THE COLORADO SUN

DONATE

NEWS: SOCIAL SERVICES

New Mexico is making child care free for all working parents. Why isn’t Colorado?

Even before the universal policy, New Mexico had much more generous child care assistance than Colorado

Taylor Dolven

4:29 AM MST on Feb 17, 2026

Emily Murphy and her 2-year-old son, Louie, outside of the University of New Mexico-Taos Kids' Campus. Since Nov. 1, 2025, child care has been free for all residents of New Mexico. (Audrianah Leon, Special to The Colorado Sun)

▶ A Colorado Sun series

Emily Murphy cried when she got the message from New Mexico's early childhood department in November: she and her husband would no longer have to pay for child care.

On Nov. 1 New Mexico became the **first state in the country** to offer free care for kids whose parents work or are in school.

"This is life-changing for us," said Murphy, a 37-year-old mom of two. Murphy, a customer service manager, and her husband, a firefighter, will finally be able to pay off some credit card debt, she said, and maybe even say yes to her daughter's pleas for ballet lessons.

"We've been surviving and we are hoping this will help push us a little bit toward thriving," she said.

Murphy and child care providers in New Mexico say the new policy is proof their state government is listening to them. Child care costs have far **outpaced wages** in the U.S. and there are far fewer spots than kids who need them, putting desperately needed care out of reach for even middle and some upper income families.

But most Coloradans are still waiting for relief.

Colorado parents with two children — an infant and a 4-year-old — have to shell out about **$37,800 per year for child care**, according to the Economic Policy Institute. And the state **spends far less** than New Mexico and many other states to support families with child care payment assistance.

It doesn't have to be this way.

For years, New Mexico has been steadily reducing the cost of child care for families and working to guarantee enough slots for every child who needs one. Child care experts in Colorado and the rest of the U.S. have long been fighting for policies like New Mexico's that aim to make care for infants to 4-year-olds as accessible as K-12 education.

Those policies could put New Mexico on track to catch up to most of the developed world, where **countries spend far more money per child** than the U.S.

Studies **show** that high-quality child care has long-term benefits for children and for society, including higher educational attainment, better health and less involvement in crime.

"We're seeing a pivot point potentially in how child care is approached," said Elliot Haspel, an early childhood education expert at Capita, a family policy think tank. "The government should make sure all families have access to the child care they need. We should treat child care like social infrastructure the way we treat fire departments, libraries, schools and roads."

More than Coloradans can afford

Colorado's child care problems for families are manyfold.

First, there are not nearly enough child care slots.

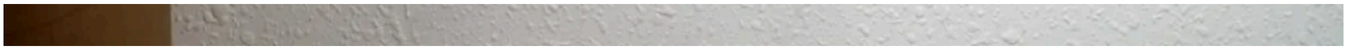
The best estimates show there are about 75,000 more children 5 years old and under with all parents in the workforce than there are licensed child care spots in Colorado. The gap doesn't account for families who find child care with family, friends or neighbors.

Second, the slots that do exist are way too costly.

The **average annual cost of infant care in Colorado** is about $21,800, or $1,800 per month, making Colorado among the most expensive states for infant care, according to the nonprofit Economic Policy Institute, a liberal-leaning think tank. Infant care for one child takes up nearly 18% of a median family's income in Colorado, far above the **affordability standard of 7%** set by the federal government.

"Child care is too expensive for most families no matter your income," said Lisa Roy, executive director of the Colorado Department of Early Childhood. "Most Coloradans are paying more than we can afford."


CLASS



Black and white art made by students at ¡INSPIRE! Bilingual Early Learning Center in Taos, New Mexico. (Audrianah Leon, Special to The Colorado Sun) (Audrianah Leon, Special to The Colorado Sun)

Infant care is the **most expensive for families** because one caregiver can look after **no more than five infants at a time**, meaning child care centers must spend much more on personnel for infants than for 3- and 4-year-olds, who require one educator for every 10 kids.

Child care for a 4-year-old in Colorado costs about $16,000 per year, or $1,300 each month, according to the Economic Policy Institute.

Colorado's new paid parental leave program offers parents 12 weeks of leave at reduced pay to care for their newborn, meaning parents who use the program must find child care when their infant is just months old.

A public good in New Mexico

New Mexico offers a very different reality for parents.

As of Nov. 1, New Mexico made its full-time, year-round child care payment assistance program open to all parents of infants to 13-year-olds who are working or in school. **Grandparents raising grandchildren**, parents caring for babies born substance-exposed, parents experiencing housing instability, and families involved with the state's Children, Youth and Families Department do not have to meet the work or school requirement.

Participating families will save an average of $12,000 per year on child care costs, the state estimates.

"It feels like the absolutely right thing to be doing at a time like right now when people are looking for help and relief in ways that are truly tangible," said Elizabeth Groginsky, New Mexico's secretary of the Early Childhood Education and Care Department.

But, this doesn't mean that every kid who needs care can suddenly get it. New Mexico still **struggles with a capacity problem** similar to Colorado's — the state estimates an additional 12,000 child care slots are needed to accommodate all kids who qualify.

High chairs lined up at ¡INSPIRE! Bilingual Early Learning Center in Taos, New Mexico. (Audrianah Leon, Special to The Colorado Sun)

Instead of waiting for the supply to develop, and then making the care free for families, Groginsky said the state decided to try to do both at the same time.

New Mexico has started a $13 million low-interest loan fund for people who want to start new child care facilities. Groginsky hopes the legislature will add more to the fund in coming years.

“We are not going into this blindly,” she said. “We have well-laid plans and strategies about how to achieve our goal of capacity.”

In just the first few weeks, the policy was a game changer not only for parents, but for child care providers.

The state pays providers a **set rate per child in their care**, depending on the age of the child and the quality rating of the child care center. For an infant attending a top rated center full time, the rate is $2,175 per month, or $26,100 per year. For a full-time preschooler, it's $1,182 per month. Rates are slightly lower for licensed home-based providers.

Providers can receive a higher payment from the state if they are open at least 10 hours during the day, at least five days a week, and start their entry-level staff at $16 to $19 per hour, depending on the rating of the center. The enhanced rate is $2,500 per month, or $30,000 per year, for an infant attending a top rated center full time and $1,375 per month for a preschooler.

Some centers that are able to charge parents more than the state rates have opted out of the program.

Alison McPartlon, director of the University of New Mexico-Taos Kids' Campus, said for the first time in years she will be operating the center in the black.

McPartlon's center, which serves 65 children from infants to 5-year-olds, has more of a financial cushion than others because of its association with the university. Still, McParlton has struggled to make ends meet.

"What I would need to charge parents never felt reasonable," she said. "I never wanted to push that middle income family to the point they couldn't afford it."

Now, she said, the state is paying her much more than what she was able to charge parents.

READ MORE

Colorado child care centers can hardly afford to stay open, and many families can't afford to enroll without government help

▶ FULL STORY

"I can take a deep breath and really ensure that my teachers are making a livable wage," she said. "I'm really happy that New Mexico families don't have to have this stress about which bills to pay, who should stay home."

Taylor Etchemendy, director of INSPIRE Bilingual Early Learning in Taos, said before free universal child care, the state was covering the child care costs for about 75% of the 250 kids at her four child care centers.

¡INSPIRE! Bilingual Early Learning Center Director Taylor Etchemendy said before free universal child care, New Mexico was covering the child care costs for about 75% of the 250 kids at her four child care centers. She charged the remaining parents less than it costs to care for kids because many families in Taos couldn't afford the true cost, especially if they had more than one child. (Audrianah Leon, Special to The Colorado Sun)

She was having to charge the remaining parents less than it costs to care for kids because many families in Taos couldn't afford the true cost, especially for more than one child.

Now, the state is paying Etchemendy almost double what she was charging families, making her business more sustainable.

"It's a defining moment for families and educators across the state that affirms early education as a public good and fundamental right for all children and families," she said.

So how did New Mexico do it?

New Mexico's prioritization of early childhood education can be traced back to the pandemic, when the failures of care infrastructure were laid bare for the entire country, after more than a decade of **grassroots advocacy from child care providers**.

For years, New Mexico has been **ranked among the worst states** for child well-being, and Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham, a Democrat elected in 2018, vowed to make changes.

In 2020, the state created an Early Childhood Trust Fund, championed by Lujan Grisham, using federal pandemic relief funds and tax revenue from the oil and gas industry to expand the number of families receiving child care payment assistance. The fund is supplied by returns on the original $320 million investment and ongoing appropriations from the legislature. The fund now holds more than $10 billion.

Then, voters overwhelmingly passed a **constitutional amendment in 2022** that allowed a state fund of oil and gas tax revenue reserved for K-12 education to be tapped for early childhood education. Each year, a portion of the fund's total value goes to the state's child care department.

The state also receives federal funding for child care.

With the surge in state funding, New Mexico was able to remove income thresholds for child care assistance last year, making it the first state to offer free universal child care.

All in all, New Mexico estimates it will spend about $446 million on the universal child care program in its first year serving about 46,000 kids and build up to about $728 million in the fiscal year that starts in July 2028 serving about 59,000 kids. Between about 75% and 85% of the funding will come from the state each year, the childhood department projects.

Some of the funding hinges on state lawmakers continuing to invest in the program. The Democratic-controlled legislature has indicated that it's on board, with some limits. A **proposal making its way through the statehouse** now would fully fund the program, but require copays from wealthier families under certain economic conditions, like high inflation, low oil prices or if demand for the program is far higher than expected.

Republican lawmakers have questioned its sustainability. After a recent vote to move the funding forward, Senate Republicans called it a "deceptive and wildly expensive program," **Source NM reported**.

Still, Groginsky called the program "the blueprint for the nation."

"We are fully aware of our responsibility to be successful," she said.

Children's art hangs on a wall at ¡INSPIRE! Bilingual Early Learning Center in Taos, New Mexico. (Audrianah Leon, Special to The Colorado Sun)

What's Colorado doing?

New Mexico was already **helping families who make 400% of the federal poverty limit**, or $106,600 for a family of three, pay for child care, among the most generous income thresholds in the country.

Colorado, on the other hand, helps families who make between 185% of the federal poverty level, or about $39,000 for a family of three, and 300% of the federal poverty limit, or about $80,000 for a family of three, **depending on the county**.

Colorado's population of about 6 million is much larger than New Mexico's 2.1 million. But Colorado also has a much larger state budget of $43.9 billion compared with New Mexico's $29.2 billion. The **median family income** for a family of three in Colorado is about $120,000, compared with $78,000 in New Mexico.

Families must navigate a much more **fragmented child care assistance system** in Colorado, and only a small fraction receive any assistance paying for child care at all until their kids are 4 years old and become eligible for some free hours of child care when school is in session.

Together, the state's two programs to help families, the child care payment assistance program and the preschool program, cost the state about $600 million.

In the fiscal year that ended in June, the Colorado Child Care Assistance Program For Families helped 27,602 children at a cost of about $191 million, covered mostly by federal funding. Some parents with low incomes who qualify for the program are **still required to pay a portion of the cost of child care**.

The budget for Colorado's child care payment assistance program this fiscal year has decreased to about $186 million. The Trump administration has tried — **so far unsuccessfully** — to cut child care funding for Colorado and four other states, which would end Colorado's child care payment assistance program.

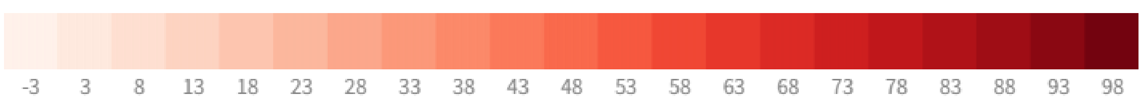
There are way more kids than child care spots just for infants and toddlers in Colorado

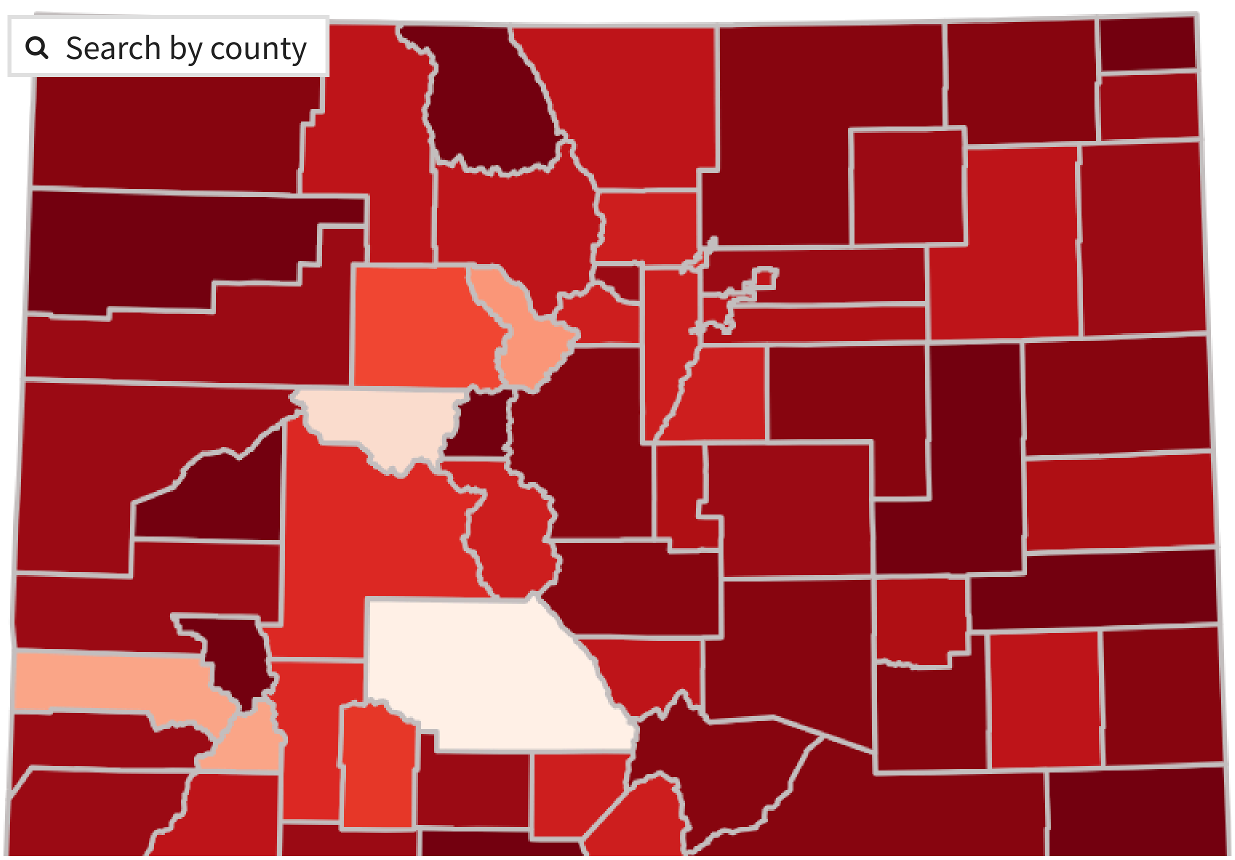
Analysis of Colorado Department of Early Childhood data as of February 2026. The state data "reflects licensed capacity, which is the maximum number of children that can be served in a licensed facility at a given time." In theory, kids could go to classes in the morning and afternoon if there were multiple offerings. So the gap could look more severe than it is on the ground.

