Beyond the Obvious: What We’re Watching in 2026

https://www.climateone.org/audio/beyond-obvious-what-were-watching-2026
Recorded on January 23, 2026

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Ariana Brocious: Well, Kousha, we are a few weeks into 2026 now, and Wow, the headlines have been relentless.

Kousha Navidar: Yeah, that honestly feels like an understatement. I mean, here's just a quick rundown of some of the stories that have broken since the beginning of the year. Uh, US forces captured Venezuela's leader and held him in Brooklyn. Trump is threatening to take over Greenland, and he sent an email to the Prime Minister of Norway saying that his stance is partially because Trump was not given the Nobel Peace Prize.

Ariana Brocious: Eye roll.

Kousha Navidar: Yeah, and protests broke out in Iran at levels that rival the protest from 1979. And reportedly, the government is arresting and killing many protestors.

Ariana Brocious: Yeah, those are all big stories here in the US, we saw the ice killing of Renee Goode in Minneapolis and increased violence in several cities where federal law enforcement has been deployed by the Trump administration. The C. D. C is no longer going to routinely recommend every child receive the vaccines that we all have since, since forever. Notably among these, the rotavirus, influenza, RS, V, Hep A and B. So that's an important change for public health. And President Trump removed the United States from the N-F-C-C-C, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, which is a huge deal in the sense that it's an even more formal withdrawal from any climate talks, and I don't know what that will mean for our future participation in those types of talks down the road.

Kousha Navidar: Yeah. And there, that's a lot.

Ariana Brocious: a lot. That's a lot. That's so, that's so much.

Kousha Navidar: in the middle of it all. It was my birthday last week, and that well was it? And, uh, it just, which is the real news story. One, two just goes to show, I still stand by the fact January's one of the worst months to have a birthday. But that is the least important thing that we're talking about today. We're actually talking about something much more important because, you know, Ariana, despite all of these headlines in a constantly changing news landscape, it, it's difficult to see the bigger picture.

Ariana Brocious: Right. So for today's show, we're gonna look a bit beyond these big headline news stories and discuss some other things we're keeping an eye on in 2026. I'm Arianna Brocious,

Kousha Navidar: I'm Kousha Navidar.

Ariana Brocious: And this is Climate One.

[music change]

Ariana Brocious: Alright, so a couple things I'm watching in the new year in the climate space, of course, first would be the cost of electricity because as we saw last year in 2025, this became a real sticking point for a lot of people. Cost of electricity are rising in all kinds of places around the country. And a lot of this is because, uh, the utilities are basically getting away with charging more for not providing any better or improved reliability in service. So I'm gonna be looking at ways places are challenging that and how they might be able to bring down the costs. Another thing I'm keeping an eye on is permitting reform and transmission grid upgrades. These are sort of national level conversations. There's some members of Congress interested in pushing these things forward. We'll see what happens there.

Kousha Navidar: Ariana, I never thought the term permitting reform would get me so excited. And then I started this job and I found out how influential it really can be. So yeah, I'm right there with you. I am also looking at congestion pricing because I live close to the area where it's happening in New York and there are so many studies coming out about the climate impacts and the quality of life impacts the policy is having. So I'm excited about that. And then also, I'm keeping the eye on EVs because there is a lot of news coming out with, uh, battery technology and just how the infrastructure at the state level across the country might be changing to make EV ownership more convenient.

Ariana Brocious: Yeah. And I just saw a headline, uh, an encouraging one about the debut of, I don't know, six or seven new reasonably priced EVs that are gonna be coming out onto the market in 2026. So that's good.

Kousha Navidar: Oh, from a specific maker?

Ariana Brocious: the Leaf is coming back, the Nissan Leaf, of which I am a proud owner.

Kousha Navidar: whoa. I love the Leaf. Yeah.

Ariana Brocious: Uh, and Subaru is unveiling a new EV called The Uncharted.

Kousha Navidar: Well, that's so Subaru. I bet it's still gonna be manual. That's an inside joke for people who own Subarus.

Ariana Brocious: So we'll see. We'll see. And so, you know, another thing we've been discussing a

lot here on the team and that I've been thinking about is the importance and the role of local action.

Kousha Navidar: Yeah. Since the Trump administration seems to be taking the, uh, fingers in ear approach to the climate crisis, I think that's the technical term.

Ariana Brocious: Lalala, head in the sand, something like that. But I do think it's worse than that. I mean, he's not just ignoring the evidence, he's deliberately bearing it and erasing it, but the federal government is not the only force in this country.

Kousha Navidar: That's right. Many subnational authorities. So that's anything that is lower than federal. Uh, they're continuing their own research and development of more sustainable solutions. And one area where a big difference could be made is transportation.

Ariana Brocious: Transportation accounts for roughly 28% of greenhouse gas emissions in the US. The fastest solution for cutting those emissions significantly is to electrify as many vehicles as quickly as possible.

Kousha Navidar: So if you want that to happen, the technology has to be reliable. It has to be convenient. That takes a lot of work. And so I spoke with Justine Johnson, she's Chief Mobility Officer for the State of Michigan. We talked about what they are doing to electrify mobility.

Justine Johnson: Mobility has been a topic that I think has been isolated. mobility and transportation are really throughlines. They're this thread that connects topics like housing and education. It's a thread that you can find in every single sector, in every single, you know, industry topic, how you move. And we are nomadic people, right? We are people who've been moving since the beginning of civilization and we've been moving because we are in search of food, we're in search of shelter, we're in search of opportunity. We're in search of trade. I mean, the, these, this is, this has not changed like since the beginning of, I don't know, Lucy, like this, this is, nothing's changed. Like Lucy was moving, you know? sometimes I think we, we are quick to say that's a transportation theme and not really take a holistic approach of like all of these, these themes that we're dealing with, all these policies, topics, and issues are, are woven together in such a dynamic way. In the state of Michigan, one thing I'm really proud of, under Governor Witmer's leadership, was creating an Office of Future Mobility and electrification. This is the first office of its kind in the United States. And, um, I commend, you know, the leadership within the state for that because while the automotive industry is a very important part of the economic profile of the state, a fourth of the state's gross domestic product comes from the automotive industry, right? And it's, it's very important, um, to have that. But also how do we think about the evolution of those industries. Right? And how does that start to show up with the intention around affordability? How do you start to get, you know, more resources to people? Before we thought about transportation planning as like going from point A to point B. Now it is a matter of the things coming to us, right? Like that is what makes something efficient and effective.

