

## USC CUTS SPENDING AMID FEDERAL PROBES

The university plans hiring freeze and more as it faces deficit and ‘funding uncertainty.’

By DANIEL MILLER AND JAWEED KALEEM

Roiled by multiple investigations from the Trump administration, USC has announced a slate of cutbacks — including a staff hiring freeze — as it braces for what it called “federal funding uncertainty” in a letter released Monday.

Among the nine austerity measures are a reassessment of capital spending projects and restrictions on discretionary spending, according to the letter signed by university leaders including outgoing President Carol Folt.

The USC actions come at a time of unprecedented threats against universities by the Trump administration. It has vowed to cut federal funding — including key medical and science research grants — to institutions that do not comply with its directives. Trump has ordered campuses to squelch antisemitism; eliminate diversity, equity and inclusion programs; and ban transgender athletes from competing in women’s sports.

“Recent developments require us to take additional steps to increase our financial resilience in the face of exceptional financial uncertainty,” said the letter, which noted that USC received about \$570 million in research funding in fiscal year [See USC, A5]



Photographs by MYUNG J. CHUN Los Angeles Times

DEAN WENNER looks at the rubble on Pacific Coast Highway where his house stood before the Palisades fire. He is eager to rebuild.

## Trying to rebuild beside a rising sea



ENVIRONMENTAL advocates have favored a policy of “managed retreat” from imperiled shorelines. But fire victims resist the idea.

Malibu properties face many climate risks. Should burned homes be replaced?

By James Rainey

Dean and Denise Wenner were sweet on the Cape Cod-style home from the moment they found it in 2019. It had five bedrooms spread over three levels, with decks that hung over Santa Monica Bay.

When the tide was up, you felt almost like you were on an ocean liner, with views that swept from Palos Verdes to Point Dume.

Now the Wenners are among more than 300 families along Pacific Coast Highway in Malibu who lost their homes in the January firestorms, all of them facing even greater hurdles than their inland neighbors in trying to rebuild homes that most never planned to

leave. The reason for extra anxiety along Pacific Coast Highway? The very qualities that made the houses so special — their precarious toehold on the Pacific coast — will now make them particularly challenging to rebuild.

Already burned by a fire that came from the north and east, the owners are being required to rebuild their homes to ward off ever-rising seas and fiercer storms coming from the south and west.

That will mean not just incorporating the fireproofing measures now required of homes throughout [See Coastal, A6]

## Why a polystyrene ban hasn’t worked

California prohibits styrofoam in food service items. How is it still on the shelves?

By SUSANNE RUST

Styrofoam coffee cups, plates, clamshell takeout containers and other food service items made with expanded polystyrene plastic can still be found in restaurants and on store shelves, despite a ban that went into effect on Jan. 1.

A Smart and Final in Redwood City was brimming with foam plates, bowls and cups for sale on a recent visit. Want to buy these goods online? It was

no problem to log on to Amazon.com to find a variety of foam food ware products — Dart insulated hot/cold foam cups, or Hefty Everyday 10.25-inch plates — that could be shipped to an address in California.

Same with the restaurant supply shop KaTom, which is based in Kodak, Tenn.

Smart and Final and KaTom didn’t respond to requests for comment. A spokesperson for Amazon said the company would look into the matter.

The expanded polystyrene ban is part of a single-use plastic law, Senate Bill 54, that Gov. Gavin Newsom signed into law in 2022 but bailed on earlier this month. [See Plastics, A6]



WILLIAM LIANG For The Times

SEA LIONS at a San Pedro rescue center. A surge in marine mammals sickened by domoic acid, a neurotoxin, has prompted warnings to beachgoers to steer clear.

## Toxic algae bloom takes toll on marine mammals

By SUMMER LIN

Sea lions and other ocean mammals in Southern California are falling victim to a poisoning event that a local expert calls the worst in recent memory. It is stranding the mammals along the coast as warnings are issued to beachgoers of the threat posed by animals that are transformed by their illness.