This is a conservative estimate based on data limitations between state and federal data. This is a comparison between the number of kids under three and the number of licensed spots in each county for infants and toddlers.

The more red a county, the more severe the gap.
Hover over or search for your county for more information.

Ratio of the size of the gap per total number of kids in each county





Graphic: Zack Newman
Source: Colorado Department of Early Childhood
Note: "Infants" refers to children 6 weeks to 18 months old. The Census data either runs 3-and-under or 3-to-4 years old. The state data for toddlers runs up to 36 months old.

THE COLORADO SUN

Twenty-four Colorado counties stopped accepting new students in response to a **federal government rule in 2024** cutting the amount families pay. This has left thousands of families without aid.

Colorado's preschool program for 4-year-olds, started by Gov. Jared Polis, is available to all kids in the year before kindergarten and provides **15 hours per week** of care from August to May. The program is funded by a voter-approved tax on cigarettes and other products that contain nicotine, and money from the state general fund.

If the budget allows, children from families with low-incomes who are also unhoused, dual-language learners, eligible for special education or in foster care can qualify for more hours.

Last year, the state spent $338 million on the preschool program serving 49,126 children, including 5,728 3-year-olds with special needs.

Under Polis' leadership, Colorado also made **full-day kindergarten free for all families** during the school year, a program enacted **years after many other states adopted a similar benefit**.

Roy, who runs the Colorado Department of Early Childhood, said New Mexico's achievement is admirable. But, she said, with Colorado's state budget this year again facing a **roughly $850 million shortfall**, there are no funding sources identified that would be sufficient to support free universal child care.

"CDEC, alongside the governor, has prioritized this investment in early learning in a way that is historic," she said of the preschool program and full-time kindergarten. "It's not a question of whether we prioritize families. It's, 'How do we continue to balance child care needs with other needs that families have, like housing?' That is the question."

Cost of universal child care in Colorado: around $2 billion

The Taxpayer's Bill of Rights requires any tax increase, like one that would be needed to raise enough revenue to fund more child care assistance, to be approved by voters.

A recent analysis modeled by Brodsky Research & Consulting for Gary Community Ventures estimated that at current child care teacher pay levels it would cost about $1.8 billion per year, including what the state currently spends, to provide free universal child care. If child care workers were paid the same as kindergarten teachers, universal child care would cost $2.1 billion, including what the state currently spends.

These estimates include care for 153,768 kids from birth through age 4, with 60% using full-time care and 40% using part-time care.

Gary Community Ventures provided funding for this story, which is part of an ongoing reporting project looking at the state of child care in Colorado.

Colorado spends about **$10 billion on K-12 education**.

New Mexico's decision to largely rely on oil and gas tax revenue to fund its universal child care program may have made it more popular with voters. In Colorado, **oil and gas tax revenue** goes to school districts, local governments and industry regulation.

Louie, 2, presses the doorbell to let teachers know that he and his mom, Emily Murphy, are ready to enter University of New Mexico-Taos Kids' Campus. Murphy says it's his favorite part of the day. (Audrianah Leon, Special to The Colorado Sun)

Other states that don't have the same natural resources funding source as New Mexico to tap are far outpacing Colorado in child care assistance.

Vermont passed a **payroll tax in 2023** with **support of the business community** that allowed the state to provide **child care payment assistance** to families making 575% of the federal poverty level, up from 350%, **lowering costs for families**. **Connecticut started an endowment** last year to grow surplus state funds and direct them toward child care assistance for families. New York City's newly elected Mayor Zohran Mamdani campaigned on providing universal child care, and New York Gov. Kathy Hochul has promised state funding to make it happen **starting with free care for all 2-year-olds**.

In the absence of similar statewide action in Colorado, some cities and counties have stepped in to help families.

Denver provides **tuition assistance** for families of kids in pre-kindergarten, funded by a city sales tax. Voters in Eagle, Garfield, Pitkin, Gilpin, Hinsdale, Larimer and Ouray counties voted in November to raise taxes on lodging or sales to **fund child care assistance**.

For Murphy, the Taos mom of two, New Mexico's decision to help all families pay for child care feels like a much needed support, especially as the federal government has made **historic cuts to social safety net programs**.

"It comes down to, 'What do you want government money to fund?' she said. "I'm really proud to be a New Mexican right now."

NEWS: HOUSING

Legislature rejects attempt to let Colorado communities increase taxes on often-vacant homes

House Bill 1036, geared toward addressing the housing shortage in resort communities, would have let the revenue generated by the new taxes pay for affordable housing projects

Jason Blevins
4:00 AM MST on Feb 11, 2026

Large family homes sit above the Snake River Arm, July 19, 2024, in Dillon. The neighborhood has a few listings on Airbnb, an online marketplace for short-term rentals. (Hugh Carey, The Colorado Sun)

A committee in the Colorado legislature on Monday killed legislation that would have allowed local voters to impose **a tax on homes that sit empty** for long stretches of the year.

House Bill 1036 faced fierce opposition from real estate brokers, homebuilders, county treasurers and business chambers. Local elected leaders and government groups supported the legislation that would have given communities a taxing tool to support affordable housing.

After more than four hours of testimony from more than 50 people Monday, the 11-member House Finance Committee voted 7-4 against the measure, which was sponsored by Democratic state Reps. Brianna Titone of Arvada and Elizabeth Velasco of Glenwood Springs, who grew up in a working family in a resort community. Three Democrats joined four Republicans on the committee to nix the legislation.

“This bill is about the visitors and the tourists who enjoy our beautiful resort communities to pay their fair share and serve the local workers who serve those communities,” Velasco told the committee before the vote. “I want the ultrawealthy to pay their fair share to support our working families.”

The legislation would have allowed city or county governments or housing authorities to ask voters to create a new excise tax classification for empty homes. The tax, which would be set by local communities and did not apply to licensed short-term rentals already generating fees and lodging taxes, was intended to help ease the housing shortage in mountain communities where as many as 40% of the homes sit empty for most of the year.

Steamboat Springs council members **narrowly voted in August** to kill a proposed vacancy tax of $3,100 a year on homes left empty for at least half the year. Crested Butte voters in 2021 voted down a $2,500 tax on empty homes.

Vancouver, in British Columbia, has **a 3% tax on the value of homes left vacant** for six months a year. The empty-home tax, approved in 2017, led to the conversion of many vacant properties into rental housing while raising nearly $200 million for the city’s affordable housing projects.

Parker White, the head of government affairs for the **Colorado Competitive Council**, said Vancouver is the only community in North America to reveal the impacts of a vacancy tax. White said the Vancouver vacancy tax has increased the supply of homes, but not the affordability of those homes relative to local wages.

“This appears to be more of a funding mechanism for local government than it is a tool for affordability,” White said.

Supporters see housing solutions

Several county commissioners with **Counties and Commissioners Acting Together** and town council members spoke in support of the vacancy tax legislation.

“This bill trusts local voters and local governments to come up with solutions for their own challenges around housing,” Jefferson County Commissioner Andy Kerr said.

Clear Creek County Commissioner George Marlin said existing sales and property tax collections are not enough to help local governments address housing shortages as well as other major challenges like forest and watershed management.

“We are seeing the current set of tax options we have just don’t get it done,” Marlin said.

Chaffee County Commissioner P.T. Wood said 91% of households in his county **cannot afford to purchase a home**. Nearly a quarter of homes in the county are occupied seasonally and sit vacant for large swaths of the year. Meanwhile, Wood said, developers are building more homes that are not attainable for local wage earners.

“Without tools like this we continue losing workers and weakening our economy,” Wood said. “House Bill 1036 empowers communities to act responsibly and collaboratively to address one of Colorado’s most pressing issues.”

Elizabeth Haskell, a policy advocate with the Colorado Municipal League, said her group was supporting the legislation as a tool for local governments to fix a housing shortage that is driving away residents and forcing workers into long commutes.

Steamboat Springs City Councilmember Gail Garey said workers in her town need to earn around $338,000 a year to afford a median-priced home. More than 3,500 workers commute into Steamboat Springs every day, said Garey, who is a board member for the Colorado Association of Ski Towns, which supported the legislation.

“This will provide one more tool for communities as we seek to balance resort-based economies while ensuring the workforce that supports those economies is housed locally,” Garey said.

Opponents fear administrative burdens

El Paso County Treasurer Chuck Broerman said there would be “administrative burdens and operational challenges” in creating a separate tax category based on occupancy instead of property values.

Marcy Wheatley, the treasurer for Grand County, also opposed the legislation, saying a new tax category for county collectors would create “operational strain … with county treasurers explaining policies we did not design.”

Midsized rural counties could expect to pay $150,000 to $300,000 a year to implement the vacancy tax, Alamosa County Treasurer Amy McKinley said. She also said the Alamosa County assessor opposed the bill, fearing the challenges of determining if owners were meeting occupancy requirements.

“I see this as an absolute disaster for anyone in the government involved in trying to implement this legislation,” McKinley said.

Several real estate brokers from across the state spoke in opposition to the bill, citing questions around the legality of taxing a home based on how often it was occupied. Several suggested that the legislation could lead to litigation.

"This is inviting lawsuits that will cost taxpayers and municipalities," said Windy Bailey, a Colorado Springs real estate broker.

A San Francisco Superior Court Judge in November struck down the California city's "empty homes tax," **ruling it was unconstitutional**. San Francisco voters approved the measure in 2022, with supporters arguing the 40,000 homes left vacant for half the year should pay taxes ranging from $2,500 to $20,000 a year. The city is appealing the judge's decision.

Andrew Hamrick, an attorney for the Colorado Apartment Association, which represents 400,000 units in the state, expressed opposition to the vacancy tax legislation fearing empty apartments could face additional taxes.

Hamrick said the vacancy tax could deter the institutional investors who are building most of the new apartments in the state.

"They get scared of taxes that are this unique and this odd that are not a risk factor in other states," Hamrick said. "Our ability to not be taxed on not being successful with our business ventures is very important to us."

Tyrone Adams, the CEO of the Colorado Association of Realtors, said his group opposed the vacancy tax.

"You can't make housing more affordable by making it more expensive," said Adams, expressing concerns that the tax could foul real estate sales. He also said the process of determining if a property was vacant "could be an invasion of privacy."

The Colorado Farm Bureau also expressed opposition to the vacancy tax legislation, fearing increased taxes for farmers and ranchers who occasionally leave houses vacant.

The vacancy tax is a "very untested tax policy," said Ted Leighty, CEO of the Colorado Association of Homebuilders.

"We don't know the total ramifications of such a policy but we have a pretty good idea of what the consequences will be," Leighty said. "You don't tax things you want more of. You are rearranging deck chairs. You are not building more deck chairs."

SHOSHONE
WATER RIGHTS PRESERVATION

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For over a century, the Shoshone Hydroelectric Power Plant in Glenwood Canyon has commanded river flows through two of the oldest and largest non-consumptive water rights on the Upper Colorado River. The Shoshone water rights maintain vital flows that preserve the health of our namesake river, benefiting agriculture, recreation, drinking water, and rural communities that depend on a clean, reliable water supply.

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In December 2023, the Colorado River District signed an agreement with Xcel Energy subsidiary Public Service Company of Colorado (PSCo) to acquire and permanently protect the Shoshone Water Rights for $99 million.

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ENHANCES WATER QUALITY Ensures cleaner drinking water for communities by diluting salinity and sediment.

STRENGTHENS COMMUNITIES & ECONOMIES Protects flows and fishing habitats that support Colorado's $18.8 billion recreation industry and countless small businesses.

SUSTAINS RIVER HEALTH Maintains water levels essential for supporting four threatened and endangered fish species and critical aquatic ecosystems.

PROGRESS & NEXT STEPS

The Shoshone Water Rights Preservation Coalition has secured a remarkable $57 million in funding commitments from state and local sources, demonstrating the project's broad and enthusiastic support. Additionally, in January 2025, the Bureau of Reclamation announced $40 million to fund the purchase of the Shoshone Water Rights, bringing the total funding amount to $97 million.

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Securing these critical water rights is crucial for ensuring the future of the Colorado River. Learn more about this effort and how you can support it at **keepshoshoneflowing.org.**

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PROJECT SUPPORTERS

COUNTIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

Archuleta County
Delta County
Eagle County $
Garfield County $
Gunnison County
Grand County $
Hinsdale County
La Plata County
Mesa County $
Montezuma County
Montrose County
Ouray County
Pitkin County $
Routt County
San Miguel County
Summit County $
City of Glenwood Springs $
City of Grand Junction $
City of Rifle $
Town of Basalt $
Town of Breckenridge $
Town of De Beque $
Town of Gypsum $
Town of New Castle $
Town of Palisade $
Town of Parachute $
Town of Silt $
Town of Silverthorne $

WATER PROVIDERS AND DISTRICTS

Basalt Water Conservancy District $
Clifton Water District $
Clinton Ditch & Reservoir Company
Collbran Water Conservancy
De Beque - Plateau Valley Soil Conservation District $
Eagle County Conservation District
Eagle Park Reservoir Company
Eagle River Water and Sanitation District $
Grand Valley Irrigation Company $
Grand Valley Water Users Association $
Kobe Water Authority $
Mesa County Irrigation District $
Middle Park Water Conservancy District $
Orchard Mesa Irrigation District $
Palisade Irrigation District $
Silt Project
Snowmass Water & Sanitation District $
Tri-County Water
Upper Eagle Regional Water Authority $
Upper Gunnison River Water Conservancy District
Ute Water Conservancy District $
West Divide Water Conservancy District $

ELECTED OFFICIALS

U.S. Sen. Michael Bennet
U.S. Sen. John Hickenlooper
U.S. Rep. Joe Neguse (CD-2)
U.S. Rep. Jeff Hurd (CD-3)
U.S. Rep. Jason Crow (CD-6)
U.S. Rep. Brittany Pettersen (CD-7)
U.S. Rep. Diana DeGette (CD-1)
Governor Jared Polis
Sen. Dylan Roberts (SD-8)
Speaker Julie McCluskie (HD-13)

ELECTED OFFICIALS (CONT.)

