Heartland Carwash Association
P.O. Box 42035
Des Moines, IA 50323

September 22, 2026
MEDIA ALERT
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: Kristen Corbisiero, Executive Director & Publisher
Phone: 1-833-HRTLAND
Email: kcorbisiero@heartlandcarwash.org

HCA: Carwash Industry Is Recalibrating as Operators Navigate Rising Costs, Changing Economics

DES MOINES, Iowa — The Heartland Carwash Association (HCA) is taking a closer look at the current state of the carwash industry and what it means for operators across its 13-state region.

The association's assessment can be summed up in one word: **Recalibrating.**

Carwash operators are navigating rising utility and property-tax costs, elevated chemical and replacement-part prices, higher construction costs and changing financing conditions. At the same time, investments in automation, artificial intelligence, smarter equipment, pricing technology and customer-retention tools are creating new opportunities while requiring operators to take a closer look at capital expenditures and return on investment.

“Operators are being asked to make more decisions with more variables than ever before,” said **Pat Shannon, President of the Heartland Carwash Association**. “They have to look closely at their costs, their pricing, their labor, their capital investments and their customers. That's what we mean when we say the industry is recalibrating.”

Revenue Growth Does Not Always Equal Profit Growth

For many operators, the current environment is creating a renewed focus on a fundamental business question: **Is growth actually producing a healthy business?**

Mel Ohlinger of **OhmCo**, an HCA board member and longtime industry consultant, says operators need to look beyond topline revenue and volume.

> “A busy carwash is not automatically a profitable carwash, and more revenue does not always mean more profit. Sometimes growth hides a lot of pressure underneath it. Keeping prices the same for years might feel like the customer-friendly thing to do, but if it leaves you without enough margin to maintain your equipment, retain good employees, support your family or keep investing in the business, eventually that catches up with you too.”

That perspective reflects a broader shift HCA is seeing throughout the industry.

Operators are being encouraged to understand their true cost per car, evaluate pricing and membership models, continually examine labor costs and approach investments in equipment and technology with a clear understanding of the potential return.

“Technology can absolutely help us become more efficient,” Shannon said. “But we still have to do the math. The same is true for pricing. We can't assume that increased volume or efficiency will automatically solve every margin problem.”

A Challenge Shared Across the Industry

The current pressures are not limited to operators.

Manufacturers, distributors, suppliers and service providers are also managing higher costs, changing customer expectations and an increasingly competitive marketplace.

The decisions made by one segment of the industry can have a direct impact on another.

Manufacturers are evaluating equipment design and pricing. Distributors are managing inventory, transportation and operating costs. Operators are weighing labor, pricing, capital expenditures and customer retention. Suppliers are looking for ways to continue delivering value while managing their own cost pressures.

The entire industry is recalibrating.

HCA believes that process can create opportunities as well as challenges.

Higher costs can force businesses to examine long-standing practices, identify inefficiencies and find new ways to operate. Investments in automation and technology can improve productivity. Changing customer expectations can create opportunities for better service and retention.

“Sometimes pressure forces us to build a better mousetrap,” Shannon said. “The companies that are willing to look honestly at their numbers and adapt have an opportunity to come out of this period stronger.”

HCA's Role: Bringing the Industry Together

HCA believes one of its most important responsibilities is helping its members navigate change by creating opportunities to learn from one another.

That is the thinking behind two of the association's major upcoming events.

On **October 14, 2026**, HCA will host the **HCA Carwash Roadshow: Land of 10,000 Washes**, bringing carwash owners, operators and industry partners together for a one-day experience featuring behind-the-scenes access to innovative carwash operations and facilities throughout Minnesota.

The Roadshow gives operators the opportunity to see equipment, technology, facility design and operational strategies in action—and, perhaps more importantly, to ask other operators why they made the decisions they made.

“Sometimes the best way to understand what is changing in our industry is to see it firsthand,” Shannon said. “The Roadshow allows operators to get out of their own wash, see what other businesses are doing and bring those ideas home.”

HCA will continue that conversation at its **46th Annual Product & Equipment Show**, scheduled for **March 23–24, 2027, at the Tinley Park Convention Center in Tinley Park, Illinois**.

With the theme **“Driving the Future of Car Washing,”** the event will bring together owners, operators, manufacturers, distributors and service providers to explore equipment, technology, operational excellence and customer retention.

“These events aren't just about networking,” Shannon said. “They're about creating a place where an operator can say, ‘Here's what I'm dealing with,’ and have a manufacturer, supplier or another operator understand exactly what they're talking about. Those conversations make the entire industry better.”

A Collective Voice Carries Further

The information HCA gathers through its members also strengthens the association's ability to advocate for the industry.

HCA has a history of engaging with policymakers when legislation and tax proposals have the potential to affect carwash businesses.

In Nebraska, HCA board members worked directly with legislators and state leadership on tax issues affecting carwash operators, bringing the industry's concerns about the tax treatment of business inputs and the potential impact on operators to the attention of policymakers.

HCA's advocacy has included communicating directly with elected officials and providing the operator perspective on how proposed tax changes could affect real businesses.

“We couldn't have done that without our members,” Shannon said. “HCA can have the conversations. We can build relationships. We can put an issue in front of legislators. But the reason those conversations have weight is because we represent real businesses and real people who are investing, hiring, paying taxes and serving their communities.”

That experience continues to shape HCA's approach to advocacy today.

An association can open the door, but its members provide the voice behind it.

As the association's membership and geographic reach continue to grow across 13 states, HCA believes that collective voice becomes increasingly important.

“A single operator may have a difficult time getting a legislator's attention,” Shannon said. “But when we can show that an issue affects carwash owners and operators throughout our region, that changes the conversation.”

Recalibrating Together

Despite the economic pressures facing the industry, HCA does not view the current environment as a reason for pessimism.

Carwashing has historically demonstrated resilience during tighter economic periods. Consumers may choose to maintain the vehicles they already own rather than take on the significantly greater expense of replacing them, and maintaining a clean vehicle remains a priority for many consumers.

But resilience does not mean ignoring the numbers - it means responding to them.

For HCA, that means continuing to provide education, connections, industry events and advocacy while giving operators a stronger collective voice.

“The circumstances will change. The numbers will change. The technology will change,” Shannon said. “Our responsibility is to keep paying attention, keep learning, keep adapting and keep standing up for the people who make this industry what it is.”

For operators, HCA's message is straightforward:

Pay attention. Stay flexible. Know your numbers. Stay connected. And be willing to recalibrate.

The industry is changing. HCA intends to help its members change with it.

About the Heartland Carwash Association

The **Heartland Carwash Association (HCA)** is a regional trade association representing the carwash industry across 13 Midwestern states. HCA provides education, networking, advocacy, industry events and resources designed to support carwash owners, operators and industry partners. Through its collective membership, HCA works to elevate the voice of the carwash industry and promote the continued growth and success of the businesses and professionals it represents.

For more information about the Heartland Carwash Association and membership opportunities, visit **www.heartlandcarwash.org**.

# # #