A surfer reported an attack by a sea lion that was “feral, almost demonic” as he was on his board off

Ventura County on Friday. Rj LaMendola said the animal bit him as he surfed off Oxnard, shaking its head and dragging him off his surfboard. He said on Facebook that as he paddled away terrified, the sea lion continued to stalk him.

LaMendola, who has been surfing in Oxnard since 2006, said he tried to splash the sea lion to scare it away. He later contacted the Channel Islands Marine & Wildlife Institute, who told him the attack likely happened due to the toxic algae

bloom.

“It was super intense,” he said, “unlike anything I’ve ever seen in all the years I’ve been in the water.”

Ingesting domoic acid from harmful algal blooms can cause sea lions to have seizures or to crane their heads in a motion known as “stargazing.” They can also fall into a comatose state. But experts advise people not to interact with animals believed to be sick because, without warning, they might aggressively lunge or even [See Mammals, A9]

## Trump discounts security breach

He calls the texting of sensitive war plans on the publicly available Signal app a ‘glitch.’

By DAVID KLEPPER AND AAMER MADHANI

WASHINGTON — President Trump on Tuesday downplayed the texting of sensitive plans for a military strike against Yemen’s Houthis this month to a group chat that included a journalist, saying it was “the only glitch in two months” of his latest administration as Democratic lawmakers heaped criticism on officials for handling highly sensitive information carelessly.

Trump told NBC News that the lapse “turned out not to be a serious one,” and articulated his continued support for national security [See Signal, A5]

### Is messaging app Signal safe to use?

Cybersecurity experts weigh in on whether the app is for everyday communication. NATION, A5

### Star’s injury dims USC’s title hopes

Losing JuJu Watkins for the rest of the season could prove devastating, Bill Plaschke writes. SPORTS, B10

### Inside the O.C.’s ghost town mall

Kaleidoscope offers its very few visitors broken elevators and sewage smells. CALIFORNIA, B1

### Weather

Mostly cloudy. L.A. Basin: 72/53. B6

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### ‘No Other Land’ co-director hurt

Palestinian Hamdan Ballal is released after attack and detention. ENTERTAINMENT, E1

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# Rescues struggle to help sickened sea lions

[Mammals, from A1] bite. Meanwhile, local rescuers are struggling to meet the challenge.

As of Friday, at least 140 sea lions with symptoms of domoic acid poisoning had been taken in by the Marine Mammal Care Center in San Pedro, according to Chief Executive John Warner. At least 50 dolphins have also been stranded on area beaches, but because they almost always die from ingesting domoic acid, they are usually euthanized.

Domoic acid is a neurotoxin produced by harmful algal blooms that accumulates in filter-feeding fish, including anchovies and sardines. Those fish are then eaten by seals, sea lions and dolphins. Sea lions have a 50% to 65% survival rate when they're taken in for treatment in a timely manner.

Animals can be treated, but moving an ill sea lion to a facility can be difficult because an adult female can weigh up to 250 pounds and an adult male up to 1,000 pounds, requiring several people to move each animal.

A similar domoic acid event occurred in 2023 in California, resulting in the deaths of more than 1,000 sea lions.

A February algal bloom isn't common but also isn't unheard of, Warner said, adding that he can only recall one other stranding event this time of year from a few years ago.

Toxic algal blooms are also getting worse over time due to human activity that exacerbates the intensity, timing and scale of the stranding events, Warner said.

The warming of ocean temperatures caused by climate change, coupled with the acidification of the ocean due to nitrate runoff, have worsened toxic algal events, according to Warner. When it rains in L.A. County, the organic runoff flows into the ocean, which then feeds the algae.

"I liken it to a bloom put on steroids from human-caused factors that make these blooms worse every time we see them," Warner said.

Large domoic acid blooms usually happen every three to seven years, but Warner said that scientists expect to see these events happen much more frequently.