Former Sen. Perry Will (SD-5)
Sen. Cleave Simpson (SD-6)
Sen. Janice Rich (SD-7)
Sen. Janice Marchman (SD-15)
Sen. Jeff Bridges (SD-26)
Rep. Karen McCormick (HD-11)
Rep. Meghan Lukens (HD-26) Rep.
Matt Soper (HD-54)
Rep. Rick Taggart (HD-55)
Rep. Elizabeth Velasco (HD-57)
Rep. Marc Catlin (HD-58)
Rep. Barbara McLachlan (HD-59)
Rep. Matthew Martinez (HD-62)
Rep. Mike Lynch(HD-65)

ECONOMIC AND REGIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

Associated Governments of Northwest Colorado
Club 20
Colorado Basin Roundtable
Colorado Mesa University $
Colorado River Valley Economic Development Partnership
Conscience Bay Company
Craig Chamber of Commerce
Fruita Area Chamber of Commerce
Glenwood Springs Chamber Resort Association
Grand Junction Economic Partnership
Grand Valley Power $
Gunnison Basin Roundtable
Gunnison County Chamber of Commerce
Grand Junction Chamber of Commerce
Marble Distilling
Northwest Colorado Council of Governments QQ Committee
Palisade Chamber of Commerce
Shoshone Outfitter Partnership
Southwestern Water Conservation District
Steamboat Springs Chamber
The Summit Chamber
The Vail Chamber & Business Association
Vail Valley Partnership
Western States Ranches
Xcel Energy
Yampa White Green Basin Roundtable

ENVIRONMENTAL AND RECREATION ORGANIZATIONS

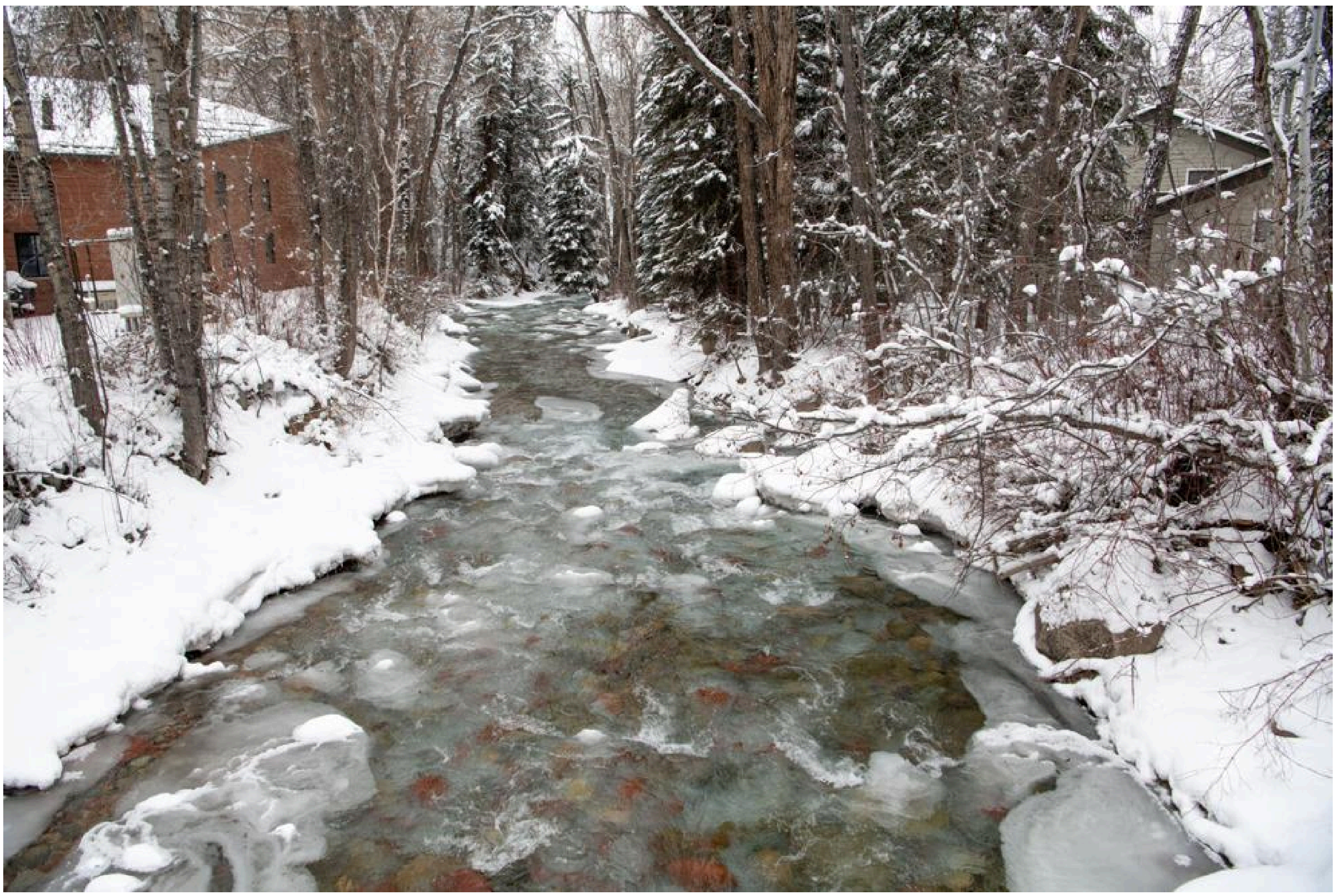
American Rivers
American Whitewater
Audubon Rockies
Blue River Watershed Group
Business for Water Stewardship
Conservation Colorado
Colorado River Outfitters Association
Eagle River Coalition
Environmental Defense Fund
Middle Colorado Watershed Council
RiversEdge West
Roaring Fork Conservancy
The Nature Conservancy
The Sonoran Institute
Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership
Trout Unlimited
Western Resource Advocates

$ = Financial Contributor

https://www.aspendailynews.com/news/aspen-might-weigh-more-aggressive-restrictions-on-water-use/article_a13c1583-0cda-4c78-91df-ddc24cf41d25.html

Aspen might weigh more aggressive restrictions on water use

Lucy Peterson, Aspen Daily News Staff Writer
Feb 20, 2026



Parts of Castle Creek freeze over on Friday. The city of Aspen relies primarily on streamflow from Castle and Maroon creeks for its water supply.

Jason Charme/Aspen Daily News

ought conditions do not significantly improve by the end of the winter, the city of Aspen may enter a stage 3 water shortage for the first time.

The city's drought response committee is anticipating recommending a stage 3 water shortage declaration based on the latest snowpack, drought data and outlooks for Aspen

department, said.

"We are hoping to see more precipitation in the coming months and this memo serves to raise awareness that we are seeing record low snow accumulation and much higher than average temperatures, and if things do not significantly change, we might have to increase water restrictions," Killer told the Aspen Daily News in an email.

If the city were to enact stage 3 water restrictions, it would use its drought mitigation response plan, which was adopted in July 2020. It outlines restrictions the city could enforce to conserve water under different stages of water shortages.

The declaration indicates extreme drought. Under stage 3 water restrictions, irrigation of existing lawns could be limited to one day per week based on a customer's address. Athletic fields, trees and golf course greens could be irrigated by a mandatory schedule or water budget only. Car washing and filling or refilling of water features and swimming pools may not be allowed.

Under those conditions, the city would "work to sustain mature trees to the extent possible but recognizes that there may be major loss of lawns, gardens, some trees and

It would only occur when public health and safety is at risk, and would require further investigation into the legal or water quality implications, according to the plan.

"At this time, we have not discussed what items would be enforced in a stage 3 restriction since it has not been declared or recommended to Council by the Drought Response Committee," Killer said.

The city council declared a stage 2 water shortage in August, after declaring a stage 1 water shortage in June. Aspen and Pitkin County remained in severe drought in November despite monsoonal moisture and cooler temperatures since the stage 2 water shortage restrictions were implemented, the drought committee told council members in November.

At the time, the committee said the city's precipitation deficit was 3.43 inches, and Pitkin County was experiencing its second-driest year to date in 131 years of record. Since then, drought conditions have continued to degrade throughout the Roaring Fork watershed. The Feb. 16 U.S. drought monitor — a map that is released every week illustrating the location of drought across the country — puts Aspen and most of Pitkin County in the exceptional drought category, the most extreme of five categories.

December 2025 was the third-hottest December on record in Colorado, according to the memo. While snowfall in December and January was near average, unusually hot temperatures impacted snowfall accumulations.

The snow-water-equivalent, an indicator used to help predict that amount of streamflow expected, for the Roaring Fork watershed is 54% of the average SWE as of Feb. 12, according to the memo.

The city relies primarily on streamflow from Castle and Maroon creeks for its water supply. It depends on consistent release of water from snowmelt.

“While any snow is welcome and needed, this storm has not had a significant impact on our snowpack and snow-water-equivalent,” she said. “We are still at a record low SWE in the RFV even with this recent storm. Our SWE is negatively impacted by the warm temperatures which are expected to return by the beginning of next week.”

The Natural Resources Conservation Service is predicting streamflows in the area to be about 58% of normal, Killer added.

The city’s stage 2 water restrictions are mandatory. Watering of any lawn, garden, landscaped area, tree, shrub or other plant is prohibited from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Household watering schedules also are mandatory.

Some of the city’s water customers are seeing monthly rate surcharges under the stage 2 restrictions. Tier three customers — those who use 10,000 to 14,000 gallons per ECU — 50% surcharges under a stage 2 water shortage and tier four customers — those using over 14,000 per ECU — see a 75% surcharge.

Water demand typically decreases in Aspen during the winter when irrigation systems are turned off, but it is also a time when streams are at their lowest point in the year. In the winter, only about 1-3% of water customers fall into tiers three and four.

A stage 2 water shortage is designed to reduce systemwide water use by 10-15% and outdoor water use by 15-25%. The utilities department sent letters to the city's top water users — numbering about 300 — notifying them of the new water restrictions in August.

City facilities reduced water use by 5.6% under the stage 1 restrictions. Under more stringent restrictions, city facilities saw a 30.4% reduction in water use.

Stage 3 restrictions aim to reduce water use by 15-25% system-wide. It aims to reduce oor water use by 25-60%.

The city last entered a stage 2 water shortage on Aug. 5, 2020. It lasted through June 6, 2023, when the city moved to stage 1 restrictions. Those restrictions were lifted on Sept.

response plan. It was first implemented to help city staff evaluate long-term plans for water shortages after historical droughts in 2002, 2012 and 2018.

City staff will review the plan and update it as "operational conditions or lessons learned through implementation of the staged drought response plan may require," according to the memo. The updates will include incorporating the most recent drought data, assessing each drought stage's indicators and water reduction goals, and expand and clarify enforcement measures of each stage.

The city council will review the updates as early as the end of May.

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Lucy Peterson

Reporter

THE COLORADO SUN

NEWS: WATER

Report: Colorado needs additional $50M annually for water projects, and severance taxes aren't the answer

State task force is examining new funding options, including the potential for new taxes or a long-term trust fund to fill the cash gap

Jerd Smith
3:31 AM MST on Jan 30, 2026

The Willoughby Corner housing project is pictured under construction on July 16, 2024, in Lafayette. (Andy Colwell, Special to The Colorado Sun)

Colorado faces a $50 million annual cash shortage for water projects and will need to consider other options such as new taxes to fill the gap, a state task force said in a new report this week.

The shortage marks the difference between existing funding for water projects, generated through severance taxes and other sources, and the cost of projects the state has identified as necessary to make sure Colorado has enough water in coming years.

Severance taxes, derived from oil and gas and other mineral extraction, generate roughly $160 million for various water programs, but that isn't enough to pay for everything that is needed, according to the report.

The **task force**, created by lawmakers last year with the passage of **Senate Bill 40**, is charged with finding ways to modify the severance tax revenue and to find additional ways to fund water programs. Severance tax revenues can vary widely from year to year and have been diverted from water programs frequently to help cover other state budget shortfalls.

The group must complete its final report and list of recommendations by July 15, at which point lawmakers can decide what new funding sources could be pursued, according to Nate Pearson, assistant director for water policy at the Colorado Department of Natural Resources.

"The questions we've been asked to answer are complicated," Pearson said at a task force meeting Tuesday.

Colorado last saw a major new infusion of cash for water programs in 2020, after voters approved an online sports betting tax in 2019. That program has grown significantly, generating $23.8 million for water projects during the state's most recent fiscal year, which ended June 30, 2025. Though revenue from the new tax continues to grow, additional cash is needed, according to the report.

One option would be to create a long-term trust fund that would rely on severance tax for initial funding and then which could grow, protected from being used for other state budget purposes. New Mexico and Wyoming have such trust funds in place.

Colorado could also consider asking voters to approve new sales taxes or a bottle tax on beverages.

Eric Bergman, director of the division of local government at the Colorado Department of Local Affairs, said it was important to get the message to the public that more funding and more stable funding for water projects is critical.

"The infrastructure crisis is terrifying," Bergman said. "It's not sexy, but it is a crisis and it's happening in small communities that don't have two nickels to rub together."

CLIMATE

Energy Star has emerged stronger after Trump's EPA tried to end it

FEBRUARY 3, 2026 · 5:00 AM ET

HEARD ON MORNING EDITION

Jeff Brady

3-Minute Listen

PLAYLIST

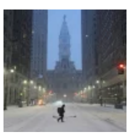
The Environmental Protection Agency awards the blue and white Energy Star logo to the most efficient appliances.

Joe Raedle/Getty Images

The Trump administration tried to end the government's Energy Star program last year, but now Congress has passed — and President Trump has signed into law — bipartisan budget legislation that has the potential to strengthen the energy efficiency program by giving it dedicated funding.

Such policy reversals have so far been rare for the Trump administration. But pushback against killing Energy Star came from a broad swath of stakeholders, including industries like real estate and construction, to which President Trump has longstanding ties. More than 1,000 manufacturers, home builders, advocacy groups and local governments signed a letter last April asking the administration to keep the program.

"What it shows very clearly is that Congress, both Republicans and Democrats, strongly support Energy Star and want to see it continued," says Ben Evans, federal legislative director for the U.S. Green Building Council, which advocated for saving the program.



