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Generate

By Ben Geman

Happy Friday! Today's Smart Brevity count: 1,141 words, or ~ 4 min read.

Heads-up: Every quarter Axios journalists highlight the trends they are watching in politics, energy, science, technology, business and more. As a subscriber to this newsletter, you'll see that in your inbox from Mike Allen tomorrow.

Today marks the 1973 release date of ZZ Top's "Tres Hombres," which takes us into the weekend...

1 big thing: Climate's partial 2020 breakthrough

The climate plans and views of 2020 White House hopefuls will soon get much more TV coverage — but not yet the way that many activists want.

Driving the news: CNN announced yesterday that it's holding a candidate forum "focused on the climate crisis" on Sept. 4 in New York.

- MSNBC said it will be the media partner for a Sept. 19–20 candidates event on climate in D.C., hosted by a Georgetown University policy institute and the news site Our Daily Planet.

Why it matters: The twin announcements yesterday are the strongest sign yet that climate change, once an afterthought in national election cycles, has broken into the political mainstream.

But, but, but: The events won't be what climate activists and a bunch of candidates themselves — led by Washington Gov. Jay Inslee — have been pushing for: An actual debate where the 2020 hopefuls are onstage together.

- Instead, in these looser "forums," candidates take questions in separate appearances onstage.
- The Democratic National Committee has rebuffed calls for a climate debate. And under their rules, candidates who appear in unsanctioned debates can be barred from the formal prime-time network contests.

How it works: CNN is inviting only candidates with at least 2% support in 4 major polls by Aug. 28, which is the DNC's threshold for the September debates.

- **Right now** that's Joe Biden, Cory Booker, Pete Buttigieg, Kamala Harris, Amy Klobuchar, Beto O'Rourke, Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren.
- **The intrigue:** That means that Jay Inslee, who has put climate at the center of his campaign, does not yet make the cut. Nor does Tom Steyer, who is also focusing on the topic. But they have a month to qualify.

Meanwhile, MSNBC said the Georgetown forum would be streamed live on NBC's website and featured over 2 nights on MSNBC's "All In with Chris Hayes," which airs at 8pm ET.

Bonus: Steyer's climate plan

The billionaire activist yesterday released his climate platform that includes a vow to formally declare climate change a "national emergency." It says this would spur new government-wide executive actions.

Why it matters: That emergency move is also designed as a leverage point for his call for Congress to pass Green New Deal legislation and boost funding for protection against the effects of climate change. Per the plan...

"If Congress refuses to act expeditiously, I will not hesitate to use the emergency powers of the presidency to protect the American public from the climate crisis, just as I would use those powers to protect our country from a hostile military invasion."

By the numbers: The wide-ranging plan calls for achieving net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2045.

- It would also devote \$2 trillion in federal funding over 10 years for investments climate-friendly transit, building efficiency, electricity infrastructure and more.

Go deeper: How Tom Steyer would address climate change (Politico)

2. The companies going big on solar

Adapted from SEIA; Chart: Axios Visuals

Apple tops the corporate world in solar power procurement as of the end of last year, according to data released by the Solar Energy Industries Association, an industry trade group.

Why it matters: Their report on business use of solar power provides a look at who is helping to lead this segment of the wider corporate renewables installation and purchasing market.

Where it stands: The chart above shows the leading players in combined onsite installations and procurement from offsite projects via power purchase agreements and other contracts.

- **But, but, but:** If the ranking included only onsite locations, the top 3 would be Target, Walmart and Prologis.

The big picture: "Today, the 7,000 MW of commercial solar installations generate 10.7 million MWh of electricity annually, enough to power 1.4 million homes," the report states.

Go deeper: Check out SEIA's full interactive report on corporate solar procurement data and trends here.

3. Making sense of automakers' Trump pushback

Let's revisit something we shoehorned into yesterday's newsletter as it went out the door: the emissions agreement between California and 4 major automakers.

Catch up fast: VW, Ford, BMW and Honda agreed to meet standards of increasing stringency through model year 2026.

- It rebuffs White House plans to freeze Obama-era emissions and efficiency mandates, rather than allow them to keep getting tighter through the mid-2020s.

What we're hearing: The 4 automakers are likely to adhere to the voluntary deal for their nationwide fleets, even if it doesn't prompt the White House to back off its plan to freeze the Obama standards.

- "Our intention is to honor the agreement with California regardless of other developments," a BMW spokesperson said.

What's next: The New York Times cites an unnamed auto executive familiar with the negotiations who said it's likely that other automakers will join.

- Their piece also quotes Margo Oge, a former EPA official who now advises the industry, as predicting that GM and Toyota will have the "courage to sign on."

The big picture: The top-line goals are similar but slightly more modest than the Obama-era deal that California agreed to.

- It would extend what's now a 2025 standard until 2026 and "smooth out the interim years from 2022 through 2025 to provide additional lead time and slightly less aggressive year-over-year reductions," according to California's summary.
- Per AP, that means new vehicles would average about 36 miles per gallon in real-world driving conditions in model year 2026.

Don't forget: A standing reminder about why California matters so much...

- It's the largest U.S. auto market and has a waiver under the Clean Air Act that gives it power to set tougher rules than federal standards that roughly a dozen states also follow.
- The Trump administration wants to yank that waiver and a legal battle is certain if that goes forward.
- Automakers' biggest priority is ensuring there's a single nationwide standard to avoid the expensive mess of meeting separate state rules.

Go deeper: Reuters has a piece on this here.

4. Go deeper on the California deal

Here's a little more on the fallout...

What they're saying: I chatted with Dan Becker of the Safe Climate Campaign, who said details of the framework — including how it credits technology adoption — mean that in practice it's far weaker than the Obama rules.

- He estimates that it will provide only about half the emissions reductions as the prior mandates that the White House is scuttling.

- Becker also noted that several of these automakers are already moving toward cleaner vehicles for their own reasons, noting VW's electric vehicle commitments that stem from the diesel emissions cheating scandal.

The bottom line: “I am not really sure we are getting a whole hell of a lot out of this deal that we are not getting anyway,” Becker said.

- However, he welcomed the pledge by the 4 automakers not to challenge California's programs implemented under its Clean Air Act waiver.

Meanwhile, the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers — which includes Ford, GM, Fiat-Chrysler and other heavyweights — didn't take an explicit position. But their statement points out that California, which has planned to carry out the Obama-era rules, has bended a bit.

- “[Thursday's] announcement of the framework of an agreement by California and certain automakers acknowledges that the [model year] 2022-2025 standards developed by the Obama administration are not attainable and need to be adjusted,” they said.

Between the lines: The 4 automakers' separate deal illustrates how the industry is in an awkward spot. It supported Trump's effort to revisit the rules, but doesn't like the plan to freeze them outright.

The other side: EPA, for its part, called the whole thing a “PR stunt.”

- The Washington Post reports, “Trump officials quickly rejected the new deal as a blueprint for federal mileage goals and said they would press ahead with their planned rollback.”

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