Kousha Navidar: So 25% of the GDP comes from the auto industry. And thinking about in a future where we are redefining our relationship with mobility, how can we equip individuals to meet them where they are with the ways that they are getting around and the ways that things are getting to them. How would you react to that summary?

Justine Johnson: I'd say that's spot on. I'd also add that this is a conversation of economic mobility as well as the relationship of how we will move, as a society. this is all about the movement of people goods and information that allows them to have a quality life and a quality life being able to breathe clean air, being able to get to your jobs, being able to get your children to, to school, going to work, having that ecosystem work on the behalf of you as an individual and and as a collective society.

Kousha Navidar: Yeah, I, I hear you. I hear you. You're kind of talking about mobility in two different ways there. You're talking about getting around and you're talking about. Going up, so to speak. In terms of electrification of transportation, you are watching a lot. So I wanna go through some top of mind pieces with you. Number one is charging infrastructure. So there was a lot of money promised in the bipartisan infrastructure law and in the inflation reduction act for EV charging. What is the future of EV charging?

Justine Johnson: Yeah. Um, so we in the state of Michigan are very focused in building out charging infrastructure to accelerate the rate of adoption of electric vehicles. So we know that we need to have the infrastructure in place so people can feel comfortable. Concepts like range anxiety. I don't, and I'm using air quotes 'cause I actually don't subscribe to range anxiety. I actually subscribe to charge reliability. I wanna know that when I get to a charger that it's actually working. That's what I want at the end of the day. Like, you know, if I can plan for my trip and I'd say, okay, here's where I need to charge my vehicle. By the time I get there, I need to charge. I don't wanna be in a situation where there's like, oh, it's not working. So we do have, um, close to about 4,000 charging stations across the state. We did secure NEVI dollars National Electric Vehicle Infrastructure Program.under the Biden Harris administration, so $110 million was slated for the NEVI project. Um, we were able to issue a little over half of that money, um, for. DC fast charging infrastructure along alternative fuel corridors. we also. As a state have really embraced what the future of charging would look like. And we have a partnership with Department of Transportation, city of Detroit, um, Michigan Central, um, Electrion, which is having the first public wireless charging roadway in the United States, located in Detroit.

Kousha Navidar: I was reading about this. This is cool, I'm so happy you brought this up. I was hoping we would talk about this. Sorry, go ahead.

Justine Johnson: Yeah, no, no, you're, so, you know, we're thinking about how, what is the role of charging, especially when we think about, um, you know, use cases such as public transit, um, where these are vehicles that are operating, you know, essentially on a fixed route. So do you actually need to stop at a depot and charge or could you actually charge while you're driving? And so how do we start to pressure test those assumptions by having that piloted roadway? Same thing for delivery vehicles. A lot of times, there may be a certain route. Based on where the distribution center is, where they're maybe doing their pickups. So how do you start to think about instead of those vehicles sleeping overnight, at a charging station, maybe there's a mixture of both, right? There's a hybrid. Maybe some hours are dedicated to charging at night, but when they're actually on the road, they're able to maintain that charge while they're running their routes.

Kousha Navidar: And in prep for this interview I was reading about this, the technology itself is similar as I understand it, to the technology that charges your cell phone wirelessly when you put it on the stand. Qi wireless charging, I think it's called.

Justine Johnson: yes,

Kousha Navidar: Okay. So that sounds very cool. Uh, some may say amazing. How practical is it?

Justine Johnson: I will say, I remember the day that the team, uh, ripped up the road. And when I say ripped up the road, I think there was probably four inches of asphalt that was removed. And then there was a, essentially a magnetic coil that was put in the road, and then they paved over it, and then it was done. I mean, you know, I thought it was gonna be like days of construction.

Kousha Navidar: Yeah.

Justine Johnson: No, I mean, I think they started at nine. They probably were done at. Three, if that, you know, and, and, and I'm probably being like generous by saying three. It probably finished a lot earlier.

Kousha Navidar: So easy to install, but like how, how effective? Like, what, what is it, what, what are you spending 2026 thinking about in terms of this project?

Justine Johnson: Yeah, so the role of how do you expand, uh, this particular pilot? Like I said, the pilot right now is in, um, Corktown, so City of Detroit, in a neighborhood called Corktown, um, in an innovation district. Uh, so that's important because we wanted to see who, uh, would be able to really get a chance to really understand how the technology's working. Um, so there's that piece, but the goal is to expand. Um, and so how do we start to expand this type of technology? Of course, the end user is very important because we know that, you know, to operate that infrastructure, we need to make sure that there is a viable user for, uh, that particular roadway. So how do you start to bring on more partners to the table to say, Hey, if you own a fleet of vehicles, test this road out and see how, how it's performing for you and some of your immediate needs. So you think about goods delivery, we have some goods delivery, um, use cases popping up, but also there's a mixture of dynamic and static charging. Dynamic charging is charging while you're actually driving on the road. So there's a receiver that's installed underneath the vehicle. Um. And then there's the magnetic coil that's on the road. So essentially it doesn't matter if it's raining, snowing, um, hot day, the two will talk to each other as long as they're operating, very similar to your phone. As long as you put the phone on the table, wherever the charging coil is, it will charge.

Kousha Navidar: Do you need a specialized vehicle to connect to it or is this the kind of thing that can be installed after market?

Justine Johnson: It's installed aftermarket. So essentially, um, yeah, it's just a plate that's put on under the undercarriage of the vehicle. Um, and that plate is installed and then from there, that plate talks to the coils when they're connected.

Kousha Navidar: Yeah, I can't wait to see what, what kind of work comes from there. That's really thrilling. Um, could you charge your cell phone on it at the same time?

Justine Johnson: No, you can't. I've, I've had people who've tried to charge their phones. Um, no, you can't charge your phone. Um, and the only reason I know is 'cause there're actually dots on the road, so we know where the coils are. So I've had people like, I'm gonna put my phone on the dot

Kousha Navidar: Right.

Justine Johnson: And like, you're not gonna see anything, but you could put your phone on the dot. I hope a car doesn't like, you know, not see, or you remember to pick it up in enough time.

Kousha Navidar: Yeah. Right. And here I am thinking I'm clever with the idea. Somebody's already had it.

Justine Johnson: Someone's already done it.