ENVIRONMENT

FAQ: What is wind chill, and why is it dangerous?

Lawmakers allocated just over $33 million to the Environmental Protection Agency for Energy Star, slightly more than the 2024 fiscal year. That also reverses a decade-long trend, since the first Trump administration, of reducing the program's budget, according to the Congressional Research Service. That leaves the program financially healthy, though it still faces staffing challenges.

Most Americans probably haven't noticed changes in the program yet, because previously approved products are still available in stores. But advocates say the program's work has been disrupted — and that could have lingering effects.

"Getting new products certified as Energy Star has been slowed with the loss of staff capacity," Evans says, and his group plans to watch closely to see how the EPA manages the program in coming months with the new funding.

The campaign to end Energy Star

Almost 90% of Americans recognize the blue and white Energy Star logo, which the Environmental Protection Agency awards to the most energy-efficient appliances. The EPA estimates the Energy Star program has saved Americans over $500 billion in energy costs since it was established in 1992.

EPA Administrator Lee Zeldin questioned his own agency's calculations for how much money the program has saved consumers at a congressional hearing last May.

CLIMATE

Trump administration claims offshore wind poses a threat. But it won't say how.

"I would happily and eagerly find out from inside of the agency how they had previously calculated that figure, because I anticipate that they're taking credit for a heck of a lot more than they should," Zeldin told lawmakers.

EPA press secretary Brigit Hirsch declined to say whether Zeldin has investigated the issue since then. While the economic benefits appear unclear to him, the EPA's own staff backed up its savings calculations with five pages of technical notes about how the calculations were made. The savings claim remains on the EPA website.

President Trump's proposed budget last year would have zeroed out Energy Star funding at the EPA. Calls for ending or privatizing the program have come mostly from libertarian and conservative groups, such as the Competitive Enterprise Institute and Heritage Foundation.

"We see consumer ratings for a very broad variety of things, including *Consumer Reports*, which provides guidance to consumers to buy different products. I don't see why appliances should be any different," says Diana Furchtgott-Roth, director of the Heritage Foundation's Center for Energy, Climate, and Environment. She argues that if the federal government didn't provide Energy Star and people found the information useful enough, a private company would step in to fill the need.

Zeldin expressed support for privatizing Energy Star at the congressional hearing last May and said the agency already was meeting with organizations interested in taking it over. But even advocates for privatizing Energy Star say that's unlikely now that Congress has stipulated that money be spent to keep the program within the government.

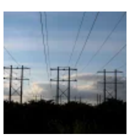
Evans says Energy Star already outsources much of its work to the private sector, including efficiency testing required for a product to earn the Energy Star label. He says more of the program could be contracted out in the future, but responsibility for managing it will remain with the EPA.

The future of Energy Star

The budget package that includes Energy Star funding passed the House 397-28 and the Senate 82-15. While members of both parties voted overwhelmingly for the overall budget package, Republicans who worked to preserve the program appear reluctant to comment on it now.

The Building Owners and Managers Association credits Idaho Congressman Mike Simpson, who chairs an appropriations subcommittee that oversees EPA funding, and Maine Sen. Susan Collins, chair of the Senate Committee on Appropriations. Neither lawmaker responded to NPR's questions.

For Energy Star advocates, the big concern now is how the EPA will run the program.



BUSINESS

Trump promised to cut energy bills in half. One year later, has he delivered?

"The Energy Star program is not fully out of the woods yet," says Jeremy Symons, senior adviser at Environmental Protection Network, a group of former EPA employees. "It's one thing to keep the Energy Star program alive and fully funded, but what we really need is for the program to be fully staffed."

The Trump administration reorganized the EPA last year, promising to cut staffing to Reagan-era levels. Now Energy Star has fewer employees assigned to it, with losses in the leadership and among the rank and file.

The EPA didn't answer questions about how many Energy Star staff members remain at the agency or its plans to staff the program in the future. "EPA is reviewing the Energy Star program to ensure responsible use of taxpayer dollars and full compliance with statutory requirements," Hirsch wrote in a statement emailed to NPR. "As the Administrator has consistently stated, he will follow the law as enacted by Congress."

Given that strong majorities in the Republican-controlled House and the Senate passed the legislation with Energy Star funding, advocates hope that will mean a bright future for the program.

"This is likely the minimum level of funding we'll have — give or take a little bit — moving forward and we should start planning around that to build the best program we can within this budget," Evans says.

climate change energy efficiency epa trump

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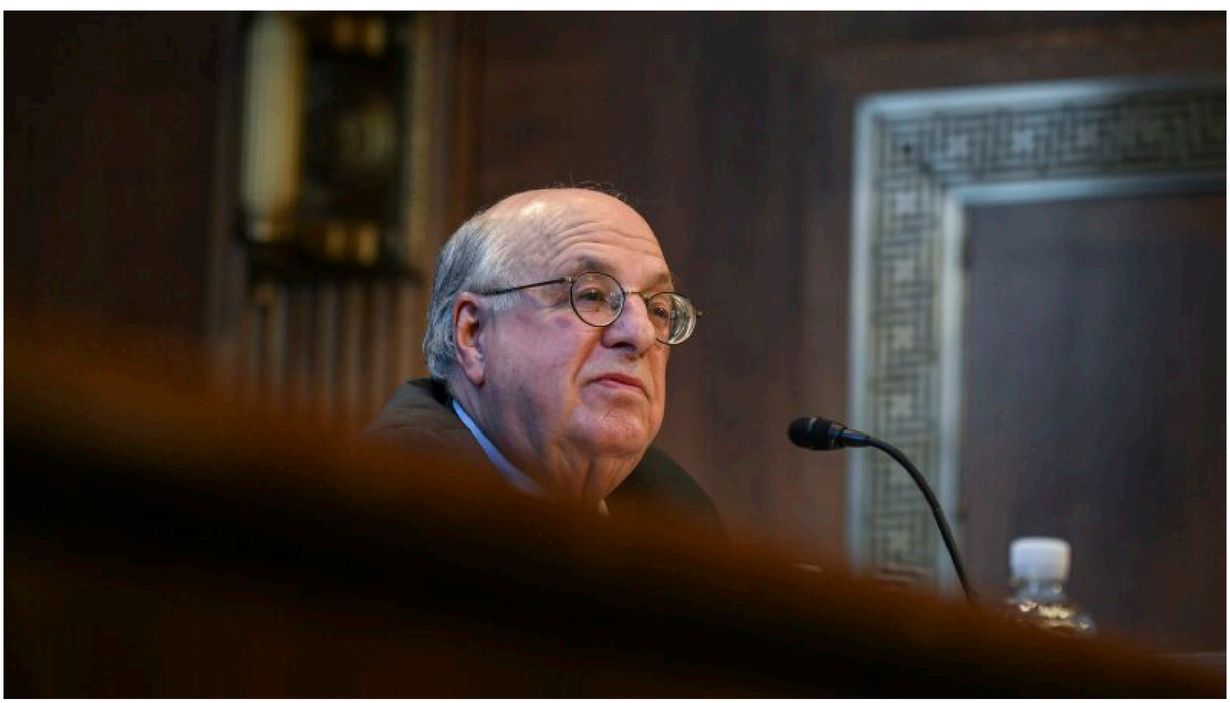

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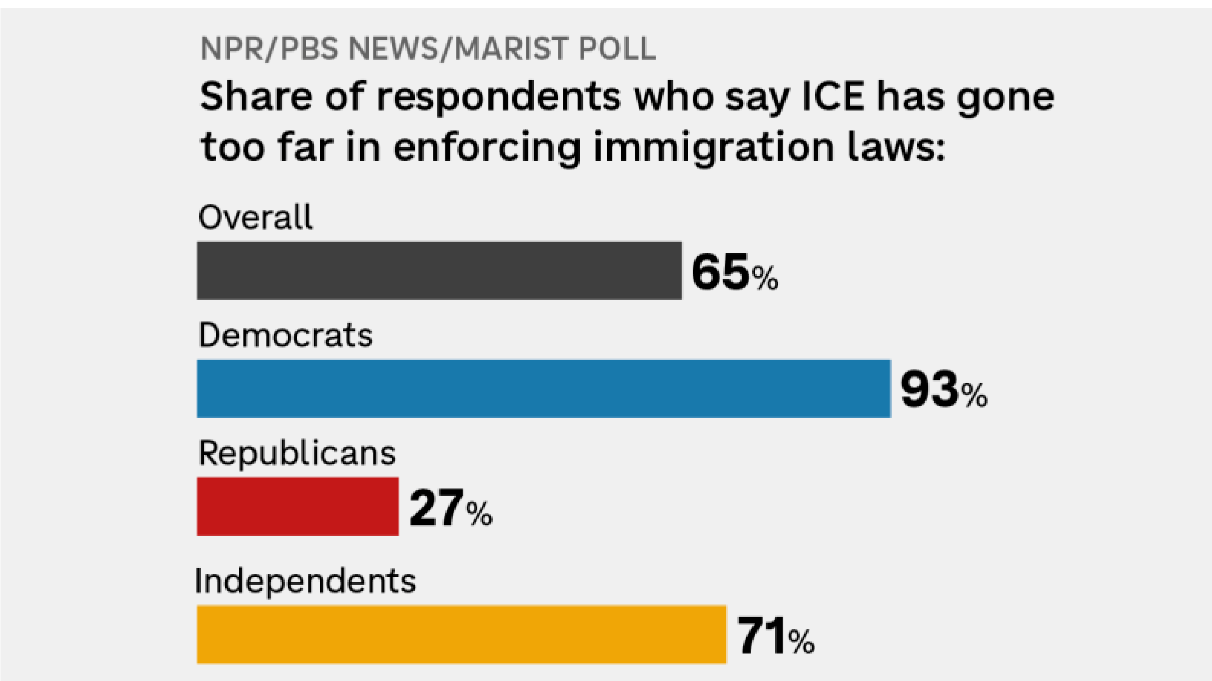

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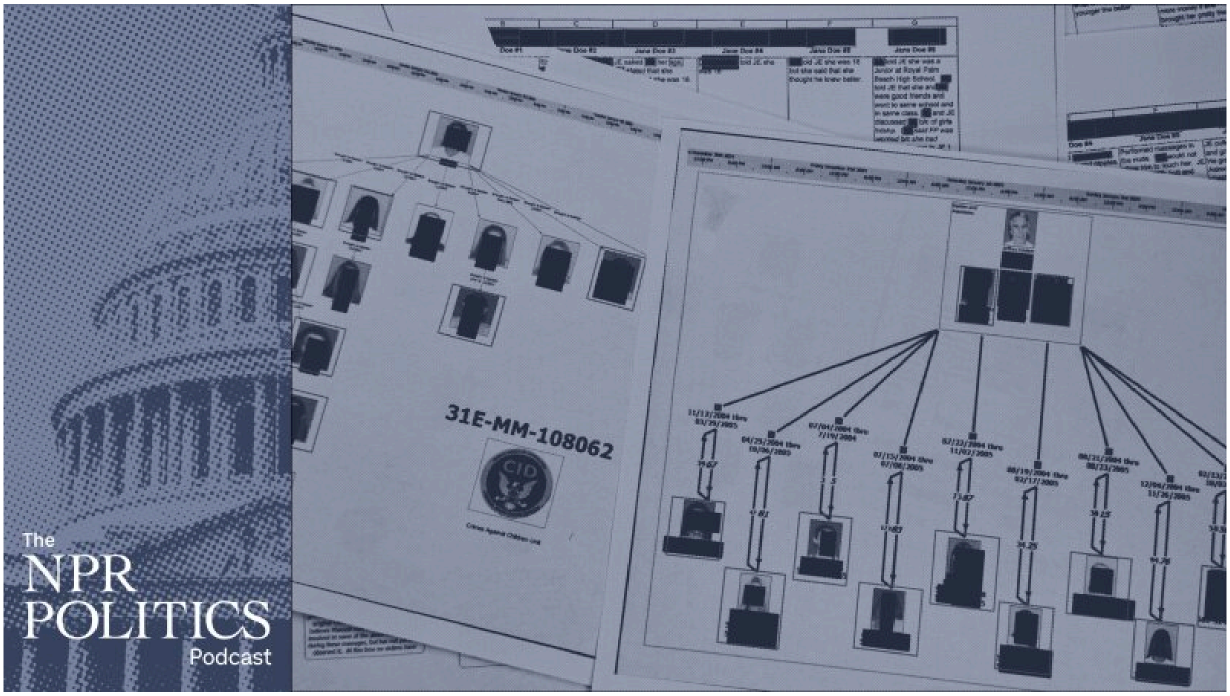

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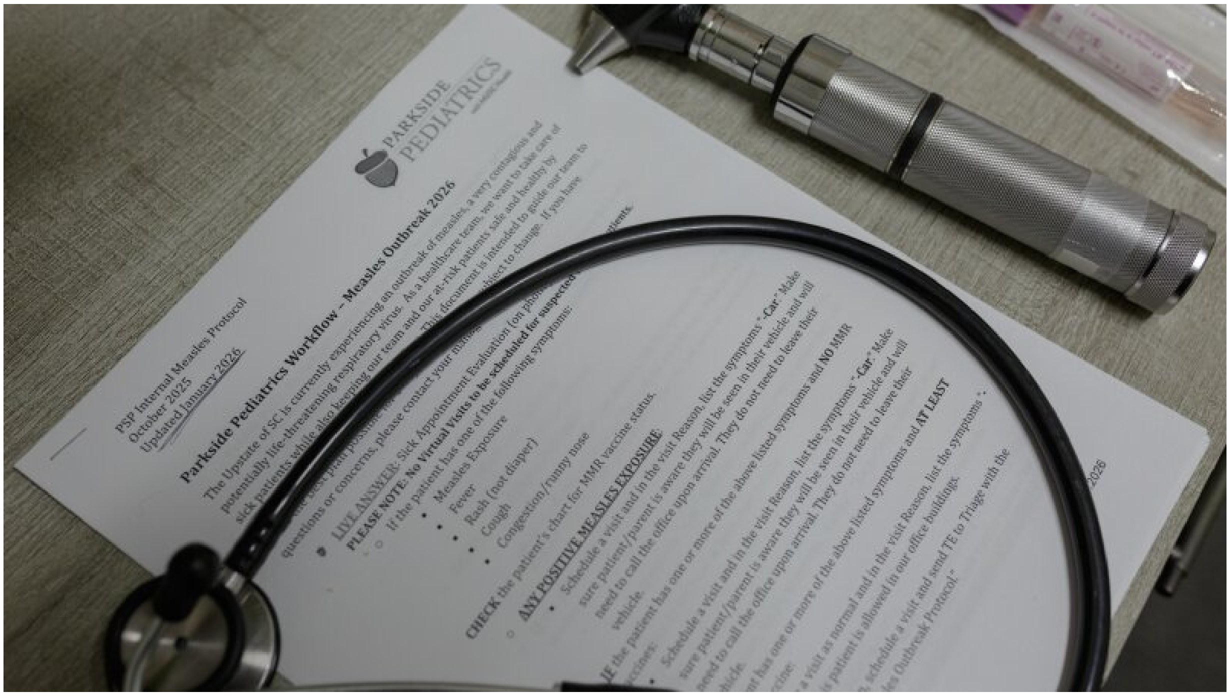

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Trump Allies Near ‘Total Victory’ in Wiping Out U.S. Climate Regulation

A small group of conservative activists has worked for 16 years to stop all government efforts to fight climate change. Their efforts seem poised to pay off.

