UC SANTA BARBARA
THE Current

September 21, 2026
Tom Jacobs

Leah Stokes brings urgency, optimism to fight to save the planet

The 1990s produced a lot of bad ideas, from grunge fashion to New Coke. But there's one Leah Stokes particularly dislikes: the notion of a "carbon footprint."

You remember that one. To protect the planet from the ravages of climate change, we were told that each of us needed to alter our lifestyles. Carpool to work. Limit your use of heating and air conditioning. Don't even think about flying.

In retrospect, all of those recommendations have one thing in common, noted Stokes, the Anton Vonk Associate Professor of Environmental Politics at UC Santa Barbara. Each of them is about "making a behavioral change within a fossil-fuel energy structure." The energy companies aren't asked to compromise: We are, because we, apparently, are the problem.

Stokes understands the threat of rising global temperatures better than most, but she approaches the issue from an entirely different perspective. We can still use as much energy as we need; we just need to upgrade the machines that provide it.

"I am talking about swapping out the hardware," she said. "Replacing a gasoline-powered car with an electric vehicle isn't behavioral change — it's infrastructure change."

Today, electricity can be, and increasingly is, generated in ways that don't involve burning fossil fuels. So, electrifying your household — swapping out your gas stove

for an electric one, or replacing your gas heating system with a heat pump — is a way to lessen your environmental impact that does not require sweating through the summer or wearing wool sweaters all winter.

“Now, you don’t have to stop at your own home,” Stokes added. “You can work with others in your community to electrify your local school or church, or lobby for your city’s car fleet to be EVs. Change happens one person at a time, joining with others to shift the system.”

Stokes has just published a new book entitled “The Carbon Wave” (MIT Press, 2026). It’s a memoir of the period when she worked closely with members of the Biden administration to enact the Inflation Reduction Act, which at the time was viewed as the most consequential piece of environmental legislation in decades.

Somewhat surprisingly, the book is also a real page-turner. There is plenty of “West Wing”-style drama recounting the difficult effort to draft a bill that could pass both houses of Congress.

Furthermore, at a critical point during the project, Stokes gave birth to premature twins. That story provides some harrowing moments, and emphasizes the stakes of what she and her colleagues were trying to accomplish.

It’s worth asking why it is worth chronicling this period, given that since he returned to office, Donald Trump has managed to gut many of the law’s key provisions. Stokes has two answers.

First, she wanted to provide a vivid example of how people working together on a difficult problem can make real progress. Second, the cliché that the current administration has effectively killed the bill is, in fact, vastly oversimplified.

“The law has proven more resilient than a lot of people predicted or understand,” she said. “Some of its most important provisions were the tax credits to build clean-energy manufacturing plants around the country. There were more than 500 of these, and nine out of 10 are still moving forward.”

On the other hand, “the tax credits for everyday people, the grants for disadvantaged communities — those got gutted,” she said. “That was a heartbreaker. Corporations are still going to manufacture clean energy, which is

good. But individuals should also be able to get heat pumps and solar panels."

In retrospect, Stokes concedes that the process was hindered by the Democratic Party's "too lawyerly approach" to awarding grants. Echoing the argument of journalists like Ezra Klein, she now emphasizes the importance of getting projects underway quickly, so that voters see tangible results before the next election.

"I wish we had gotten money out the door faster," she said. "I see no inherent tension between supporting equity, justice and labor rights and moving fast. As Klein told me a few months ago when he was in town, 'Speed should be a progressive value.'"

Stokes brings a glass-half-full perspective on the climate crisis to her work. In spite of polls showing environmental protection is less and less salient to Americans as an issue that influences how they vote, she insists that "more and more people want to do the right thing."

While that is debatable, everyone wants to save money, and Stokes argues the technological revolution is rapidly making green energy more affordable than traditional power sources. "EVs are cheaper than gas vehicles, in terms of total cost of ownership," she said. "With the wars in Ukraine and Iran pushing fossil-fuel prices through the roof, the whole world is waking up."

The political clout of the fossil-fuel industry, particularly in America, remains a problem, she said. "But the clean-energy industry is starting to get politically savvy as well," she added. "We're at an inflection point politically as well as economically."

An American citizen who was born and raised in Canada — "I'm proud to be Canadian at this moment," she declared in reference to the current trade war — Stokes insists her approach is pragmatic rather than pollyannaish or utopian.

"It's heartbreaking to me to watch Canadian forests burn," she said. "But the best way to channel those negative emotions is to take action. Sitting around and feeling sad isn't going to help anything."

Yes, humanity seems poised to blow past the 2.5-degree Celsius rise in average global temperature that scientists have long argued is crucial if we are to avoid major climate disruptions. "But there are degrees of bad," she said. "Things will get a lot worse if we get to three degrees. Everything we do matters, and I think we

should do everything we can.

“If we don’t think we can change the system, that just bolsters the status quo,” Stokes added. “Hopelessness just benefits the fossil-fuel industry, and I have no interest in increasing their profits.”

Tags
Books

Media Contact
Shelly Leachman
Editorial Director
(805) 893-2191
sleachman@ucsb.edu

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.