Kousha Navidar: Yeah. Right. I wanna go through a, a few more things, uh, just on top of your mind, kind of rapid fire here. So, I know you said you don't subscribe to range anxiety; neither do I. But I always think that a bigger battery is better. It can be a great source of mobility. So I wanna know about EV battery development from your perspective, because that's a huge part of the cost for an electric vehicle, uh, and a limiting factor when it comes to range. So what are you watching for in the worlds of battery innovation?

Justine Johnson: Yeah, it's, it's so funny that you asked this question as someone who does drive an EV themselves. And my, uh, electric Pony is about four years old now, so, you know, I'm sure as, as more and more newer vehicles come out, I'm like, oh. I always ask people like, what's the range of your battery? And I'm just hearing these numbers. I'm like, wow, that's so cool. Can't wait till I get to that number soon, but, especially when it comes to battery technology. I think we have really important resources like academic partners in the state, specifically University of Michigan comes to mind. They have a EV battery center, and essentially this is a space that allows for industry and researchers to meet, to focus. On battery innovation. So how do you start to think about, um, the range of the batteries? How do you start to think about the size of the batteries? How do you start to think about the cathodes and the anodes that allow for faster connectivity? What types of non rare earth minerals can be utilized now to make these battery cells? How do we start to reduce our dependency on rare earth minerals and materials to build batteries? And how do we start to figure out other types of chemistries that, um, are, are not, you know, in that classification? So I'm excited about that. I do think, you know, it's kind of like I always remind people when flat screen TVs first came out. They were bulky and they were heavy. Right. And, you know, you were just like, it was cool. But I mean, I, I still remember kind of my first flat screen tv. It was a heavy,

Kousha Navidar: Mine was a Samsung and I hooked up a PlayStation 2 to it and I thought, this is great, and it's never moving out of this house 'cause no one's gonna be able to move it.

Justine Johnson: Yes. And you think about, you know, I was just at CES in January and they're displaying wallpaper tv, like it's as thin as wallpaper. And so you think about just like in a matter of years, how much the TV has evolved. They're getting thinner and thinner and lighter and lighter, and the quality's getting better. I think the same thing's gonna happen, especially with batteries.

Kousha Navidar: So let's talk about what you're looking at with advanced air mobility, because you had mentioned drones earlier.

Justine Johnson: Yeah, so last year in the state of Michigan, the governor had signed an executive directive, really focusing on all things advanced air mobility um, manufacturing, 'cause Michigan, we can make 'em. And as well as thinking about deployments as well for both commercial and defense related applications. I think about this a lot in terms of what that's gonna mean for 2026. How do we build the infrastructure that's gonna be needed to support, uh, where drones and where EVTOLs will take off and land. How can drones be a first responder, helping our first responders do their jobs even more effectively. They're already putting their lives on the line every single day. How do you start to rightsize by having more information very quickly to assess the scene? Um, you also think about, um, you know, for the defense related perspectives counter UAV system. So if there is a drone that's flying, we don't want a situation where drones are flying and people are scared, and what is this? How do you, you know, detect a drone that may be flying in the, in a space where it's not supposed to? And how do you then deter that drone from that particular space? Agriculture, um, the utilization of drones specifically for crop analysis, pesticides, seeding, And then the other part of this is B2B logistics. Imagine when you take your car to get fixed and they say, oh, you know what? I'm so sorry. We have to keep it overnight because we're waiting for a party. It's gonna get delivered tomorrow. Imagine a world where it's like, actually we don't have the part, but we're actually gonna just have it dispatched via this drone. Dropped off. Similarly medical health delivery, right? CVS Health is another, uh, grant recipient as part of our advanced Mobility Activation fund. So how do we get prescription drugs, specialty prescription drugs, to people who may live really, really far from a pharmacy? How do you start to remove the barrier of, you know, the distance that someone lives in proximity to their healthcare needs and bringing those resources to them as well?

Kousha Navidar: Yeah, it's, it is crucial. I mean, back when I worked in the tech industry in the mid 2010s. A significant amount of my work was writing about this idea, right, of drone delivery for first

responders, for inaccessible, uh, uh, areas where you need help. All of those things. And it's so interesting that you brought up the Advanced Air Mobility Activation Fund because the first thing that popped into my head was all of this research takes money. And money nowadays for these advanced systems can be difficult to find. So last thing I wanna ask you about is, where do you see innovation in financing?

Justine Johnson: one of the things, uh, that I'm really proud of is, you know, serving as the, the Chief Mobility Officer for the state, is that I run an office that I always tell people we're the office that kind of embraces risk. We're the one who says, oh, it's hard. All right, let's try it. It's difficult. Okay, let's do it. You know, let's just figure it out. Right. And so I do think when we talk about financing, that we start with non-dilutive grant funds. and those grant funds allow us to issue funding to companies who are saying, Hey, I have a solution and I can, you know, uh, address a particular problem. More recently, we've, uh, started something very new with our funding where we're, um, we have something called statewide Advanced Aerial Mobility Challenges. This was the focus for this one right now is aerial mobility, um, as part of these statewide challenges to, to really,assess how many state departments have a big issue that there's the mobility solve here, right? Like, they may not realize it, but like mobility could be an answer. And we as an office are then putting out solicitations to industry all, all around the world. Hey, we're looking for someone who can do this, can you do this? And there is grant funding associated with this particular project. Ultimately the end of the goal is think about ways and potentially how the state can be a customer of this type of technology. and how do you start to be a customer? We have to de-risk it. And so this pilot or this demonstration period and these non-dilutive grants that are, you know, associated with a sprint are the ways in which you start to reduce the risk for government, we've already done the analysis. We know that they can do this. We know that they've done these assessments. You start to build out your metrics in terms of what success looks like, and hopefully, you know, my goal here is how do we start to influence the procurement process moving forward where we start to bring innovation into this, this dialogue and conversation. And as a state and states across the United States, how do we start to say, and now we're gonna associate funding to innovative procurement solutions.

Kousha Navidar: Justine, 2026 sounds like it's gonna be a, a a a banner year for Michigan innovation, for for transportation, I, I might have to plan a trip to go to Michigan just to drive on that wireless EV charging roadway to see what it's like. And I will not hold out my cell phone while I do it because I talked to you. So I really appreciate getting to speak with you. Justine Johnson is Chief Mobility Officer of Michigan. Thanks so much for joining us.