By Lisa Friedman and Maxine Joselow
Reporting from Washington

Published Feb. 9, 2026 Updated Feb. 10, 2026, 11:55 a.m. ET

In the summer of 2022, Democrats in Congress were racing to pass the biggest climate law in the country’s history and President Joseph R. Biden Jr. was declaring that global warming posed a “clear and present danger” to the United States.

But behind the scenes, four Trump administration veterans were plotting to obliterate federal climate efforts once Republicans regained control in Washington, according to documents reviewed by The New York Times and interviews with more than a dozen people familiar with the matter.

Two of them, Russell T. Vought and Jeffrey B. Clark, were high-profile allies of Donald Trump. Mr. Vought, who has railed against “climate alarmism,” and Mr. Clark, who has called climate rules a “Leninistic” plot to seize control of the economy, drafted executive orders for the next Republican president to dismantle climate initiatives.

The other two, Mandy Gunasekara and Jonathan Brightbill, were lesser-known conservative attorneys with long histories of fighting climate initiatives. Ms. Gunasekara, a onetime aide to the most vocal global warming denialist in the Senate, and Mr. Brightbill, who had argued in court against Obama-era climate regulations, collected an “arsenal of information” to chip away at the scientific consensus that the planet is warming, documents show.

The overwhelming majority of scientists around the world agree that carbon dioxide, methane and other greenhouse gases are dangerously heating the planet and supercharging storms, droughts, heat waves and sea level rise, directly contradicting the four conservatives.

Nevertheless, their efforts are now paying off. In the coming days, the Environmental Protection Agency is expected to revoke a determination that has underpinned the federal government’s ability to fight global warming since 2009.

That scientific conclusion, known as the endangerment finding, determined that greenhouse gases threaten public health and welfare. It required the federal government to regulate these gases, which result from the burning of oil, gas and coal.

The endangerment finding concluded that greenhouse gases are amplifying extreme weather, therefore threatening public health. Philip Cheung for The New York Times

In revoking that determination, the Trump administration would erase limits on greenhouse gases from cars, power plants and industries that generate the planet-warming pollution.

Unlike the swings in federal policy that have become routine when administrations change hands, getting rid of the endangerment finding could hamstring any future administration's efforts to regulate greenhouse gas emissions.

"We are pretty close to total victory," said Myron Ebell, who helped the first Trump administration set up its operations at the E.P.A. and has been attacking climate science and policies for nearly three decades.

Mr. Ebell said that dozens of conservative activists, lawyers, scientists and others had worked for years to prepare the case against the endangerment finding. But he singled out Mr. Vought, Mr. Clark, Mr. Brightbill and Ms. Gunasekara as the ones who drafted detailed plans of attack that the second Trump administration has largely followed.

"No amount of outside public support would have done anything if there hadn't been those four people: Russ and Jeff and John and Mandy," he said.

Funding an ‘Arsenal’

When the E.P.A. issued the endangerment finding under President Barack Obama, it offered a mountain of peer-reviewed scientific evidence. In more than 200 pages, the agency detailed how increasingly severe heat waves, storms and droughts were expected to contribute to disease and death.

Conservative groups and businesses initially fought to discredit the science. But as they lost legal challenges and public concern about global warming began to grow, many corporations withdrew from the battle. By 2017, when Mr. Trump first took office, hundreds of U.S. companies, including oil giants and major manufacturers, had accepted the reality of climate change.

Even Mr. Trump’s top advisers at the time rejected the most extreme demands of those who wanted to challenge the science. Days before Mr. Trump left office in January 2021, his E.P.A. denied a petition from Mr. Ebell’s group to reconsider the endangerment finding.

“There just wasn’t an appetite among any of the institutional crowd,” said Michael McKenna, who worked in the White House on energy issues during Mr. Trump’s first term.

Still, some conservative activists who insisted that the threat of climate change was overblown kept up the fight during the Biden years.

One of them was Ms. Gunasekara, who served as E.P.A. chief of staff during Mr. Trump’s first term and wrote the E.P.A. chapter in Project 2025, the set of conservative policy recommendations for a second Trump term. Another was Mr. Brightbill, a partner at the law firm Winston & Strawn who had served in the Justice Department’s environment division during the first Trump administration.

Mandy Gunasekara is an attorney with long history of fighting climate initiatives. Rogelio V. Solis/Associated Press

Ms. Gunasekara is known in Washington for handing a snowball to James M. Inhofe, then a Republican senator from Oklahoma and her boss, on a cold February day in 2015. Mr. Inhofe held up the snowball in the well of the Senate as evidence that the planet could not be warming dangerously.

Mr. Brightbill, for his part, had gained some attention for prosecuting the owners of the Oklahoma zoo featured in the Netflix documentary series “Tiger King.” But his main focus as a federal attorney had been defending the first Trump administration’s repeal of Obama-era climate rules, including a landmark regulation aimed at curbing greenhouse gases from power plant smokestacks.

In the summer of 2022, as Mr. Biden and Democratic lawmakers were ramping up their climate efforts, Ms. Gunasekara and Mr. Brightbill sought $2 million for a secretive campaign to kill the endangerment finding, according to a funding pitch obtained by Fieldnotes, a watchdog group that investigates the oil and gas industry.

The two wanted funding to draft regulatory documents that a future administration could use to abandon the endangerment finding. They also planned to solicit white papers from favored scientists who did not accept the physics of climate change.

The endangerment finding had helped Democrats wage a “war on fossil fuels,” Ms. Gunasekara and Mr. Brightbill wrote in the funding pitch. Conservatives needed a comprehensive strategy for reversing the finding on “Day 1” of the next Republican administration, they wrote.

The campaign would operate in secret “to prevent media and other conflicted sources from shaming participants and undercutting the work before it is done,” they added.

The Heritage Foundation eventually agreed to fund some of this work, although it is unclear whether the group provided the full $2 million, according to two people familiar with the matter. A spokesman for the Heritage Foundation, where Ms. Gunasekara was a visiting fellow from September 2022 to December 2024, did not respond to questions.

The Heritage Foundation funded at least part of the campaign to kill the endangerment finding. Jared Soares for The New York Times

Ms. Gunasekara said in a text message that she was "extremely proud of the work I and others produced at the Heritage Foundation to rebut junk science and expose the Green New Scam." She said her work for the group had helped inform "Cooling the Climate Hysteria," a collection of essays by scholars who reject mainstream climate science. It features a melting ice cube on its cover.

Ben Dietderich, a spokesman for the Energy Department, where Mr. Brightbill is now the general counsel, declined to make him available for an interview but said in an email, "Jonathan Brightbill brings a deep understanding of energy and environmental issues that make him exceptionally qualified for his role."

Clinching 'Total Victory'

While many conservatives lined up against the endangerment finding when it was established, Mr. Clark started to fight its core principles many years earlier.

In 2005, as a 38-year-old Justice Department lawyer in the George W. Bush administration, Mr. Clark argued in federal court that the Clean Air Act did not give the E.P.A. the power to regulate greenhouse gases. The Supreme Court rejected that argument in a landmark 2007 case called Massachusetts v. E.P.A., clearing the way for the agency to issue the endangerment finding two years later.

It was a stinging defeat that Mr. Clark was determined to reverse, according to people familiar with the matter and his own remarks on podcasts, panels and other public forums.

During his time in the Justice Department, Jeffrey Clark argued that the Clean Air Act did not give the E.P.A. the power to regulate greenhouse gases. Jose Luis Magana/Associated Press

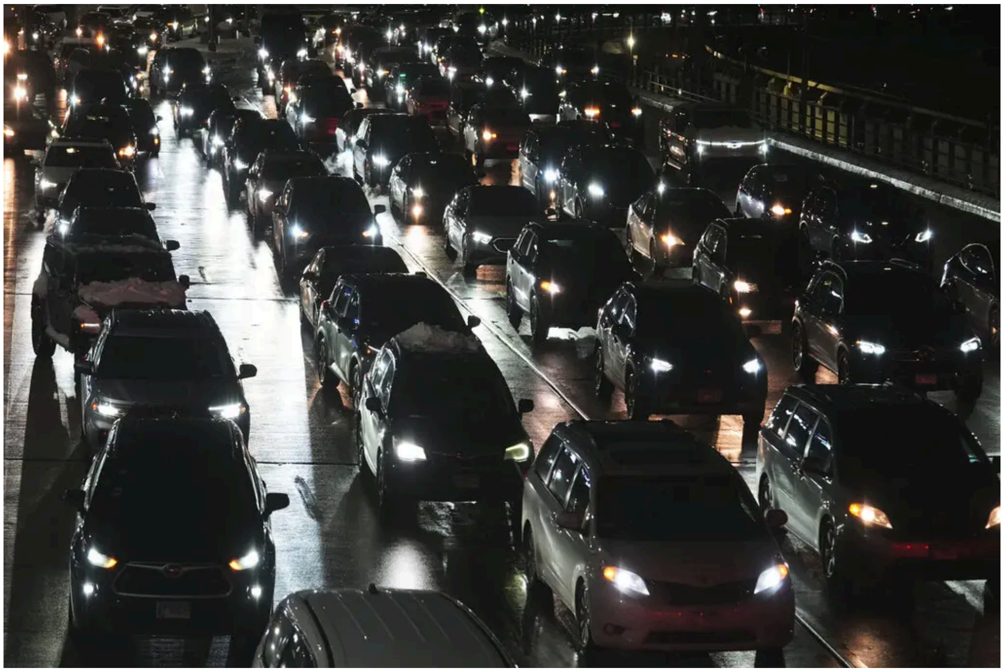
His next opportunity came in 2022, when he joined a conservative research organization called the Center for Renewing America. Mr. Vought was running the center from an old rowhouse near the Capitol, where he complained of pigeons infesting the walls. From there, Mr. Vought drew up sweeping plans for a second Trump administration.

Under Mr. Vought's supervision, Mr. Clark drafted executive orders that a future president could use to swiftly scrap Mr. Biden's climate policies, according to two people familiar with the matter. He also brainstormed legal arguments that the future administration could use to repeal the endangerment finding, the people said.

Former colleagues of Mr. Clark's said he was less concerned with reducing the costs to companies of complying with environmental laws than with fighting what he saw as government overreach in the form of climate policies.

Mr. Clark has called climate initiatives part of a plot to "control" Americans" and to undermine the U.S. economy. He has called environmentalists a "crazy climate cult" and compared them to the authoritarian pig characters in George Orwell's dystopian novel "Animal Farm."

Mr. Clark is "an ideologue with very, very strong views that E.P.A. shouldn't regulate greenhouse gases," said Richard Lazarus, a professor of environmental law at Harvard Law School and the author of the book "The Rule of Five: Making Climate History at the Supreme Court," in which Mr. Clark figures prominently.



Repealing the endangerment finding could hamper future administrations' efforts to regulate greenhouse gas emissions. Nam Y. Huh/Associated Press

"For the Russell Voughts, the Jeff Clarks, this has been a bee in their bonnet," Mr. Lazarus said.

At the time that he was hired by Mr. Vought, Mr. Clark was facing a criminal investigation in connection with Mr. Trump's effort to overturn the 2020 election results in Georgia. President Trump preemptively pardoned Mr. Clark in November and the Georgia case was dismissed.

With Mr. Trump's return to the White House last year, Mr. Clark became the government's top regulatory official as the acting head of the White House Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs. Mr. Vought is once again the White House budget director and Mr. Clark's boss.

In their new roles, both men have focused on ridding the government of green initiatives. And Mr. Clark has pushed E.P.A. lawyers to strengthen their legal arguments for repealing the endangerment finding, according to two people familiar with the matter.

Allie McCandless, a spokeswoman for the White House Office of Management and Budget, declined to make Mr. Clark available for an interview or respond to questions about his work. She said in a statement that Trump administration officials were "working in lock step to execute on the president's deregulation agenda."

Neil Chatterjee, a Republican who led the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission in the first Trump administration, said conservative activists had helped sustain the fight against the endangerment finding even after businesses backed out.

“It’s not the corporate interests,” Mr. Chatterjee said, adding, “It’s the pure ideological activists who believe that climate change is a hoax, who believe that this was about transferring wealth and driving socialism and destroying renewable energy and promoting left-wing ideology.”

“This is their moment,” Mr. Chatterjee said.

Steven J. Milloy, a former Trump transition adviser who runs a website that promotes theories saying that climate change is not real, said the years of work of conservative activists might have gone nowhere if a different Republican had won the presidency. Instead, the activists found a receptive audience in Mr. Trump, who has called climate change a “hoax” and a “con job.”

The next challenge is to ensure the repeal of the endangerment finding holds up in court, he said.

“We’ve kept the skepticism alive,” Mr. Milloy said, adding, “I hope we don’t blow it. I don’t know when or if this opportunity will come around again.”

Coral Davenport contributed reporting.

Lisa Friedman is a Times reporter who writes about how governments are addressing climate change and the effects of those policies on communities.

Maxine Joselow covers climate change and the environment for The Times from Washington.

NEWS: ENVIRONMENT

134 more people laid off from federal renewal energy lab in Golden

National Laboratory of the Rockies, formerly NREL, keeps shrinking under Trump administration changes

Michael Booth
4:54 PM MST on Feb 9, 2026

January 7, 2025 - Construction continued on the Control Center Facility during winter at the National Laboratory of the Rockies, previously known as the National Renewable Energy Laboratory. (Gregory Cooper, NREL)

The Golden renewable energy lab formerly known as the National Renewable Energy Laboratory laid off an additional 134 employees across both research and operations Monday, further shrinking the renowned center under changing Trump administration priorities.

