptation a shared responsibility. Homeowners participating in the city's rain garden program have seen reductions of up to 40% in their flood insurance costs.

**Small Climate Actions, Big Economic Benefits**

Investing in community-driven resilience isn't just a social good—it makes financial sense. Studies show that every dollar spent on climate resilience and preparedness saves communities \$13 in damages, cleanup costs and economic impact. Small interventions require lower upfront costs but yield high returns in reduced climate risk and improved public health.

For example, California's Cool Roof program, which incentivizes residents to install reflective roofing, has helped reduce indoor temperatures by 2–3 degrees F, cutting air conditioning costs by up to 30% during heat waves. And in Michigan, what started as a small community effort to help Detroit's farmers and gardeners, Keep Growing Detroit now supports over 2,200 gardens and farms across the city. In 2023 alone, program participants—primarily families and local growers engaged in the Garden Resource Program—collectively harvested fresh produce

via distribution of over 300,000 transplants and nearly 68,000 seed packs, enhancing household food security and helping participants save on grocery costs.

The most resilient cities of the future won't be defined by massive infrastructure alone; they will be shaped by thousands of interconnected local actions, including initiatives by residents, neighborhoods and grassroots groups responding to their unique challenges. These small efforts may not always make headlines, but when multiplied, they can shift systems, spark policy change and build collective resilience from the ground up.

# Energy Prices Are Soaring

## BETTER BUILDINGS CAN HELP.

ALEX DEWS

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Since 2000 the United States has grown by 60 million people while GDP has expanded by 170%, yet energy consumption has stayed relatively flat. How did we do that? In part, we made buildings more efficient.

With electricity demand surging, especially from data centers and the growth in artificial intelligence, there is increasing concern over how to meet our power needs while balancing grid resilience, affordability and climate impacts. The supply side of this equation tends to get lots of attention: how do we get more energy generation across the finish line?

But that's not a fully informed way to look at the issue; it's on the demand side that we can make an immediate difference, because increasing energy efficiency in buildings is a proven, scalable solution to both energy affordability and decarbonization. The bottom line is that, for significantly lower cost than new power generation, we can meet a large part of energy demand by improving buildings' energy efficiency and energy use time shifts.

### **Buildings' role in energy infrastructure**

Buildings use nearly 75% of U.S. electricity and more than a third of natural gas. A McKinsey study, "Powering a new era of U.S. energy demand," leads with a graphic showing that buildings comprise the majority of demand, but the study does not mention buildings in its analysis or proposed solutions. Similarly, as the federal government wipes out clean energy investments, talk about climate action in this new context largely ignores the role of buildings. A recent episode

of the Ezra Klein Show, entitled “Is Decarbonization Dead?” mentions buildings exactly zero times even though they are the largest single end-user of energy.

As many as 8 in ten buildings that will be in use 25 years from now are already built, and the EPA estimates that 30% of the energy used in commercial buildings today is wasted. Older buildings, in particular, represent a huge amount of overall energy use, and a major untapped opportunity to reduce demand.

Of course, supply-side discussions matter because the fuels we use to generate energy offer starkly different paths forward. We can take the path of investing in clean technology that reduces air pollution and helps mitigate the worst effects of climate change. Alternatively, we can prop up fossil fuels at great cost to our physical health and financial well-being. In addition to dirtier air, utility customers may be stuck with the bill for stranded assets if AI turns out to be a market bubble.

But demand determines how much energy we need to produce. In essence, energy efficiency should be thought of as a demand-side infrastructure solution. Greater demand raises prices for all fuel types, and it makes power outages more likely. If there’s one thing everyone agrees on, it’s that we don’t want blackouts while waiting for more power to come online.

## **Addressing affordability and decarbonization**

For a fraction of the cost, time and difficulty of adding new power plants, we can improve the way our buildings use energy. In less than a year, building efficiency and demand flexibility—like pre-cooling buildings on summer days—can make a difference in lowering electric demand, improving affordability and keeping the lights on. By contrast, new transmission lines and power plants typically take more than a decade for design, permitting and construction.

Energy use by the building sector has remained relatively flat for the last 20 years, even while adding more square footage and electric devices. That’s because building codes and appliance standards continually improve, making newly constructed buildings more efficient.

Efficient buildings cost less to run, and with smart lease structures, both the landlord and tenant can benefit. Efficient buildings are also more valuable. Six academic studies found that ENERGY STAR certified buildings earn a 5–16% rental premium, a 6–13% sales price premium and 3–6% higher occupancy.

Furthermore, upgrading less-efficient buildings creates local jobs that can’t be outsourced. These jobs can be done by people with a range of skills and experience. Policymakers can intentionally grow these jobs in areas with limited opportunities and target job training to those residents. In 2024, there were 2,290,179

energy efficiency jobs contributing to the U.S. economy, constituting the majority of jobs in the clean energy sector and outnumbering all fossil fuel extraction and processing jobs, according to the U.S. Department of Energy.

For anyone who cares about climate action, buildings are critical. In many urban communities, buildings represent 50%–75% of greenhouse gas emissions. That means there is simply no way to meet climate goals without reducing building energy use. And unlike clean energy, most policies that influence building energy efficiency are passed and implemented by states and localities, making them less vulnerable to changes in federal incentives. More than 50 jurisdictions have benchmarking laws that require building owners to track their energy use and 15 have passed building performance standards that set energy reduction targets.

Policymakers should engage both real estate professionals and residents in efforts to improve buildings' energy efficiency, creating opportunities for greater civic engagement and discussion about the future each community wants to create. Building energy code advancements have been powerful tools for improving newly constructed buildings. Building performance standards, which drive upgrades to existing buildings, have the potential to reduce energy use dramatically. The National Building Performance Standards Coalition is a group of 49 local and state governments committed to passing such policies. If all members of this coalition adopted BPS policies, the energy savings by 2040 could eliminate the need for more than 100 gas power plants.

More-efficient buildings offer beneficial outcomes for everyone: fewer taxpayer dollars, lower individual and business utility bills, higher net operating income, healthier air and lower greenhouse gas emissions. Philanthropy, state and local governments and businesses need to work together to reduce energy waste in buildings. Energy efficiency may not be attracting attention, but it is a proven solution that is cheaper, faster and more practical than most supply-side alternatives.



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