Justine Johnson: Thanks for having me. Great conversation as always.

Music: In

Kousha Navidar: Coming up, renewables are here and they’re cheap. Maybe it’s time we lean into that.

Michael Grunwald: The stone age didn't end because we ran outta stones and it didn't end because of some kind of law preventing the extraction of stones. It ended because of better alternatives.

Kousha Navidar: That’s coming up, when Climate One continues.

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Music: Out

Ariana Brocious: This is Climate One. I'm Ariana Brocious.

We've heard about some of the exciting things Michigan is doing to address the transportation sector, but let's zoom out a bit more to one of the biggest climate drivers that most people don't think about: agriculture.

[Music cue]

Growing food and raising livestock account for over a quarter of global climate pollution – from fertilizer use, to methane from cows, to deforestation. And that deforestation is likely to get even worse. By some estimates, we'll need to expand food production by 50% by 2050 to feed a growing population.

[music change]

Michael Grunwald is a journalist and author of We Are Eating The Earth. He says we need to figure out how to make more food with less land.

Michael Grunwald: Even those of us who live in cities and suburbs, um, we know when we take a cross country flight and look out the window and see all those. Circles and rectangles can see that there's a lot of agriculture out there, but it turns out that there's a lot of agriculture out there. Our cities and suburbs only cover like 1% of the earth's land, and farms and pastures are now nearly 40%. We're losing a soccer field worth of forest to agriculture. Every six seconds. And that really is at the heart of our water pollution problems, our water shortages, our biodiversity problems, and increasingly our climate problems. So it's, it's a really big deal.

Ariana Brocious: So how do we begin to address this? The scale you're talking about is, is intimidating. I mean, how do we make more food with less land?

Michael Grunwald: Yeah, well I think, you know, it's sort of a two part problem, right? Where we have to, you know, eat foods that take up less land, and that is mostly meat, unfortunately. Uh, 'cause

Ariana Brocious: Meaning we need to eat less meat. 'cause that takes up a lot of land.

Michael Grunwald: Exactly three quarters of our agricultural land is either pasture or it's growing crops that we feed to animals before we eat them. Um, so yes, so we have to eat less meat. And also on the demand side, we need to waste less food, right? Because we waste about a quarter of our food. That means we waste about a quarter of the land we use to grow the food. We use a landmass the size of China to grow garbage. Uh, but then as you said, you know, this isn't just gonna be solved on the demand side and we are going to have to make more food with less land, and that means we are gonna have to increase our yields. 'cause when we make more food per acre, we don't need as many acres to make the same amount of food. And so that leads to some uncomfortable places, right? For people who would like these kind of like all organic, uh, you know, regenerative, sort of low yield, kinder and gentler farming. Well, it turns out that that often makes less food per acre and needs more acres to make the same amount of food. It eats more of the earth. So we really do need

highly productive food, whether that's done with chemicals and pesticides and fertilizers, and gene editing and GMOs, um, it can, you know, sometimes lead us into uncomfortable places.

Ariana Brocious: Yeah, So you touched on beef cattle, which are, um, you know, kind of a staple for many Americans. They use nearly half of the world's agricultural land to produce just 3% of its calories. As you noted, factory farms are far more efficient than free range cattle. There are other impacts to consider here. I don't wanna totally gloss over, like animal health and welfare, manure handling, disease, things that can come from concentrated animal feeding operations. However, from an efficiency standpoint, they are much better. Does that make them good?

Michael Grunwald: It doesn't make them good. Right, because, and you mentioned a lot of reasons why, right? They treat people badly. They treat animals badly. They use too many antibiotics. Their politics usually suck. Um, and, uh, and those are, those are real issues, right? The fact that they could contribute to the next pandemic is, uh, something we have to keep in mind. But for a lot of people that means like, oh, we need to get rid of factory farms. And the one thing that factory farms do, do, like other factories, is they manufacture a lot of stuff. and we are going to need 50% more calories by 2050 and we're gonna have to do it with less land and fewer emissions. And it turns out that, you know, right now we're on track to deforest another dozen California's worth of land by 2050. Factory farms, by making more food with less land can help us avoid that kind of problem.

Ariana Brocious: Yeah, that is a staggering statistic. You know, we've talked on the show recently about the Amazon Rainforest as an example of this. Obviously it's a very often cited example, but you know, uh, clearing of the Amazon to plant soybeans, which then go to feed cows, which then go to feed people. And that just a highly inefficient system that's doing more harm than good, I think is a, is a fair assessment. There is though a growing demand for meat in terms of the global diet. People who are, you know, becoming less poor, want to eat meat, that's a good thing that people are becoming less poor. But five or six years ago, plant-based meat companies, like Impossible and Beyond Meat were kind of all the rage. What happened?

Michael Grunwald: Well, the short answer is the dogs didn't like the food. Right. Um, you know, uh, like plant-based meat, it's, you know, it uses 90% less land than meat-based meat or certainly beef based meat. and obviously it, uh, kills a hundred percent fewer animals, which is also great. It's in many ways a remarkable technological achievement that these companies have created meat out of plants that tastes like 80% as good as the real thing and only costs 50% more. Um, and that was enough to encourage people to try it and find that it actually was better than those old, you know, veggie burger hockey pucks, but it wasn't as good as meat. So they didn't keep eating it. Um, you know, the, the good news is that while the cow is a pretty mature technology, uh, fake meat isn't, um, whether that's meat made of plants or made of fungi, or made out of animal cells in a, in a kind of brewery, um, I do think that there is, there's still a lot of hope. Human beings don't seem to be really great at making big sacrifices for the good of the planet. But we're pretty excellent at inventing things and uh, I assume that, you know, if, even if fake meat hasn't yet taken over the world, um, someday it could.

Ariana Brocious: Hmm. Yeah. You know, I try to avoid eating meat most of the time, and I've had a number of these fake meat burgers. And I will tell you, there have been at least two occasions where I actually asked the server if they would confirm that it was not meat, because it was so, the way it was prepared, and, you know, I know some are better than others, but I, I was, I was fooled, you know?