The big losses followed the slashing of 114 staff and contracting positions at the renamed National Laboratory of the Rockies in May. Employees, conservation groups and Colorado's Congressional delegation have condemned the severe cuts to the renewables lab as a misguided American retreat on technology that could be key to the nation's economic future and slowing global climate change.

"Today, the National Laboratory of the Rockies implemented workforce actions affecting 134 employees across the laboratory, including roles in both research and operations. These actions were taken to adjust to existing and projected funding levels and alignment with (Department of Energy) priorities," spokesperson David Glickson said in an emailed statement. "We recognize the meaningful contributions of those impacted and the role they have played in advancing the laboratory's work."

"We appreciate their meaningful contributions to the laboratory. NREL's mission continues to be critical to achieve an affordable and secure energy future," the statement said.

Employees affected by the cuts have been reluctant to speak on the record while they await severance packages or struggle to hear about colleagues. Those who did speak said the lab is losing both promising young employees and many scientists or experts with decades of experience. They believe no other labs are doing the same level of work NREL used to do, and that other nations the U.S. had equalled or surpassed will now pick up the lead.

The successive rounds of layoffs have hit hard at what used to be a total of 3,675 employees listed on the NREL website at the beginning of 2025. President Trump's fiscal 2026 budget pitched $19.3 billion in cuts to the Department of Energy's allotted 2025 spending, according to the website utilitydive.com.

The White House budget request went out of its way to ridicule renewable energy research and subsidies promoted heavily by the Biden and Obama administrations: "The Budget cancels over $15 billion in Green New Scam funds committed to build unreliable renewable energy, removing carbon dioxide from the air, and other costly technologies burdensome to ratepayers and consumers," **the budget proposal said**.

The cuts are part of an openly stated reversal of renewable energy support in favor of bolstering traditional fossil fuel industries like coal-fired power plants and oil and gas drilling. The Trump administration, for example, has paved the way for coal-fired power plants in Colorado and other states to stay open long past scheduled closing dates.

Outlook

Hickenlooper, Bennet, Colleagues Demand Trump Reverse Political Termination of $600M in Public Health Grants

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For Immediate Release
February 20, 2026

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Hickenlooper, Bennet, Colleagues Demand Trump Reverse Political Termination of $600M in Public Health Grants

Washington, D.C. – U.S. Senators John Hickenlooper and Michael Bennet, along with nine of their Senate colleagues, are demanding the Trump administration immediately reverse its recent politically-motivated termination of $600 million of public health grants for Colorado, California, Illinois, and Minnesota.

"This funding supports core state and local public health infrastructure in each of these states, and any effort to impose such deep cuts is a threat to public safety. We demand that the administration immediately and definitively reverse course in its effort to rescind critical public health funding from communities in these states," the senators wrote.

"Indeed, only these four states were the subject of terminations, despite every state in the country receiving such funds to conduct virtually identical activities. It appears instead that these grant terminations are politically motivated. Public health threats, including infectious diseases, are not bound by state lines and they do not care about political affiliations. Terminating these grants makes those living in the specific communities served by these programs less healthy and it increases the

risks to the health of all Americans," the senators continued. **"The safety and health of our communities should not and cannot be contingent on political whims."**

Last week, the Trump administration blatantly targeted Democratic states, by eliminating critical Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) funding for public health and testing and treatment of lethal diseases including HIV, despite every state in the country receiving funds to conduct identical activities. In Colorado, the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment is losing $25 million in grants. Other health organizations in Colorado were targeted as well.

The full text of the letter can be found HERE and below:

Dear Secretary Kennedy:

We write you today to express deep concern about the Trump administration's decision to abruptly and unjustifiably terminate a reported $600 million in public health grants for California, Colorado, Illinois, and Minnesota administered by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). This funding supports core state and local public health infrastructure in each of these states, and any effort to impose such deep cuts is a threat to public safety. We demand that the administration immediately and definitively reverse course in its effort to rescind critical public health funding from communities in these states.

CDC's priorities statement lists "a commitment to modernizing public health infrastructure and enhancing our approach to health data" as a key strategic priority, alongside "empowering communities and strengthening public health systems for a safer, healthier nation." The administration has allegedly deemed the $600 million in grant funding as "inconsistent with agency priorities." Despite this claim, the administration's effort guts essential public health infrastructure, as well as testing and treatment for lethal diseases, including HIV. Should the administration move forward with these planned cuts, basic public health infrastructure in California, Colorado, Illinois, and Minnesota will be threatened.

In fact, the Department of Health and Human Services has provided no explanation for how these grants are "inconsistent with agency priorities". That is because there is no defense of these actions on those grounds – a review of the grants being terminated demonstrate that these are overwhelmingly exactly the kind of activities CDC should be supporting in communities across the country. Indeed, only these four states were the subject of terminations, despite every state in the country receiving such funds to conduct virtually identical activities. It appears instead that these grant terminations are politically motivated. Public health threats, including infectious diseases, are not bound by states lines and they do not care about political affiliations. Terminating these grants make those living in the specific communities served by these programs less healthy and it increases the risks to the health of all Americans.

The largest cuts target the Public Health Infrastructure Grant (PHIG) program – funding that serves as the backbone of hundreds of local health agencies. In California, PHIG funds emergency dental services for low-income children, and funds critical health care workforce education, including training for nurses and epidemiologists. Such deep cuts to PHIG funding would also result in hundreds of job terminations for public health workers who have dedicated their careers to protecting communities in California. In Illinois, cuts to PHIG would eliminate approximately one hundred employees from the Illinois Department of Public Health– upending financial stability for workers and their families and reducing the state's capacity to prevent lead poisoning in children and monitor disease outbreaks. The loss of PHIG funding in Colorado will significantly degrade public health infrastructure and capabilities across the State, ranging from reduced diabetes care for low-income residents, to elimination of resources for rural Coloradans who lack access to local care providers, to harming the State's ability to respond to immediate public health needs and future public health emergencies. In Minnesota, these grant terminations will lead to the immediate termination of 75 Minnesota Department of Health FTEs, immediate loss of organizational support for 50 rural local public health departments, including two very small "frontier" public health departments, and elimination of core public health activities, including the norovirus and food safety program which includes a statewide foodborne illness complaint system, making it riskier for Minnesotans to trust the food supply of real, whole foods. In addition, these cuts to public health funding will jeopardize Tribal health programs in California, Colorado, and Minnesota that address chronic disease and uphold the federal government's treaty obligations.

These latest grant terminations also fall on the heels of your recent attempt to terminate 2,800 grants and $2 billion in funding supporting mental health and substance use prevention and treatment programs nationwide, as well as your attempt to pause all activities under CDC's PHIG program nationwide. Those actions were so reckless and deadly that both decisions were reversed within 24 hours. Effectuating similar terminations to lifesaving public health programs, but targeting them to Democratically governed and represented states is solely vindictive and should be immediately reversed. Funding provided by CDC has improved the well-being and health status of communities across the United States. Investment in public health infrastructure nationwide is essential to achieving this administration's stated goals of improving population health, strengthening resilience, and reducing long-term healthcare costs. Weakening this infrastructure diminishes our collective ability to respond to emerging health threats, leaving our country more vulnerable.

To that end, we demand the Trump administration immediately and definitively reverse all efforts to gut CDC public health funding for California, Colorado, Illinois, and Minnesota, and to abandon this kind of politically-motivated effort in other states. The safety and health of our communities should not and cannot be contingent on political whims, and we look forward to working with you to ensure robust support for America's public health infrastructure.

Sincerely,

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TECHNOLOGY

AMERICA ISN'T READY FOR WHAT AI WILL DO TO JOBS

Does anyone have a plan for what happens next?

By Josh Tyrangiel
Illustrations by Stephan Dybus

Illustration by Stephan Dybus

FEBRUARY 10, 2026, 6 AM ET

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In 1869, a group of Massachusetts reformers persuaded the state to try a simple idea: counting.

The Second Industrial Revolution was belching its way through New England, teaching mill and factory owners a lesson most M.B.A. students now learn in their first semester: that efficiency gains tend to come from somewhere, and that somewhere is usually somebody else. The new machines weren't just spinning cotton or shaping steel. They were operating at speeds that the human body—an elegant piece of engineering designed over millions of years for entirely different purposes—simply wasn't built to match. The owners knew this, just as they knew that there's a limit to how much misery people are willing to tolerate before they start setting fire to things.

Still, the machines pressed on.

So Massachusetts created the nation's first Bureau of Statistics of Labor, hoping that data might accomplish what conscience could not. By measuring work hours, conditions, wages, and what economists now call "negative externalities" but were then called "children's arms torn off," policy makers figured they might be able to produce reasonably fair outcomes for everyone. Or, if you're a bit more cynical, a sustainable level of exploitation. A few years later, with federal troops shooting at striking railroad workers and wealthy citizens funding private armories—leading indicators that things in your society aren't going great—Congress decided that this idea might be worth trying at scale and created the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Measurement doesn't abolish injustice; it rarely even settles arguments. But the act of counting—of trying to see clearly, of committing the government to a shared set of facts—signals an intention to be fair, or at least to be caught trying. Over time, that intention matters. It's one way a republic earns the right to be believed in.

The BLS remains a small miracle of civilization. It sends out detailed surveys to about 60,000 households and 120,000 businesses and government agencies every month, supplemented by qualitative research it uses to check and occasionally correct its findings. It deserves at least some credit for the scoreboard. America: 250 years without violent class warfare. And you have to appreciate the entertainment value of its minutiae. The BLS is how we know that, in 2024, 44,119 people worked in mobile food services (a.k.a. food trucks), up 907 percent since 2000; that nonveterinary pet care (grooming, training) employed 190,984 people, up 513 percent; and that the United States had almost 100,000 massage therapists, with five times the national concentration in Napa, California.

From the February 2026 issue: Alexandra Petri tried to be the federal government. It did not go well.

These and thousands of other BLS statistics describe a society that has grown more prosperous, and a workforce endlessly adaptive to change. But like all statistical bodies, the BLS has its limits. It's excellent at revealing what has happened and only moderately useful at telling us what's about to. The data can't foresee recessions or pandemics—or the arrival of a technology that might do to the workforce what an asteroid did to the dinosaurs.

I am referring, of course, to artificial intelligence. After a rollout that could have been orchestrated by H. P. Lovecraft—"We are summoning the demon," Elon Musk warned in a typical early pronouncement—the AI industry has pivoted from the language of nightmares to the stuff of comas. *Driving innovation. Accelerating transformation. Reimagining workflows.* It's the first time in history that humans have invented something genuinely miraculous and then rushed to dress it in a fleece vest.

There are gobs of money to be made selling enterprise software, but dulling the impact of AI is also a useful feint. This is a technology that can digest a hundred reports before you've finished your coffee, draft and analyze documents faster than teams of paralegals, compose music indistinguishable from the genius of a pop star or a Juilliard grad, code—really code, not just copy-paste from Stack Overflow—with the precision of a top engineer. Tasks that once required skill, judgment, and years of training are now being executed, relentlessly and indifferently, by software that learns as it goes.

AI is already so ubiquitous that any resourceful knowledge worker can delegate some of their job's drudgery to machines. Many companies—Microsoft and PricewaterhouseCoopers among them—have instructed their employees to increase productivity by doing just that. But anyone subcontracting tasks to AI is clever enough to imagine what might come next—a day when augmentation crosses into automation, and cognitive obsolescence compels them to seek work at a food truck, pet spa, or massage table. At least until the humanoid robots arrive.

Stephan Dybus

Many economists insist that this will all be fine. Capitalism is resilient. The arrival of the ATM famously led to the employment of more bank tellers, just as the introduction of Excel swelled the ranks of accountants and Photoshop spiked demand for graphic designers. In each case, new tech automated old tasks, increased productivity, and created jobs with higher wages than anyone could have conceived of before. The BLS projects that employment will grow 3.1 percent over the next 10 years. That's down from 13 percent in the previous decade, but 5 million new jobs in a country with a stable population is hardly catastrophic.

And yet: There are things that economists struggle to measure. Americans tend to derive meaning and identity from what they do. Most don't want to do something else, even if they had any confidence—which they don't—that they could find something else to do. Seventy-one percent of respondents to an August Reuters/Ipsos poll said they're worried that artificial intelligence will "put too many people out of work permanently."

This data point might be easier to dismiss if the modern mill and factory owners hadn't already declared that AI will put people out of work permanently.

In May 2025, Dario Amodei, the CEO of the AI company Anthropic, said that AI could drive unemployment up 10 to 20 percent in the next one to five years and "wipe out half of all entry-level white-collar jobs." Jim Farley, the CEO of Ford, estimated that it would eliminate "literally half of all white-collar workers" in a decade. Sam Altman, the CEO of OpenAI, revealed that "my little group chat with my tech-CEO friends" has a bet about the inevitable date when a billion-dollar company is staffed by just one person. (The business side of this magazine, like some other publishers, has a corporate partnership with OpenAI.) Other companies, including Meta, Amazon, UnitedHealth, Walmart, JPMorgan Chase, and UPS, which have recently announced layoffs, have framed them more euphemistically in sunny reports to investors about the rise of "automation" and "head count trending down." Taken together, these statements are extraordinary: the owners of capital warning workers that the ice beneath them is about to crack—while continuing to stomp on it.

It's as if we're watching two versions of the same scene. In one, the ice holds, because it always has. In the other, a lot of people go under. The difference becomes clear only when the surface finally gives way—at which point the range of available options will have considerably narrowed.

AI is already transforming work, one delegated task at a time. If the transformation unfolds slowly enough and the economy adjusts quickly enough, the economists may be right: We'll be fine. Or better. But if AI instead triggers a rapid reorganization of work—compressing years of change into months, affecting roughly 40 percent of jobs worldwide, as the International Monetary Fund projects—the consequences will not stop at the economy. They will test political institutions that have already shown how brittle they can be.

The question, then, is whether we're approaching the kind of disruption that can be managed with statistics—or the kind that creates statistics no one can bear to count.

AUSTAN GOOLSBEE IS the president of the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago, the Robert P. Gwinn Professor of Economics at the University of Chicago's Booth School of Business, and a former chair of the Council of Economic Advisers under Barack Obama. He's also one of the few economists you would not immediately regret bringing to a party. When I asked Goolsbee if any conclusive data indicated that AI had begun to eat into the labor market, he delivered an answer that was both obvious and unhelpful, smiling as he did it. The nonanswer was the point.

I've known Goolsbee long enough to enjoy these moments, when he makes fun of our shared uselessness. Economists are rarely equipped to give straight answers about the present. Journalists hate when the future won't reveal itself on deadline.

