

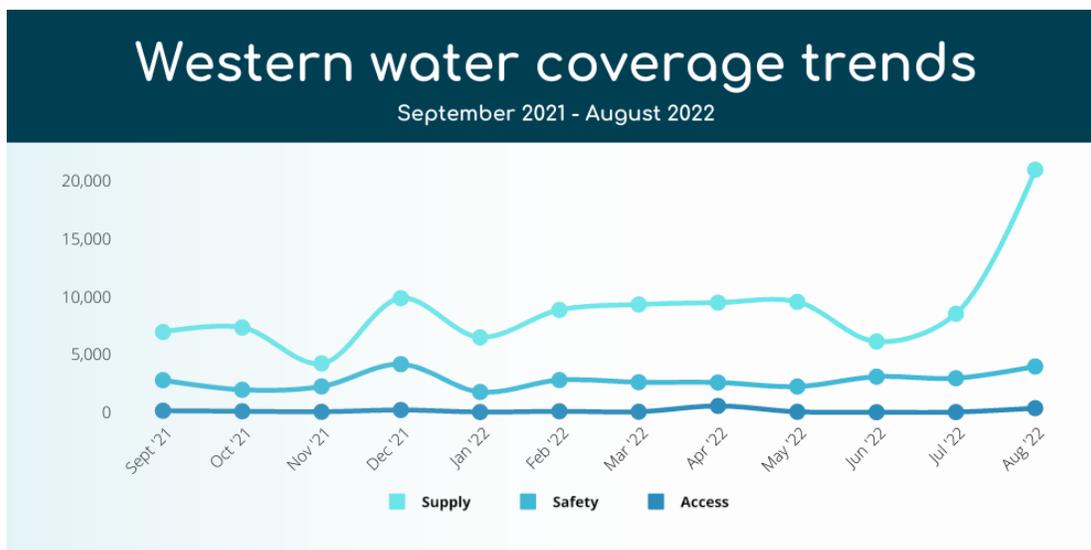


What's up in Western water news?

December 2022 media analysis by Water Hub

Introduction

Since 2020, we have regularly keyed in on three areas of Western media coverage (water supply, water safety, and water access and affordability) to try to understand coverage trends and what's shaping water narratives in the news. In this year's probe, we used Cision and Meltwater to scan the volume and content of media coverage from September 2021 through August 2022 using automatic text analysis and keyword searches.



Western water supply

The flood of Western water supply coverage we observed last year is not a blip. Compared to [last October's analysis](#), the volume of Western water news, anchored by coverage of a drying Colorado River, continued to increase dramatically.¹ Water supply news dominated the media

¹ The specific keywords we searched for included: (water supply, water shortage, water source, water use, water allocation, water demand, drought contingency plan, or drought plan) and (river, reservoir, aquifer, groundwater, lake, stream, flow, precipitation, rain, snowpack). We were looking exclusively at news in Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, or Wyoming and counts include syndication.

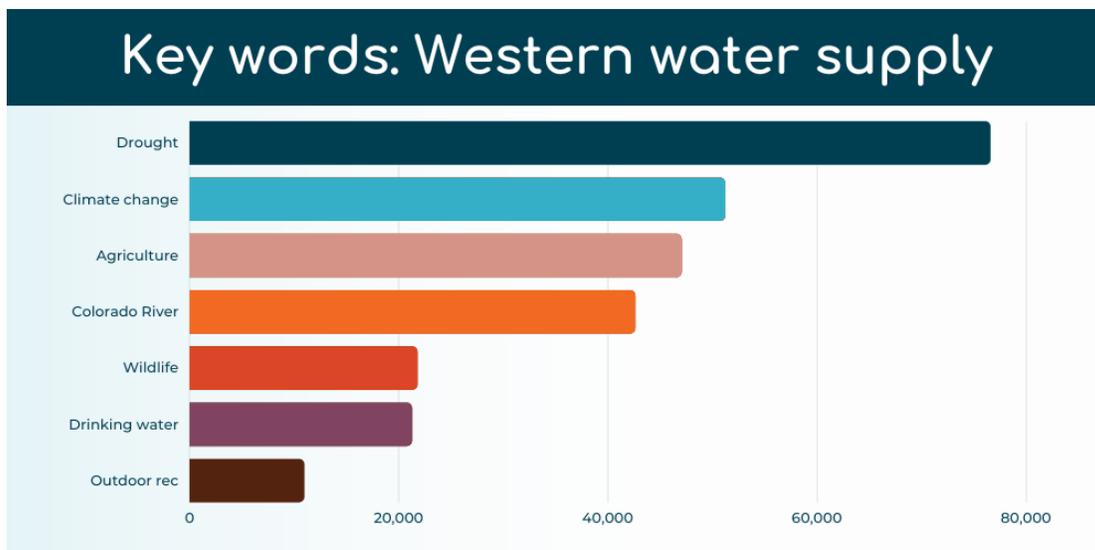
landscape and our search found 3 out of every 4 stories over the last twelve months was about just how much water there is (or isn't) in the West.²