Michael Grunwald: Well, there's no longer any reason really to have a, a chicken nugget. I mean, and who even knows what's in a chicken nugget, right? I mean, but, uh, but in blind taste tests now, the plant-based nuggets beat the alleged chicken based nuggets. Right. And they're just mostly

vehicles for sauces anyway. And you're starting to see some of the burgers come close where there's really still a long way to go is with the kind of the whole cuts, whether it's, you know, the beef tenderloin or the steaks or the, uh, you know, the pork chops. Um, the more complex cuts, and there I think some of the cultivated meat made from actual animal cells, um, they may be more promising in the long run.

Ariana Brocious: Hmm. So let's pivot for a second, to some of the technological advances here. In the ag tech space, you've written about watching everything from Uber for tractors, Tinder for cattle, and Fitbit for pigs, which each and of themselves are pretty interesting. Um, to bio pesticides that use the RNA technology behind the coronavirus vaccines to constipate beetles to death. What, what is happening here? Why would we wanna do that?

Michael Grunwald: Well, again, I mean the, that bio pesticide is a perfect example, right? If, uh, you know, if you can use just a teaspoon of this stuff can really cover an entire field, but it's sort of like sending in Jason Bourne to kill the bad guy rather than sending in a nuclear bomb and you have to blow up the entire field. Um, you can use just a, a little bit of this bio pesticide and it sends these messages to the bad guys, the potato beetles to die essentially. Um, but it doesn't kill the, you know, any of the plants or any of the ladybugs or any of the beneficial organisms. Um, and it doesn't use fossil fuels like, uh, you know, synthetic fertilizers do. you know, there are a lot of alternatives, whether it's in the fertilizer world where you're editing the genes of microbes to sort of snatch nitrogen from the air so that you don't have to dump it on the crops. Um, or even I went to the University of Illinois where they are literally reinventing photosynthesis, um, which has done a pretty good job of maintaining life on earth for 3 billion years, but turns out to be pretty inefficient at manufacturing food and they are using AI and gene editing and big data to essentially engineer away some of those inefficiencies. And they think they can increase crop yields like 50% over the next 20 years.

Ariana Brocious: That's significant. Yeah. I mean, the major revolution of like the 1950s was synthetic fertilizer, right? I mean that really improved yields made a huge difference at that time. And so we're maybe on the cusp of another revolution or several. So of these, what do you think is real? You gave us a couple examples there, and what do you think is hype?

Michael Grunwald: Well, the first thing I have to say is, you know, I wrote about dozens of pretty promising solutions in this book, and none of them really have any traction. At least not yet. You know, there's this big problem and I'm trying to wave my hands in the air and say like, Hey, you know, people ought to pay attention to this problem because it's getting worse every day. you know, we've, in many ways, we have not solved the fossil fuel problem, but we do know how to solve it. Right. We need to electrify the global economy and run it on clean electricity. Um, and we've made some progress there, right? We're in the, we're having this in incredible clean energy revolution where 90% of the new power plants built in the world last year were wind or solar or some other zero emissions technology. While with food and agriculture, it's still getting worse. Um, and we really don't know what to do. So part of the answer to your question is we need to test, we need to figure out what works and then we need to deploy what works just like we did with solar and wind and, and electric vehicles. In some ways the most promising technology I've seen isn't much of a technology at all. It's essentially more efficient pastures. It's, you know, I went down to Brazil and I saw some degraded ranches where there would be like one cow for every 10 acres and the cows would look like they were on hunger strikes. And then I'd see upgraded ranches where they had invested in better grasses and they fertilized the pastures. And yeah, some of them had feed lots, but you'd see one cow per acre, and that meant they were using only one 10th as much of the Amazon, so they were eating a lot less of the earth.

Ariana Brocious: Yeah. So this idea, this uh, uh, pasture intensification, I think is what you're

describing, right? So how does that compare to, rotational grazing, because this is something I've heard about for years cows are really not good at, um, protecting their own interests. They eat the good stuff and leave the bad stuff, and then just kind of hang out. And so rotational grazing helps them move around in a way that other animals and other livestock do, where they make better use of the plants there.

Michael Grunwald: I'm so glad you mentioned that because it's funny, as you can imagine, a lot of people who hate factory farms get very angry at me. But it turns out that some of these regenerative practices can also help. And rotational grazing is a great example and integrating cattle in with, with your crops, um, and with cover crops and often with, uh, with no-till crops. And I think that's great. I think in the food world and the ag world, people tend to get into their silos, right? So to speak, right? Excuse the pun.

Ariana Brocious: Good pun. Yep.

Michael Grunwald: Yeah. You've got your vegan people, you've got your beef people, then you've got your regenerative people and your industrial people. But it does seem like there's a lot that these different groups can learn from each other. Um, and certainly food and agriculture, there is a lot of ideology and sort of politics involved with it. But these are really practical questions, um, where, you know, more science and, uh, and more research can really help us get to good answers that can be, you know, sort of good for everybody. Um, you know, we all, we all vote on these issues three times a day, right? Uh, so, so we all have an interest in, in, you know, a sort of sustainable food and a sustainable planet.

Ariana Brocious: You know, you say that there's a lot of ideology and I don't disagree, As you know, this last year, 2025, we saw a real rollback, dismantling, defunding, erasure of all kinds of things by the Trump administration. And agriculture took a big hit, as did climate science. And so many of the things that you're talking about, which would benefit from research, from testing, from, you know, big universities that have test plots and do all these kinds of things is getting cut. So what do we do right now?

Michael Grunwald: Yeah, it's a real problem, right? I mean, 'cause, uh, certainly you would think particularly research into the kind of things that could help farmers increase their yields, which farmers really like, uh, you would think that the Trump administration, which cares a lot about, about what farmers think, you'd think at least in that area, they wouldn't be cutting so much research, but they're, they're cutting everywhere. I mean, I think these are really hard problems. And honestly, the power of the agricultural industry, which is the most powerful lobby in the United States and in most countries. is going to make this really difficult. But around the world, governments spend $300 billion a year subsidizing agriculture and most of that is simply no strings attached. So I think, you know, where you wanna start is like, Hey, can we maybe attach some strings where we will continue to support farmers and, uh, and make it as profitable as possible to provide food for the 99% of Americans who don't farm. But at the same time, there have to be some responsibilities. Um, a lot of farmers care a lot about their, you know, stewardship of the land, but collectively they are stewarding a mess. And I think we have to say like, Hey, you know, we are going to help you produce even more food, but you're gonna have to do it with less mess.

Ariana Brocious: Mm. Yeah. So beyond food and ag, you've written a lot about non-farm politics and policy over the years. As we look ahead at 2026, what are you watching right now in that realm?