Treatment for affected animals includes tube feeding and IV fluids twice daily, which provides them with nutrition and medication



**A SEA LION** is moved at the Marine Mammal Care Center in San Pedro. An adult male can weigh up to 1,000 pounds. As of Friday, the center had received at least 140 sea lions with symptoms of domoic acid poisoning.



**BEACHGOERS** are advised not to interact with sick animals, which can bite or lunge aggressively, but to call (800) 399-4253 to ask for rescue assistance.

until their seizures are under control, Warner said. Treatment also includes anti-seizure medication and sedatives, which also help with controlling seizures so they don't worsen in intensity and duration and result in permanent brain damage.

The longer the toxic blooms last, the more exposure the animals have, which increases the risk of permanent brain damage and makes it so they can't be released back into the wild, according to Warner. In those cases, when their behavior is

no longer safe, the animals have to be euthanized.

The current algal bloom, which began about a month ago, has been worse for the center than the one that occurred in 2023, which Warner called the "worst domoic acid bloom in recorded history

in Southern California."

Besides the higher number of sick sea lions taken in by the center overall, more male sea lions are succumbing to domoic acid poisoning compared with two years ago, Warner said. In 2023, the center took in about 130 sea lions and didn't have to take in any males.

"It takes a lot to take them down, and we're taking them in without them putting up a fight," he added. "That says a lot about the condition that they're in."

Male sea lions can be kept in the same pen when they're in a comatose state, but once they start waking up, they can become aggressive because of the neurological effects of the toxin. That puts capacity strains on the wildlife center because, at some point, every male sea lion will need its own enclosure.

The center could probably take in another 20 sea lions, as they continue releasing some animals that have already recovered, Warner said. They'll only be able to take in sea lions for another week or two, because the center still has to prepare for rescuing orphaned or stranded elephant seal pups during pup-

ping season, which falls from February to late June.

"If these numbers keep up for another week or two, we're gonna be at the place where we have to leave animals on the beach," he said.

Currently, the center has two male sea lions in the same pen who will have to be separated. There are four small enclosures, a medium-sized enclosure and a large enclosure. Each enclosure can fit from three to five adult female sea lions, but only one male sea lion can be in an enclosure at a time.

"It's organized chaos," he added.

During the 2023 stranding event, the wildlife center took in 120 sea lions and five dolphins, Warner said. Dolphins are only rehabilitated if they're of an endangered species; they tend to experience intense stress hormones and trouble breathing when they're around people and out of the water.

There isn't much that can be done to lessen the blooms or clean them up; blooms usually last from four to eight weeks, Warner said. The 2023 stranding event lasted eight and a half weeks.

Because the Marine Mammal Care Center is a small nonprofit that relies on private philanthropy, Warner has been reaching out to cities and counties in the state to ask for their support to prepare for future stranding events.

"It's sort of a like in a fire, you don't hire your firefighters and personnel after the fire starts," he said. "We're not resourced to handle this volume on an ongoing basis. We're doing everything we can to meet the moment, and we can't do this without public and private partnership."

Although Angelenos may have learned to stay at least 50 feet away from sickened marine animals and refrain from taking selfies with them, and to not put beached dolphins back into the water, tourists are a lot less educated about the proper protocol, Warner said.

People should call (800) 399-4253 to ask for rescue assistance if they see any stranded marine animals.

Dolphins, in particular, are skittish around humans and have a high rate of heart attack when they get scared.

"That's not the ending these animals deserve, and people need to leave them alone and not crowd around them," Warner said. "That's what we really need from the public. Selfies kill animals, so use your zoom, and stay away."

## MARKET ROUNDUP

# Wall Street drifts as mood of U.S. consumers sours

ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK — Wall Street edged higher on a quiet Tuesday after roaring the day before on hopes that President Trump's tariffs may not be as sweeping as earlier feared.

The S&P 500 added 0.2% after jumping 1.8% on Monday to one of its best days of the last year. The Dow Jones industrial average inched up less than 0.1%, and the Nasdaq composite rose 0.5%.