We spoke in September, shortly after the release of what's come to be known as "The Canaries Paper," written by three academics from the Stanford Digital Economy Lab. By crunching data from millions of monthly payroll records for workers in jobs with exposure to generative AI, the authors concluded that workers ages 22 to 25—the canaries—have seen about a 13 percent decline in employment since late 2022.

For several days, the paper was all anyone in the field wanted to talk about, and by talk about I mostly mean punch holes in. The report overemphasized the effect of ChatGPT. Youth employment is cyclical. The same period saw a sharp interest-rate spike—a far more likely source of turbulence. “Canaries” also contradicted a study released a few weeks earlier by the Economic Innovation Group, which argued that AI is unlikely to cause mass unemployment in the near term, even as it reshapes jobs and wages. That paper was knowingly titled “AI and Jobs: The Final Word (Until the Next One).”

This was the point Goolsbee wanted to emphasize: Economists are constrained by numbers. And numerically speaking, nothing indicates that AI has had an impact on people’s jobs. “It’s just too early,” he said.

A lack of certainty should not be mistaken for a lack of concern. The Fed’s mandate is to promote maximum employment, so the corporate pronouncements about imminent job loss have Goolsbee’s attention. But the numbers don’t add up. It’s possible that the labor market is softer than it looks, but that the softness is being absorbed within firms rather than showing up in the unemployment rate. If companies are sitting on more workers than they need, however—a phenomenon known as labor hoarding—you’d expect that to reveal itself as weak productivity growth. It’s as predictable as a hangover: too many workers, not enough work, sagging productivity. “But it’s been totally the opposite,” Goolsbee said. “Productivity growth has been really high. So I don’t know how to reconcile that.”

Productivity is the cheat code for a more prosperous society. If each worker can produce more in the same hour—more goods, better services, faster results—then the total economic p[illegible] even if the number of workers doesn't. It's the rare efficiency gain that expands the pie rather than merely redistributing slices.

America has been on a productivity tear for the past few years. It might be temporary, the result of a onetime boost, such as the COVID-era boom in new small businesses. But with the special joy of someone paid to complicate everything, Goolsbee pointed out that general-purpose technologies such as electricity and computing can create lasting productivity gains, the kind that make whole societies wealthier.

Whether AI is one of those technologies will only become clear over time. How long before we'll know? "Years," Goolsbee said.

In the meantime, there's another complication. The immediate risk to employment may not be AI itself, but the way companies, seduced by its promise, overinvest before they understand what it can actually do. Goolsbee reached back to the internet bubble, when companies spent wildly on laying fiber cables and building capacity. "In 2001, when we found out that the growth rate of the internet is not going to be 25 percent a year, but merely 10 percent—which is still a pretty great growth rate—it meant we had way too much fiber, and there was a collapse of business investment," Goolsbee said. "And a bunch of people were thrown out of work the old-fashioned way."

A similar crash in AI investment, if it comes, would likely look familiar: painful, destabilizing, and accompanied by surges of CNBC rants and recriminations. But it would amount to a financial reset, not a technological reversal—the kind of outcome economists are especially good at recognizing, because it resembles a thing that's happened before.

This is the paradox of economics. To understand how fast the present is hurtling us into the future, you need a fixed point, and the fixed points are all in the past. It's like driving while looking only at the rearview mirror—plenty dangerous if the road stays straight, catastrophic if it doesn't.

David Autor and Daron Acemoglu are among the most accomplished rearview drivers. Both are at MIT, and both excel at understanding previous economic disruptions. Acemoglu, who won the Nobel Prize in Economics in 2024, studies inequality; Autor foc[illegible]bor. But both insist that the story of AI and its consequences will dep[illegible]stly on speed—not because they assume lost jobs will automatically be replaced, but because a slower rate of change leaves societies time to adapt, even if some of those jobs never come back.

Labor markets have a natural rate of adjustment. If, over the course of 30 years, 3 percent of employees in a profession retire or have their jobs eliminated annually, you'd barely notice. Yet a decade later, a third of the jobs in those professions would be gone. Elevator operators and tollbooth attendants went through this slow fade to obsolescence with no damage to the economy. "When it happens more rapidly," Autor told me, "things become problematic."

From the July/August 2015 issue: Derek Thompson on a world without work

Autor is most famous for his work on the China shock. In 2001, China joined the World Trade Organization; six years later, 13 percent of U.S. manufacturing jobs—about 2 million—had disappeared. The China shock took a disproportionate toll on small-scale manufacturing—textiles, toys, furniture—concentrated primarily in the South. "Many of the workers in those places still haven't recovered," Autor said, "and we're obviously living with the political consequences."

But AI isn't a trade policy. It's software. Even if it hits some professions and places first—a lawyer in a large urban firm, say, may feel the impact years before a worker in a less digitized industry—the technology won't be constrained by geography. Eventually, everyone will be affected.

All of this sounds foreboding, until you remember the most important thing about software: People hate it, almost as much as they hate change.

This is what gives many economists confidence that the AI asteroid is still at least a decade away. "These tech CEOs want us to believe that the market for automation is preordained, and that it will all happen smoothly and profitably," Acemoglu said. He then made a disdainful noise from his Nobel Prize–winning bullshit detector. "History tells us it's actually going to happen much slower."

The argument goes like this: Before AI can transform a company, it has to access the company's data and be woven into existing systems—which sounds easy, provided you're not a chief technology officer. A trade secret of most *Fortune* 500 companies is that they still run many critical functions on lumbering, industrial-strength mainframe computers that almost never break down and therefore can never be replaced. Mainframes are like Christopher Walken: They've been going nonstop since the 1960s, they're fantastic at performing peculiar roles (processing payments, safeguarding data), and nobody alive really understands how they work.

Integrating legacy tech with modern AI means navigating hardware, vendors, contracts, ancient coding languages, and humans—every one of whom has a strong opinion about the "right" way to make changes. Months pass, then years; another company holiday party comes and goes; and the CEO still can't understand why the miracle of AI isn't solving all of their problems.

Every new general-purpose technology is, for a time, held hostage by the mess of what already exists. The first electric-power stations opened in the 1880s, and no one debated whether they were superior to steam engines. But factories had been built with steam engines in their basements, powering overhead shafts that ran the length of the buildings, with belts and pulleys carrying power to individual machines. To adopt electricity, factory owners didn't just need to buy motors—they needed to demolish and rebuild their entire operations. Some did. Most just waited for their infrastructure to wear out, which explains why the major economic gains from electrification didn't show up for 40 years.

NONE OF THIS IS REASSURING enough for the economist Anton Korinek. He's "super worried," he told me. He thinks that America will see major job losses—"a very noticeable labor-market effect"—as soon as this year.

"And then those economists you've been talking to, they're going to say, 'I see that in the data!'" Korinek paused. "Let's not joke about it, because it's too serious."

Korinek is a professor and the faculty director of the Economics of Transformative AI Initiative at the University of Virginia. Last year, *Time* magazine put him on its list of the most influential people in AI. But he did not set out to become an economist. He grew up in an Austrian mountain village, writing machine code in 0s and 1s—the least glamorous form of programming, and the most unforgiving. It teaches you where instructions bottleneck, where systems jam, and what breaks first when pushed too hard.

He'd kept a close watch on developments in AI since the deep-learning breakthroughs of the early 2010s, even as his doctoral work focused on the prevention of financial crises. When he got his first demo of a large language model, in September 2022, it took "about five seconds" before he considered its consequences for the future of work, starting with his own.

We met for breakfast in Charlottesville in the fall. Korinek is youthful and slender, with delicate wire-frame glasses and a faintly red beard. My overall impression was of someone who'd rather be customizing Excel tabs than prophesizing doom. Still, here he was, saying the five words economists disdain the most: *This time may be different*.

Stephan Dybus

The crux of Korinek's argument is simple: His colleagues aren't misreading the data—they're misreading the technology. "We can't quite conceptualize having very smart machines," Korinek said. "Machines have always been dumb, and that's why we don't trust them and [illegible] taken time to roll them out. But if they're smarter than us, in many ways they can roll themselves out."

This is already happening. Many of the least comprehensible ads during sporting events are for AI tools that promise to speed the integration of other AI tools into the workflows of large companies. Because many of these systems don't require massive new hardware or human-engineered system rewrites, the rollout time shrinks by as much as 50 percent.

This is where Korinek parts company with the rearview economists. If AI moves as fast as he expects, for many workers the damage will arrive before institutions can adapt—and each successful use will only intensify the pressure for more.

Consider consulting firms, which have always charged high fees for having junior associates do research and draft reports—fees clients tolerated because there was no alternative. But if one firm can use AI to deliver the same work faster and cheaper, its competitors face a stark choice: adopt the technology, or explain why they are still charging a premium for human hours. Once a firm plugs in and undercuts its rivals, the rest must either race to follow or be left behind. Competition doesn't just reward adoption; it makes delay indefensible.

Korinek concedes the two standard objections: The numbers don't show anything definitive yet, and new technologies have historically created more jobs than they've destroyed. But he thinks that his peers need to start driving with their eyes looking ahead. "Whenever I speak to people at the labs on the West Coast"—Korinek is an unpaid member of Anthropic's economic advisory council—"it does not strike me that they are trying to artificially hype what they're producing. I usually have the sense that they are just as terrified as I am. We should at least consider the possibility that what they are telling us may come true."

Korinek is not sure that the technology itself can be steered by policy, but he wants more economists doing scenario planning so that policy makers aren't caught flat-footed—because mass job loss doesn't just mean unemployment; it means missed loan payments, cascading defaults, shrinking consumer demand, and the kind of self-reinforcing downturn that can transform a shock into a crisis, and a crisis into the decline of an empire.

After the brief period in early 2025 when CEOs were openly volunteering "thought leadership" about AI and its impact on their workforces and profit margins, the pronouncements stopped, eerily, at roughly the same time. Anyone who has seen a shark fin break the water and then disappear knows this is not reassuring.

The simple explanation comes courtesy of the Bureau of Labor Statistics. America employs about 280,590 public-relations specialists, an increase of 69 percent over the past two decades. (They outnumber journalists almost 7 to 1.) It's not hard to imagine their expert syllogism: AI is unpopular. CEOs who talk about job cuts are even less popular. So maybe shut up about AI and jobs?

In October, the day after *The New York Times* revealed Amazon executives' plan to potentially automate more than 600,000 jobs by 2033, the PR chief at a large multinational firm told me, "We are so done speaking about this." It was at least a small piece of history—the first time I'd been asked to grant anonymity to someone so they could explain, on the record, that they would no longer be speaking at all.

All of which is to say that the chief executives of Walmart, Amazon, Ford, and other *Fortune* 100 companies, as well as executives from rising AI-driven firms including Anthropic, Stripe, and Waymo—people who had been remarkably chatty about AI and jobs a few months earlier—declined or ignored multiple interview requests for this story. Even the Business Roundtable, an association of 200 CEOs from America's most powerful companies that exists to speak for its members on exactly these kinds of issues, told me that its CEO, former George W. Bush White House Chief of Staff Joshua Bolten, had nothing to say.

Of course, telling a reporter you won't speak on the record isn't the same as not speaking. The CEOs are talking to at least one person: Reid Hoffman, the co-founder of LinkedIn and a Microsoft board member. Hoffman is a technologist by pedigree and an optimist by temperament. He knows everyone in corporate America, and everyone knows he knows everyone, which makes him Silicon Valley's favorite mensch—a reasonable, neutral sounding board whom CEOs can go to when they want to think out loud. He told me that AI has sorted the CEOs into three groups.

The first are the dabblers: latecomers finally spending some quality time with their chief technology officers. The second rushed to declare themselves AI leaders out of vanity or a desire to have their traditional businesses taken more seriously by tech snobs. “They’re like, *Look at me! I’m important! I’m central here*. But they’re not actually doing anything yet,” Hoffman said. “They’re just like, *Put me at the AI table too*.” The third group is different: executives who are quietly making transformational plans. “These are the ones who see it coming. And to their credit, I think a lot of them want to figure out how to help their whole workforce transition with this through education, reskilling, or training.”

But what all three groups share is a belief that investors—after years of hearing about AI’s promise—have lost patience with dreaming. This year, they expect results. And the fastest way for a CEO to produce results is to cut head count. Layoffs, Hoffman said, are inevitable. “A lot of them have convinced themselves this only ends one way. Which I think is a failure of the imagination.”

Hoffman doesn’t waste time urging CEOs not to make cuts; he knows they will. “What I tell them is that you need to be presenting paths and ideas for how to get benefits from AI that aren’t just cutting costs. How do you get more revenue? How do you help your people transition to being more effective using AI?”

“It’s a fever,” Gina Raimondo, the former governor of Rhode Island and commerce secretary under Joe Biden, told me, referring to the rush to cut jobs. “Every CEO and every board feels like they need to go faster. ‘We have 40,000 people doing customer service? Take it down to 10,000. AI can handle the rest.’ If the whole thing is about moving fast with your eye strictly on efficiency, then an awful lot of people are going to get really hurt. And I don’t think this country can handle that, given where we already are.”

Like Hoffman, Raimondo occupies an unusual niche: a Democrat who can walk into a boardroom without setting off the cultural metal detectors. She co-founded a venture-capital firm, and AI executives, who see her as pragmatic and fluent in tech, are willing to talk to her. “This is a technology that will make us more productive, healthier, more sustainable,” Raimondo said. “But only if we get very serio [illegible] managing the transition.”

Last summer, Raimondo made the trip to Sun Valley, Idaho, for the four-day Allen & Co. conference known as "summer camp for billionaires." She asked people the same two questions: How are you using AI? And what happens to your workers when you do? A number of CEOs admitted that they felt trapped. Wall Street expects them to replace human labor with AI; if they don't do it, they'll be the ones out of a job. But if they all order mass job eliminations, they know the consequences will be enormous—for their workforces, for the country, and for their own humanity.

Raimondo's response was that "it's the responsibility of the country's most powerful CEOs to help figure this out." She sees the possibility of "new public-private partnerships at scale. Imagine if we could get companies to take ownership over the retraining and redeployment of people they lay off."

She knows how this sounds. "A lot of people say, 'Oh, Gina, you're naive. Never going to happen.' Okay. But I'm telling you it's the end of America as we know it if we don't use this moment to do things differently."

If executives' concern is as genuine as Raimondo thinks, then perhaps they can be moved to action. Liz Shuler, the president of the AFL-CIO, is trying—and mostly failing—to do just that. CEOs and tech leaders are so focused on winning the AI race that "working people are an afterthought," she told me.