Michael Grunwald: Well, it's funny because on these climate issues writ large, right? It's really boring to say that the orange man is bad. Um, but the orange man is really bad. And or even for those of us who, you know, I often run afoul of some of the kind of climate activism community, and

you know, I might be pointing out that, you know,plastic straws are not a good fight to have. And there's some, you know maybe we do need some permitting reform, even if that means rolling back some of NEPA and some other environmental laws so that we can get

Ariana Brocious: National Environmental Policy Act. Mm-hmm.

Michael Grunwald: So that we can get more clean energy built, even if that also makes it a little bit easier to do fossil fuel projects. There's some of these very complicated arguments, That said, are there areas where there could be progress? Things like geothermal, nuclear power, which seems to have some bipartisan support, maybe even some permitting reform if you could, you know, pair it with some kind of prohibition on Trump just, you know, destroying the wind and solar industry while, uh. While opening it up to, to oil and gas, um, you know, that, that could be possible. Maybe the rest of the world is gonna have to pick up the slack for the United States. I mean, Denmark just passed an unbelievable agricultural reform act that's gonna tax agricultural emissions, but also invest in agricultural technologies, uh, and rewild a million acres of marginal farmland. Um, so we really have to hope that, you know, the kind of good guys keep doing the good stuff and that, you know, where there is bad stuff happening, that it can be limited through the courts, through politics, through elections in November. It's, uh, it's just a little bit of a bleak scenario.

Ariana Brocious: Yeah. In the positive realm, the costs of solar and wind and batteries keep dropping. And so in your mind, at what point does the economic momentum become, you know, unstoppable regardless of policy?

Michael Grunwald: Well, I think it is already unstoppable. The question is, you know, how long is this transition gonna take? 'cause it really matters a lot whether we quit using fossil fuels in, you know, 20 years or 40 years. Climate is not a binary problem where, you know, if we reduce emissions 43% by 2030, all is good and otherwise it's game over for the climate. There is no game over for the climate. There is, uh, there's better and worse. And better is better than worse, you know, so, so we have to, you know, I think it's awesome. The way what's happening, I mean, solar is in the process of taking over the world and anything that can be done to accelerate its spread is great. And that's why for many of us permitting reform where we'll say like, yeah, we're gonna make it easier to do wind and solar and we're also gonna make it easier to do fossil fuels and we have confidence that that's gonna be good for the earth. 'cause wind and solar is gonna win. And I am confident about that, but I think it is going to be. You know, tough. and like you said on the merits. Things are looking really good for, uh, the clean energy transition, but politics doesn't always happen on the merits.

Ariana Brocious: No kidding. Right now, at the beginning of 2026, it's easy to feel that kind of everything's a five alarm fire. So for those who are trying to fight the literal and figurative climate fires, what should not be a priority?

Michael Grunwald: I do think some of the focus on the supply side on stopping pipelines, on stopping drilling is a little less effective right now than the work on the demand side, and particularly on the clean energy supply side. Um, where, you know, the more clean you can do, the less dirty you're gonna need. The stone age didn't end because we ran outta stones and it didn't end because of some kind of law preventing the extraction of stones. It, uh, it ended because of better alternatives. And I really do think that should be the focus. It's a sort of yes, environmentalism that creates more clean energy as opposed to the no environmentalism of the past, which was all about just trying to stop the bad guys.

Ariana Brocious: Michael Grunwald is a journalist and author of We Are Eating The Earth. Thank you so much for joining us.

Michael Grunwald: Appreciate Ariana.

Music: in

Ariana Brocious: This is Climate One. Coming up, the climate crisis isn't a joke, but humor can be a powerful tool for getting at hard topics.

Jessie Bluedorn: I think my personal comedic sensibility is that. I find the funniest things in the darkness. That's how I cope. I think a lot of us can relate to that. So to me it seems so obvious that the climate crisis would be funny.

Ariana Brocious: That's up next, when Climate One continues.

Music: out

Kousha Navidar: This is Climate One. I'm Kousha Navidar.

So today we've talked about developments happening nationally and globally. Meanwhile, we are in this moment when there's a massive competition for people's attention. Obviously that's not unique to this time, but the noise feels so loud. And if you control the narrative, you control the power.

Jessie Bluedorn is Founder & Executive Director of The Carmack Collective, a group using comedy, art, media, and journalism to address cultural narratives around climate and fossil fuels in particular.

Jessie Bluedorn: The biggest thing we're focusing on both at the Carmac Collective and on the Carmac production side, is combating the fossil fuel industry's control of narrative. So what I mean by that is I think in our day-to-day life, we often don't realize how much of a hand the industry itself has in the talking points we hear. For example, if we think about even the idea of the individual carbon footprint, a lot of us think we're really trying to do something climate friendly by embracing the individual carbon footprint and doing our best, but that was actually a greenwashing tactic invented by BP a number of decades ago to shift the blame from the industry who is knowingly polluting the earth and killing the climate onto the individual consumer who only has a very set number of options, even when they're doing their best. So we're trying to highlight the ways that this kind of propaganda is ongoing and it's also getting very inventive through things like social media, influencers and online gaming. And it's just really not stopping. It's only getting worse.

Kousha Navidar: Yeah, I, I, I wanna talk more about that, like dive deeper into it, uh, in a second. But let's just, let's just focus on like your work and, and, and where you're coming from. So you've talked about countering the fossil fuel industry's narrative, that, that, that narrative being that fossil fuels are essential and therefore good. So what counter narratives are you trying to fund into existence?

Jessie Bluedorn: So. We're primarily trying to lift up narratives that show just how bad fossil fuels and the industry are. There are a lot of other exciting narratives about solutions and alternatives that are also out there, but we see our specific role as trying to remove the biggest obstacle from the playing field, and that's the fossil fuel industry itself. So for example, one of the narrative projects that we're working on this year in 2026 explores the role of the PR and ad industry in propping up this fossil fuel propaganda. And how complicit a lot of creatives are behind the scenes and advancing, again, the propaganda of the industry.

Kousha Navidar: When you say complicit, do you mean like people who do PR campaigns for the industry? People who are like in and around it as creatives?