This increase in news coverage peaked in August, with more than 20,000 news stories in one month alone (compared to 12,000 in August 2021). This spike in coverage followed the release of the Bureau of Reclamation's 24-month study and announcement of [2023 water cuts](#) due to low reservoir levels. Unlike years past, the ebbs and flows of water supply coverage we've come to expect around are less defined in this scan, signifying a steadier stream of coverage.

Water supply themes

Drought and climate change

In [past analysis](#), we found coverage tended to peak around scientific studies, snowpack and reservoir reports, policy milestones, and weather events. While that trend wasn't observed in this year's scan, due to an overall increase in coverage, weather events like December 2021's [record snowfall in the Sierra Nevada](#) and concurrent [record lack of snowfall](#) in metro Denver were still covered closely. Scientists³ remain an important source to explain our natural world. A Nature study on megadrought in the West received [wide attention](#) as did science communications explainers like this [KOED story](#) on the meaning of "weather whiplash."



² The share of media coverage on Western water supply ranged from 56% to 69% in the previous twelve-month periods.

³ [Pew polling](#) has found 39% of Americans trust climate scientists (with significantly higher trust among liberals) and a 2020 [Water Hub poll](#) found 87% of U.S. voters trust scientists as a source of information about drinking water.



Colorado River

40% of water supply stories between September 2021 and August 2022 mentioned the [Colorado River](#), up from 32% the previous year. That is unsurprising given [dire reservoir levels](#) at Lakes Mead and Powell, stories of receding waters unearthing the lost [Glen Canyon](#) and, in a [true-crime twist](#), decades-old [murder victims](#). American Rivers named the Colorado this year's [most endangered river](#), and several other Western waterways also made this year's [Top 10 list](#). Coverage of the Colorado looked at how cities in the West are [addressing water insecurity](#) and the [impact on farmers](#), particularly in Arizona, who have come to expect deliveries of Colorado River water. On the flipside of this agricultural water story, are the neighbors of megafarms who want to [limit groundwater over-pumping](#) and [increased scrutiny of groundwater leasing](#) to grow alfalfa for Saudi cattle.

The Colorado isn't the only river revealing secrets as researchers in Texas discovered [dino footprints](#) on the Paluxy's drying riverbed. Coverage of the Salton Sea (led by local reporting from the Desert Sun), whose future is inextricably linked with that of the Colorado River, looked at what conservation ([and funding](#)) efforts are needed to stabilize the region and the promise of expanded [lithium mining](#). Other important stories about water in the West include [Nebraska and Colorado's](#) dispute over the South Platte River, the plight of [California's salmon](#), a dry [Rio Grande](#) and the impact on tourism, the controversial [Delta Tunnel project](#), and the future of the [Great Salt Lake](#).

Solutions

While the problem of hotter, drier climate and less water in the West's rivers, reservoirs and aquifers tends to take center stage, we also observed unique angles and in-depth coverage on the kinds of solutions that can be scaled up across the West. Examples include this [Christian Science Monitor story](#) on acequia culture in rural New Mexico, [50 years of citizen science](#) studying snowpack from a high-elevation ghost town, a [deep dive into water recycling](#) from Southern California to Colorado, wiser water use [in wine country](#) and the Las Vegas ban on [ornamental grass](#).