Shuler's aware that this is a predictable take from a union leader, so she volunteered a concession: "Most working people, and especially union leaders, start out with a panic, right? Like, *Wow, this is going to basically obliterate all jobs and everyone's going to be left without a safety net and we have to put a stop to it*—which we know is not going to happen." Instead of panicking, Shuler said, she talked with the leaders of the AFL-CIO's unions, representing about 15 million people, and pushed them to use the brief moment before AI is imposed on them to figure out what they want from the technology—and what they might be prepared to trade for that.

Michael Podhorzer: The paradox of the American labor movement

So far the olive branch has been grabbed by precisely one company. Microsoft has agreed to bring workers into conversations about developing AI and guardrails around it. Most remarka[illegible]deal includes a neutrality agreement that allows workers to fr[illegible]n unions without retaliation—

something that's never been done before in tech. "We think it's a model," Shuler said. "We would love to see others acknowledge that working people are central to this debate and to our future."

Squint and you might convince yourself that the Microsoft deal is indeed proof of concept. More likely, it's an anomaly. Because all the coaxing, reasonableness, and appeals to patriotism and shared humanity are battling a truth as old as wage labor: American capitalism rushes toward efficiency the way water flows downhill—inevitably, indifferently, and with predictable consequences for whoever happens to be standing at the bottom. And with AI, for the first time, capital has a tool that promises the kind of near-limitless productivity the factory and mill owners could never have imagined: maximum efficiency with a minimum number of employees to demand a share of the gains.

In that context, the silence of the CEOs takes on a different resonance. It could be a cold acknowledgment that the decisions have already been made—or a muffled plea for the government to save them from themselves.

AND SO TO WASHINGTON.

You're probably aware that our politics are unbearable at the moment. And yet the only way to make them bearable—to recover the glimmer of promise at their core—is more politics. That's the joke at the heart of Washington: The very struggle that's hollowed the place out is also the only way it can be renewed.

If there were ever an issue capable of relieving the national migraine—something large enough and urgent enough—you might assume the future of American jobs would be it. "At least from my interactions here in the Senate, not many people are talking about it," Gary Peters, the senior senator from Michigan, told me. "There's a general attitude among my colleagues"—Peters, a Democrat, singles out Republicans, though he says there's blame to go around—"like, *We don't need to do anything. It's going to be fine. In fact, the government should just stay out of it. Let industry move forward and continue to innovate*."

Stephan Dybus

It’s hard to slow AI without abdicating America’s tech supremacy to China—a point the tech lobby makes with religious fervor. It’s hard to force AI labs to give advance notice of the consequences of their deployments when they often don’t know themselves. You could regulate the use of job-displacing AI, but enforcement would require a regulatory apparatus that doesn’t exist and technical expertise the government doesn’t have.

That said, the government has a decades-old playbook on how to get workers through economic shocks. And Pet[illegible]been banging his head on his desk trying to get Congress to use it.

Since 1974, when the United States began opening its economy more aggressively to global trade, the Trade Adjustment Assistance program has helped more than 5 million people with retraining, wage insurance, and relocation grants, at a cost in recent years of roughly half a billion dollars annually. In 2018, Peters co-sponsored the TAA for Automation Act, which would have extended the same benefits to workers squeezed by AI and robotics. It died quietly, as many things in Congress do. In 2022, authorization for the TAA expired, and in a Congress allergic to trade votes and new spending, Peters's efforts to revive it have gone nowhere.

This is very stupid. The United States has about 700,000 unfilled factory and construction jobs. (Ironically, one of the few things slowing AI is a shortage of HVAC technicians qualified to install cooling systems in data centers.) Jim Farley, the Ford CEO who predicted that half of white-collar jobs could disappear in a decade, has been saying that the auto industry is short hundreds of thousands of technicians to work in dealerships—jobs that sit in a long-term sweet spot: technical enough to earn six figures, and dependent on precise manual dexterity that makes them hard to roboticize. But someone has to pay for the months of training the jobs require. "These are really good jobs," Peters said. But "we spend a lot more money from the federal government for four-year higher-education institutions than we do for skilled-training programs."

There's no shortage of ideas about what to do if AI hollows out large swaths of work: universal basic income, benefits that don't depend on employers, lifelong retraining, a shorter workweek. They tend to surface whenever technological anxiety spikes—and to recede just as reliably, undone by cost, politics, or the simple fact that they would require a level of coordination the United States has not managed in decades.

The 119th Congress is a ghost ship, steered by ennui and the desire to evade hard choices. And the AI industry is paying millions of dollars to make sure no one grabs the wheel. To cite just one example, a super PAC called Leading the Future—which has reportedly secured $50 million in commitments from the Silicon Valley venture-capital firm Andreessen Horowitz and $50 million more from the OpenAI co-founder Greg Brockman and his wife, Anna—plans to "aggressively oppose" candidates from both parties who threaten the industry's priorities, which boil do fast. No, faster.

Shuler told me that the AFL-CIO will keep pressing national elected officials for a worker-focused AI agenda, but that "this game is not gonna be played at the federal level as much as it will be at the state level." More than 1,000 AI bills are bubbling up in statehouses. Of course, the AI money will be there, too; Leading the Future has already announced plans to focus its efforts on New York, California, Illinois, and Ohio.

The executive branch has delegated almost all of its AI oversight to David Sacks—nominally a co-chair of the President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology, but functionally a government LARPer who maintains his role as a venture capitalist and podcast host. Sacks, who is also the White House crypto czar, co-wrote the Trump administration's "America's AI Action Plan." A *New York Times* investigation found that Sacks has at least 449 investments in companies with ties to artificial intelligence. The fox isn't just guarding the henhouse; he's livestreaming the feast.

AI IS JUST a newborn. It may grow up to transform our lives in unimaginably good ways. But it has also introduced profound questions about safety, inequality, and the viability of a wage-labor system that, despite its flaws, spawned the most prosperous society in human history. And there's no sign—none—that our political system is equipped to deal with what's coming.

Which means the deepest challenge AI poses may not be to jobs at all.

"Gosh, the textbook ideal of democracy," says Nick Clegg, "is the peaceful articulation and resolution of differences that otherwise might take a more disruptive or violent form. So you'd like to think that a strong democracy could digest these kinds of changes."

Clegg is a former deputy prime minister of the United Kingdom and leader of the Liberal Democrats. When he lost his seat in Parliament after Brexit, he moved to California, where he spent seven years running global affairs at Facebook/Meta, becoming a kind of Tocqueville with vested options, before returning to London in 2025. Many governments "just don't have the levers" to deal with AI, Clegg told me.

He suspects that the societies best [illegible]d to navigate the next few years are small homogenous ones like the Sc[illegible]ans, who are capable of having mature conversations—they'll put together "some commission led by some very wise former finance minister who will come up with a perfect blueprint which everybody consensually will then do, and they will remain in a hundred years the happiest societies"—or large authoritarian ones that refuse to have conversations at all. China, America's primary AI rival, has repeatedly demonstrated a capacity to impose rapid, society-wide change (the one-child policy, the forced relocation of more than 1 million people for the Three Gorges Dam) without consent or delay.

"If democratic governments drift into this period, which may require much more rapid change than they currently appear to be capable of delivering," Clegg warned, "then democracy is not going to pass this test with flying colors."

He then delivered, over Zoom, a fantastically British pep talk, combining Churchillian resolve with a faintly patronizing nod to America's centuries-long streak of pulling four-leaf clovers out of its ass. "You are extraordinarily dynamic," he began. "It's remarkable the number of times people have written off America."

If politics is to be part of the solution, Gary Peters will not be around to participate; he's retiring next year. Marjorie Taylor Greene, Congress's most articulate Republican advocate (really) for safeguarding the workforce from AI, has already resigned. Gina Raimondo is being considered as a potential presidential contender for 2028, and she's a centrist with the chops to balance the reasons for speeding forward on AI with the need to do so warily. But the issue is unlikely to wait that long. "We're going into a world that seems to be getting more unstable with each and every day," Peters said. "And that uncertainty creates anxiety, and anxiety leads to sometimes dramatic shifts in how people act and how they vote."

Which brings us to Bernie Sanders, who has been wrestling with an AI-shaped future since it was still theoretical. "Are AI and robotics inherently evil or terrible? No," Sanders told me in his familiar staccato. "We are already seeing positive developments in terms of health care, the manufacturing of drugs, diagnoses of diseases, etc. But here is the simple question: Who is going to benefit from this transformation?"

At the Davenport, Iowa, stop on his 2025 Fighting Oligarchy tour, audience members booed when he mentioned AI. And Sanders, the ultimate vibes politician, can feel decades of anger—over trade, inequality, affordability, systematic unfairness, government fealty to corporations—coalescing around AI.

In October, he issued a 95 theses–style report on AI and employment. It included all of the dire CEO and consulting-firm quotes about the looming job apocalypse and proposed a shorter workweek; worker protections; profit sharing; and an unspecified "robot tax on large corporations," whose revenue would be used "to benefit workers harmed by AI." It's a furious document, as though Sanders typed it with his fists.

At least one populist politician thinks Sanders didn't go far enough.

Steve Bannon's D.C. townhouse is so close to the Supreme Court that you can read JUSTICE THE GUARDIAN OF LIBERTY from the top step. He greeted me in his signature look: camouflage cargo pants, a black shirt, also a brown shirt, also a black button-down shirt. He hadn't shaved in days. It would not have surprised me if he suggested that we get hoagies, or form a militia.

From the July/August 2022 issue: Jennifer Senior on Steve Bannon, a lit bomb in the mouth of democracy

Bannon has, shall we say, some scoundrel-like tendencies. But he's not an AI tourist. In the early 2000s, while still a film producer, he tried to buy the rights to Ray Kurzweil's *The Singularity Is Near*, a sacred text of the AI movement that imagines the day when machines surpass human intelligence. Bannon thought it would make a good documentary. He hired an AI correspondent for his *War Room* podcast a few years ago, and he tracks every corporate-layoff announcement, searching for omens.

He's concerned about rogue AI creating viruses and seizing weapons—fears that are shared more soberly by national-security officials, biosecurity researchers, and some notable AI scientists—but he believes the American worker is in such imminent danger that he's prepared to toss away parts of his ideology. "I'm for the deconstruction of the administrative state, but I'm not an anarchist," Bannon told me. "You do have to have a regulatory apparatus.

If you don't have a regulatory apparatus for this, then fucking take the whole thing down, right? Because this is what the thing was built for."

What Bannon wants goes beyond regulation. It's a callback to an old idea: that when the government deems a technology strategically vital, it should own part of it—much as it once did with railroads and, briefly, banks during the 2008 financial crisis. He pointed to what he called Donald Trump's "brilliant" decision to have the federal government take a 9.9 percent stake in Intel in August. But the stake in AI would need to be much greater, he believes—something commensurate with the scale of federal support flowing to AI companies.

"I don't know—50 percent as a starter," Bannon said. "I realize the right's going to go nuts." But the government needs to put people with good judgment on these companies' boards, he said. "And you have to drill down on this *now, now, now*."

Instead, he warned, we have "the worst elements of our system—greed and avarice, coupled with people that just want to grasp raw power—all converging."

I pointed out that the person overseeing this convergence is the same man Bannon helped get elected, and recently suggested should stick around for a third term.

"President Trump's a great business guy," Bannon said. But he's getting "selective information" from Elon Musk, David Sacks, and others who Bannon thinks hopped aboard the Trump bandwagon only to maximize their profit and control of AI. "If you noticed, these guys are not jumping around when I say 'Trump '28.' I don't get an 'attaboy.'" He said that "they've used Trump," and that he sees a major schism coming within the Republican Party.

Bannon's politics don't naturally lend themselves to cross-party coalition building, but AI has scrambled even his sense of the boundaries. He and Glenn Beck signed a letter demanding a ban on the development of superintelligent AI, out of fear that systems smarter than humans cannot be reliably contained; they were joined by eminent academics and former Obama-administration officials—"[illegible]t would rather spit on the floor than say Steve Bannon is with them [illegible]ything." And he's been sketching out a theory of the coalition needed to confront what's coming. "These ethicists and moral philosophers—you have to combine that together with, quite frankly, some street fighters."

Horseshoe issues—where the far right and far left touch—are rare in American politics. They tend to surface when something highly technical (the gold standard in 1896, or the subprime crisis of 2008) alchemizes into something emotional (William Jennings Bryan's "cross of gold," the Tea Party). That's populism. And the threat of pitchforks has occasionally made American capitalism more humane: The eight-hour workday, weekends, and the minimum wage all emerged from the space between reform and revolution.

No one understands or exploits that shaggy zone quite like Bannon. His anger about AI can sound reasonable in one breath and menacing in the next. We were discussing some of the men who run the most powerful AI labs when he said, "Let's just be blunt": "We're in a situation where people on the spectrum that are not, quite frankly, total adults—you can see by their behavior that they're not—are making decisions for the species. Not for the country. For the species. Once we hit this inflection point, there's no coming back. That's why it's got to be stopped, and we may have to take extreme measures."

The trouble with pitchforks is that once you encourage everyone to grab them, there's no end to the damage that might be done. And unlike in earlier eras, we're now a society defined by two objects: phones that let everyone see exactly how much better other people have it, and guns should they decide to do something about it.

America would be better off if its elites could act responsibly without being terrified. If CEOs remembered that citizens are a kind of shareholder, too. If economists tried to model the future before it arrives in their rearview mirror. If politicians chose their constituents' jobs over their own. None of this requires revolution. It requires everyone to do the jobs they already have, just better.

There's an easy place for all of them to start—a bar so low, it amounts to a basic cognitive exam for the republic.

Erika McEntarfer was the commissioner of labor statistics until August, when Trump fired her after the release of a weak jobs report. McEntarfer has seen no evidence of political interference at the Bureau of Labor Statistics, but "independence is not the only threat facing economic data," she told me. "Inadequate funding and staffing are also a danger."

Most of the economic papers trying to figure out the impact of AI on labor demand use the BLS's Current Population Survey. "It's the best available source," McEntarfer said. "But the sample is pretty small. It's only 60,000 households and hasn't increased for 20 years. Response rates have declined." An obvious first step toward figuring out what's going on in our economy would be to expand the survey's sample size and add a supplement on AI usage at work. That would involve some extra economists and a few million dollars—a tiny investment. But the BLS budget has been shrinking for decades.

The United States created the BLS because it believed the first duty of a democracy was to know what was happening to its people. If we've misplaced that belief—if we can't bring ourselves to measure reality; if we can't be bothered to count—then good luck with the machines.

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