Jessie Bluedorn: I think complicit is a big word, and obviously there's a full spectrum, right? So if you're the head of the agency that's doing BP's marketing, that's a lot more complicit than, you know, our friend who maybe works there at the entry level and just really needs to pay rent. So. I don't wanna blame like any individual workers, but if you look at the big firms, like Edelman for example, does still hold a lot of fossil fuel contracts, so I absolutely think the leadership at an agency like that is complicit because they're making significant income every year on doing PR and messaging for the fossil fuel industry, much of which is dishonest at best and very harmful.

Kousha Navidar: You also mentioned the Carmac collective explicitly aims to combat and dismantle the fossil fuel fuel industry rather than just like, quote unquote address climate change.

Jessie Bluedorn: this is also a little bit more of a provocative tactic to take. And so I think it takes sort of an emergent and a little bit braver funder to step out and say, so explicitly the fossil fuel industry actually has to go. And so I think we're also willing to play that role within the movement. There are a lot of narratives around the fossil fuel industry potentially leading a transition. And is the fossil fuel industry investing a lot in green energy in algae research? You know, maybe they're the ones that lead us into the future and our analysis is that can't possibly be true. That's greenwashing at best. It's lying at worst. If you look at the balance sheets of these companies, the investments they are making in green energy are such a small fraction of the money they continue to make from fossil fuels. They really just have every motivation to keep us on the path we're on, and they have a long track record of lying and people have died because of it. and I don't think that you would want to call up an arsonist to put out the fire at your house, and I don't think that we should be looking to the fossil fuel industry to take us into a climate just future either.

Kousha Navidar: yeah, that, that is confrontational.making the arsonist comment.

Jessie Bluedorn: But at the same time, I. I know the world that I wanna build, and I'm gonna use every card that I've been dealt to try to build a better future for all of us together.

Kousha Navidar: one of those cards that you play to make the world the way you wanna see is comedy, which. I am so excited to talk to you about, 'cause you've invested heavily in, and this, this was kind of new to me, climate comedy. So you're funding projects like the climate comedy cohort and, and good laugh. When you are talking about the climate, where is the funny.

Jessie Bluedorn: Yeah. Um, I'll say, first of all, uh, as a comedian, in addition to a producer and funder, I think my personal comedic sensibility is that I find the funniest things in the darkness. That's how I cope. I think a lot of us can relate to that. So to me it seems so obvious that the climate crisis would be funny. Like you have to laugh or you'll cry. And I think more technically speaking, the comedy for me is often in the absurdity of the situation. Like it's just, it's almost funny how absurd it is that, you know, the world's being set on fire so like one 80-year-old man could buy his seventh house.

Kousha Navidar: Sure. Yeah, yeah,

Jessie Bluedorn: Sorry. And we're all just like, yeah, that seems right. I think that's totally fine for me personally, like, come on.

Kousha Navidar: Yeah. What do you think when it comes to climate, humor can do that other ways of communicating can't? I'm thinking like scientific reports, activist campaigns.

Jessie Bluedorn: All of those modalities are important, but I think comedy is really unique for a couple of reasons. One, I think it lowers people's guard. There's a tendency, and we can all feel it in

ourselves if we're reading like an activist message or watching a documentary, if it starts to veer into that preaching kind of space. We get really defensive. Our hackles go up. It's like, don't tell me what to do. Like I'm trying my best. Comedy immediately sort of works around that. Like you're open, you're looking for the laugh, you're kind of more willing to receive the message and give it a think. Um, I also think in an increasingly saturated media landscape, we're desperately competing for consumer attention. I think the average attention span is like 15 seconds per thing you view, or I don't know, insert correct data point there. Um, and so I think it's important to reach people where they are. People want to sit and watch funny things that will make them feel a little better about an increasingly dark world around them. So why don't we reach them with a message in that space as well? It's a harder sell to ask people to sit down and watch, you know, a 90 minute feature on a pretty tough topic when they've already had a really long day.

Kousha Navidar: Yeah. Let's talk about 2026 for for a second. 'cause the midterms are gonna come up, those are gonna be crucial. Uh, how are you thinking about the role of culture and comedy in so far as influencing those elections?

Jessie Bluedorn: Yeah, I think it's gonna be really important. Um, I will say on the Carmac Collective side, we provide all 501 C3 funding so we don't weigh in. Too explicitly on any certain electoral races for regulatory reasons, but there were a couple of races in 2025 that provided a really good roadmap, particularly for the use of influencers and comedy and pop culture. I'm specifically thinking of Zohran's race here in New York. I loved the way comedians like Mary Beth Barone were popping up at comedy shows with him. Um, Mary Beth specifically did this really funny organic series on her, um, Instagram that was called politics for hot people. And so I think there's such a unique way that was just organic content, but if we put a little bit of strategy behind this and continue to scale up how comedy and the people you're already viewing on social media can support this larger political moment, I think there's so much potential.

Kousha Navidar: Yeah. That also requires some of these people with clout to put themselves on the line. I'm wondering, do you see that becoming harder or easier, or has it always been hard? Like I just see the stakes getting higher and higher. What do you think about that?

Jessie Bluedorn: I mean, I do think the stakes are getting higher, arguably for all of us in this moment. You know, with the crackdown on activists, with the crackdown on free speech. I think, yeah, the stakes are getting higher. I think at the same time. You know, the cost of doing nothing is getting much higher, and so I think especially those of us with the most privilege in our society, so that includes a lot of celebrities, but also people with wealth, you know, et cetera. I think it's our responsibility to leverage that privilege to stand on the front lines and deflect some of that from people who might be in more vulnerable situations. Obviously there are a lot of. People in like Hollywood for example, we could call out who are not using their voice for good. But on a more hopeful note, I think that there are a lot of people we've seen over the past couple of years really throw their power and their creativity behind trying to fight climate change. And that's very inspiring to me.

Kousha Navidar: Yeah. Um. How about on the other side? Uh, what are the tactics that you're looking out for in 2026 from the fossil fuel industry that, that they're trying to do to control the narrative?

Jessie Bluedorn: the gaming one. Um, it was very shocking to me a couple of years ago when I learned about it. It’s true that over a billion people participate in video games or eSports every year. So it's one of the largest media markets, and it's a very young media market. And so the fossil fuel industry strategically has invested a lot of money in sponsorships. So for example, any Fortnite players might have seen a year or two ago that Shell did a big in-game activation within Fortnite. It

was like a race car kind of thing, and you powered up your car at a branded Shell station and it made the whole thing look like very sexy and oil equals cool fast cars, et cetera. And this is so insidious because we often think of these younger demographics as like inherently very progressive. It's the school strike generation. They know all about climate change in school. But if this propaganda is, you know, seeping into the places where they spend all of their time hanging out and shaping the way they think about. Like oil equals prosperity, oil equals cool. Gas cars equal sexy, and electric cars are ugly. You know, that's something that can have such a huge impact.