Western water safety

This year's analysis also saw an uptick by about 30% in coverage of the safety and quality of water in the West, compared to past years.⁴ The coverage spike in December 2021 followed the [Honolulu drinking water crisis](#) where jet-fuel leak at the Red Hill facility near Pearl Harbor contaminated the drinking water, sickening and displacing thousands of families. While outside

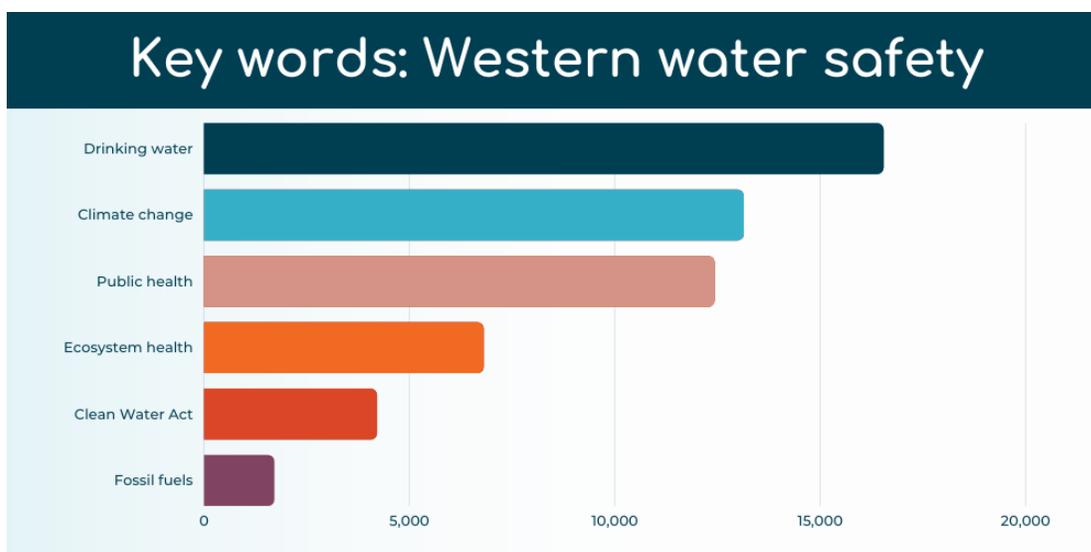
⁴ We searched for stories that included these keywords: (river, reservoir, lake, drinking water, tap water, stream, creek, aquifer or groundwater) and (safe water, clean water, clean water rule, waters of the US, water safety, water contamination, contaminated water, water pollution, polluted water, or exceeds safe levels) in Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, or Wyoming.

our defined scope of “the West,” the severity of the crisis led to national coverage that was caught by our scan.

Water safety themes

Drinking water

We observed a decrease in coverage of water’s essential public-health role as a pandemic response compared to [years past](#). Drinking water, overall, was the top theme observed in this category. As noted above, crises often drove media. The largest wildfires in New Mexico’s history [contaminated the Gallinas River](#) and led to a drinking water crisis for the [city of Las Vegas, NM](#), leaving the community with [just weeks of available](#) drinking water in their reservoirs. An audit of California’s SAFER program found [1 million people](#) in the state still lack access to safe drinking water, a decade after the state recognized the human right to water. Drinking water stories were often also framed around public health, looking at infrastructure funding for [rural water initiatives](#) or [water contamination from copper mining](#) (a key mineral for the clean energy transition) in New Mexico. PFAS was another hot topic as the EPA identified over [120,000 contaminated locations](#), with hot spots [in Colorado](#) and California.



Climate change

When we think about climate change and water, the impact of a hotter, drier West on water supply is often top of mind. But, climate change impacts the safety and quality of waterways too. A push in California for dairy digesters as a play to reduce methane emissions and generate electricity clashes with local communities who say incentives for more cows will lead to [more local water contamination](#). [Toxic algae](#) is on the rise in Western waters driven by warming temperatures, but communities are investing in nature-based solutions like [“floating islands”](#) to tackle the blooms.