U.S. stocks have recovered a chunk of their losses since falling 10% below their all-time high earlier this month, for their first "correction" since 2023. The S&P 500 is now down 6% from its record, and that drop has left the market looking less expensive than before, which had been a major criticism after its euphoric rise in earlier years.

But strategists on Wall Street warn that more sharp swings probably are still on the way with an April 2 deadline looming. That's what Trump has called "Liberation Day," when he will begin tariffs on trading partners that he says will roughly equal what he sees as the burden each of them puts on the United States. Monday's spurt for Wall Street came on hopes that Trump's "reciprocal" tariffs may be more targeted than had earlier been feared.

"We think markets are underplaying the risk of a tariff shock in early April," according to Ajay Rajadhyaksha, global head of re-

search at Barclays.

Even if Trump's tariffs do end up being less painful for the global economy than feared, all the dizzying talk about them has already soured confidence among U.S. households and businesses. The fear is that could lead them to cut back on their spending and freeze the economy.

A report on Tuesday showed that pessimism among U.S. households is only worsening. The Conference Board's measure of consumer confidence fell more than expected, mostly because of a tumble for expectations about upcoming conditions in the short term. That dropped to its lowest level in 12 years and is sitting "well below the threshold of 80 that usually signals a recession ahead."

Like other recent surveys, the data showed U.S. households are much more concerned about where the economy is heading than where it is currently. So far, actual economic activity and the job market seem to be holding up despite the worsening moods of U.S. companies and consumers.

On Wall Street, Trump Media & Technology Group climbed 8.9% after the company behind the president's Truth Social platform said it had reached an agreement with Crypto.com to offer a suite of "America-First" investment funds.

The exchange-traded funds will hold bitcoin and other digital assets, along with what TMTG called "securities with a Made in America focus spanning div-

erse industries such as energy." Crypto.com will support the back-end technology, provide custody and supply the cryptocurrencies for the ETFs, which will operate under TMTG's Truth.Fi brand.

Tesla rose 3.4% after drifting between gains and losses following more grim sales figures from Europe. Its stock remains down nearly 29% for 2025 so far.

European sales of Tesla's vehicles fell by nearly half during the first two months of the year compared with a year earlier, according to the European Automobile Manufacturers Assn.

In addition to an aging model line, drops in sales may be due in part to Chief Executive Elon Musk's endorsement of Germany's far-right party in last month's national election, his embrace of fringe political movements and a gesture during a Trump event in January that many saw as a Nazi salute. Tesla is also facing increasing competition from Chinese carmakers such as BYD.

Home builder KB Home dropped 5.2% after reporting weaker profit and revenue for the latest quarter than analysts expected. Already mired in a slump, home builders may face potentially rising costs due to tariffs. A report on Tuesday said U.S. sales of new homes last month were slightly weaker than expected.

In the bond market, Treasury yields eased. The yield on the 10-year Treasury fell to 4.31% from 4.34% late Monday.



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DOW		42,696.61	42,441.83	42,587.50	+4.18	+0.01%	▲	▼	▲	+0.10%
DOW Trans.		14,989.01	14,754.74	14,806.63	-119.45	-0.80%	▲	▼	▲	-6.85%
DOW Util.		1,007.05	987.94	992.86	-16.16	-1.60%	▼	▼	▲	+1.03%
NYSE Comp.		19,772.26	19,615.99	19,678.44	-25.77	-0.13%	▲	▼	▲	+3.18%
NASDAQ		18,281.13	18,170.79	18,271.85	+83.26	+0.46%	▲	▲	▼	-5.81%
S&P 500		5,786.95	5,760.42	5,776.65	+9.08	+0.16%	▲	▼	▼	-1.78%
S&P 400		3,030.26	2,993.78	3,009.58	-9.45	-0.31%	▲	▲	▼	-3.57%
Wilshire 5000		57,855.81	57,576.16	57,733.77	+53.74	+0.09%	▲	▼	▼	-2.19%
Russell 2000		2,110.03	2,090.04	2,095.38	-14.00	-0.66%	▲	▼	▼	-5.42%

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