Kousha Navidar: How do you counter that?

Jessie Bluedorn: I think you counter that by making sure that we are telling stories in the places that these young people are as well. So I think that, you know. A lot of people who work in the climate space are our age, are older, so they aren't thinking Fortnite, but that is where people are. So for example, at the Carmac Collective, this past year we, for the first time invested in, uh, a Game Jam. So it was a competition to create, um, video games that represented like a green healthy, beautiful future. And so it was different than anything we've done before, but we were so excited about testing out this space and seeing what came of it. Because to this point, video games are where so many young people are, and so we need to be like actively funneling money into the ecosystem to create products that provide an alternative set of messages.

Kousha Navidar: It's tough though, right? Because like on the one hand you have people with a ton of money saying, Hey, here's the the sexy cool thing. And then on the other hand you have a side who's saying like, Hey, kids, uh, don't travel as much by airplane. Yeah. Recycle Captain Planet, which like, I don't know, maybe in the eighties was, had a different vibe. How do you, how do you make it cool?

Jessie Bluedorn: I mean, no, the answer is not, Hey kids, please recycle. Like, do the recycling song. It's what we like, had a whole little like, hand thing that went with it. Um, I think the messages have to be a lot more honest to people's lived experiences. So like one type of messaging, and this goes for all age groups that we're seeing really resonate, is speaking to people about climate fueled weather patterns that they might be experiencing in their daily life. Helping people to understand that the scary thing that they see out their window is actually being caused by a bad guy. And there are things that they can do to fight that bad guy and to create a better future for themselves is very powerful.

Kousha Navidar: Yeah, Jesse, that really strikes a chord with me because what you're describing, at least when I listen to it, is playing a different game. Narratively, like, you're not trying to make something sexy and cool, you're trying to focus on the truth. Last thought that I wanna get from you. Um, obviously the alignment between fossil fuel interests and political power can feel more entrenched than they have for decades. We've been talking about all of these forces, all of these tactics. Um, it can feel daunting I would guess. Where do you see energy building that others might be missing?

Jessie Bluedorn: One of the areas I've been most excited about is around these make polluters pay campaigns. The fundamental premise is the fossil fuel industry. Knew about climate change for decades, at least since the 1970s or the 1980s. They systemically covered it up and lied to continue making money, and they should have to be responsible for the harm they've caused to people and planet. Obviously we're in a tough situation at the federal government level right now, but there are still a lot of exciting, uh, lawsuits and litigation happening at state levels, at city levels, And I also think the broader cultural narrative around make polluters pay is something that's gaining a lot of traction because there is something so fundamentally American that really. Trans versus the entire political spectrum to the idea that if someone causes harm, they should be responsible for repairing

that harm. After the LA wildfires, for example, there was a lot of commentary about, you know, who should be paying for this? How can we hold polluters responsible for the role that they played in this terrible disaster? And so I think on multiple fronts, I feel really hopeful about how that will play out and how we can think about accountability in this moment.

Kousha Navidar: Jessie Bluedorn is founder and executive director of the Carmack Collective. Jesse, thanks.

Jessie Bluedorn: Thanks so much.

Ariana Brocious: Hey, it's Ariana and Kousha. We have reached the end of our show, and so we often like to share one more thing that's on our minds. Kousha, what's on your mind?

Kousha Navidar: I was on Reddit a few weeks ago and I saw this video of somebody lighting a tire on fire. Stay with me, Ariana. Okay, so there's a plastic covering over the tire that is capturing all of the carbon coming off in smoke, and there's two things about this. Number one. It is striking how much pollution is created just from a single tire being burned. But number two, it is also striking just to see pollution in real time and in a visceral way because these things we talk about, we all know they're cerebral, they're hard to like capture. In, in, in, um, in things that you can see and touch. And to just see that demonstration to me was striking. So if you wanna check it out, go on to Reddit. It's in the Be Amazed subreddit and it's called Pollution from Burning a Single Tire. Uh, what do you got?

Ariana Brocious: Well, yeah, I just have to say that reminds me of, you know, the times in your, a pedestrian out in the streets and somebody walks by and puts out a whole bunch of exhaust and you can see the cloud in the air. I mean, that's another time when it's visible briefly, uh, before dispersing. And you think how gross that looks. On my mind this week is a public meeting that I attended last week here in Tucson, and it was held by our Attorney General, the State Attorney General Kris Mayes, um, who is doing these kind of like listening tour meetings of different communities around the state because of high utility prices. And she is trying to gather information from rate payers about. The burdens that these new utility rates are imposing on them, uh, so she can do something about it. And it was really invigorating to go to a public meeting to be surrounded by people who care so much about their community and, um, wanna do something to affect the way this utility is trying to behave. So. Yeah. Power to the people.

Kousha Navidar: Did you meet anyone?

Ariana Brocious: I did. I talked to several people and also just listened to all of the public comments and um, you know, the stories are what you would expect. People who are on limited income, people who are on fixed incomes or have a lot of other budgetary constraints in their lives and, you know, a 14% rate hike by their utility, uh, after a couple years of additional rate hikes, it's just not something they can bear.

Kousha Navidar: yeah. That's cool to be in community with people even before you speak to power. I think that's really cool. I, I hope we get to hear about it in a future episode.

Ariana Brocious: We shall.

Kousha Navidar: Oh, yay. Good. Well, I look forward to that.

Music: In

Kousha Navidar: And that’s our show. Thanks for listening. Talking about climate can be hard,

and exciting and interesting -- AND it’s critical to address the transitions we need to make in all parts of society. Please help us get people talking more about climate by giving us a rating or review. You can do it right now on your device. Or consider joining us on Patreon and supporting the show that way.

Ariana Brocious: Climate One is a production of the Commonwealth Club. Our team includes Greg Dalton, Brad Marshland, Jenny Park, Austin Colón, Megan Biscieglia, Kousha Navidar and Rachael Lacey. Our theme music is by George Young. I’m Ariana Brocious.

Music: Out