The environment

In 2022, we celebrated the 50th anniversary of the Clean Water Act, though [half of U.S. waterways](#) are still not safely swimmable, fishable or drinkable. This is happening as the [Supreme Court considers](#) whether to narrow the scope of the Clean Water Act, making it more difficult to protect small streams and wetlands. The [wetlands at Rio Bosque](#) is a story of hope but also shows how challenging it can be to ensure water for environmental health and quality gets priority.

Environmental harm isn't the only consequence of climate-stress, damaging water management practices and extractive industries: communities are impacted as well. In California, the [plight of the salmon](#) is inextricably tied to the Tribal communities fighting for the species' survival. [This Arizona Republic story](#) investigated the cultural and legal barriers Indigenous peoples face to protect sacred lands and waters.

Western water access and affordability

The scan picked up 2,000 news stories⁵ on water access and affordability issues in the West.⁶ A spike in volume in April 2022 was due to a widely syndicated [Associated Press story](#) on the possibility the Rio Grande would run dry in Albuquerque ([it did in July](#) for the first time in 40 years).

Water access and affordability themes

Water debt

Water debt and affordability issues were a key theme the past twelve months. The emergency Low-Income Household Water Assistance Program (LIHWAP) got off the ground, a year after it was established as part of the pandemic relief package.. Local news outlets covered the announcement of state and local programs such as in [San Antonio](#) and [Arizona](#). In Arizona and [California](#), the publicity push around low-income water bill assistance coincided with the end of the pandemic-era [utility shutoff moratoriums](#), though Arizona also passed new protections to keep utilities connected [during extreme weather events](#) like heat waves. California affordability news included ongoing coverage of the cost of water and efforts to pass SB222, a state low-income water assistance program.

⁵ Compared to 4,000 (Sept '20 - August '21) and 1,600 (September '19 to August '20) in the previous 12-month periods.

⁶ We searched for stories including the following keywords: water debt, water shutoff, water shut off, water service shutoff, water service shut off, water affordability, unaffordable water, water service turned off, shutoff moratorium, shutoff moratoria, unpaid water bills, and low income ratepayer assistance in Arizona, California, New Mexico, Utah, Wyoming, Colorado, or Nevada.

Drying wells and more

Across the West, the ability to afford water isn't the only issue keeping households without water access. Other water access coverage in California honed in on specific impacts, like [drying wells in Tulare County](#), caused by drought and overpumping of nearby farms. While California's landmark groundwater control law passed in 2014, [communities are losing safe water access](#) faster than the law is being implemented. In the [Oasis Mobile Home park](#), residents have been calling for help to address their contaminated water system for years. While water safety issues in California's Central Valley have been covered for years, we also saw attention on how the megadrought, and the lack of groundwater oversight, is [leaving households dry in Arizona](#) too.



Tribal water

Since 2020, much-needed media attention shined a light on the importance of water for public health and the disproportionate number of Native American households lacking safe, running water. Coverage of the work to connect families to clean [water on Navajo Nation](#) continued in this scan. The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, passed in November 2021, also made big news for Western water because it included [billions in Tribal clean water funding](#) for the Indian Health Service's water and sanitation program and toward [Tribal water rights settlements](#). We also found that in-depth coverage of Tribal water, like Pauly Denetclaw's beautiful story on Indigenous nations in the [Colorado River Basin](#), often spans all three categories, exploring the rights of Tribal Nations, water access gaps, and the role of rivers.

Conclusion

We've become used to the ebbs and flows of water coverage over the years, following seasonal snow reports and weather extremes. Today, our scans of Western water coverage pick up less variation month-to-month as reporters follow the crisis of unsustainable water management and climate change.



Word cloud shows the most commonly used terms in Western water news. Sentiment (positive/negative) is a text analysis that determine the feeling or attitude a reader would derive from reading the story. For example, stories on water and drought are more likely to have a negative sentiment. Chart generated using Meltwater.

While the overall volume of media coverage is growing, the past bumps in attention to safe water access and public health/the pandemic haven't continued at the same pace. The vast majority of stories are looking at ways climate change, and our response, is shaping the future of water in the West.