

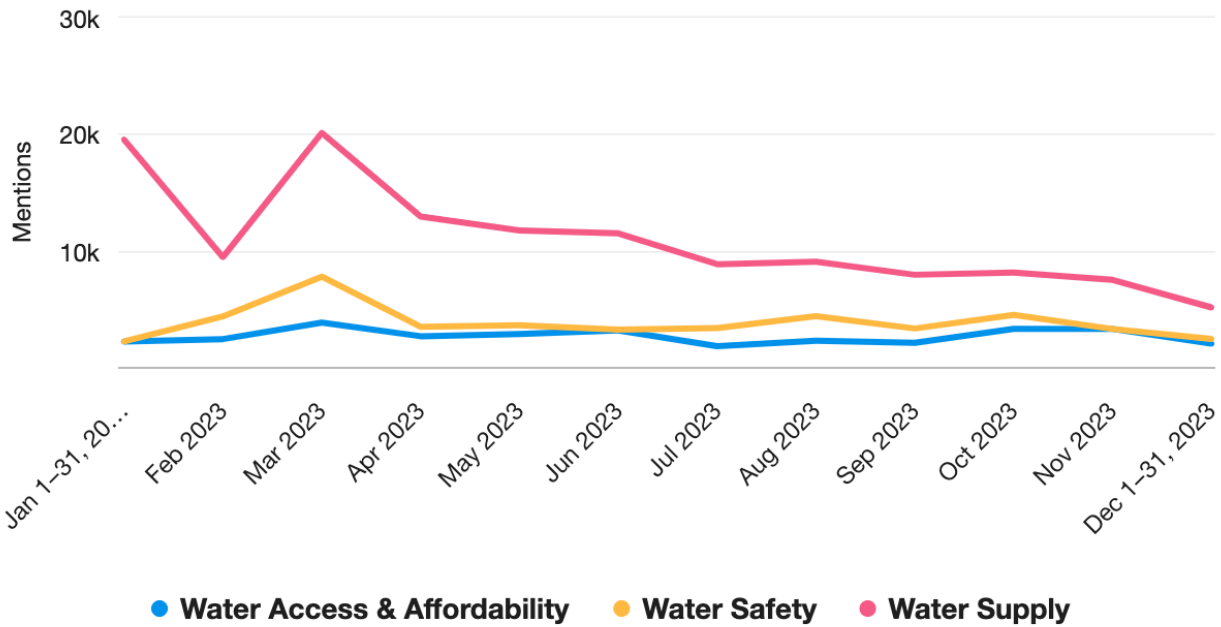
# National media scan

## What's up in 2023 water news

### Introduction

Since 2020, the Water Hub has paid attention to the hot topics that float to the top of the water news cycle, with a geographic focus on the Western U.S. Since we are now working throughout the country, we are now looking at three areas of coverage (water supply, water safety, and water access and affordability) across all U.S. media coverage. In this media scan, we look back at a year's worth of media coverage in 2023 using text analysis and keyword searches in Meltwater<sup>1</sup> to understand the water news cycle.

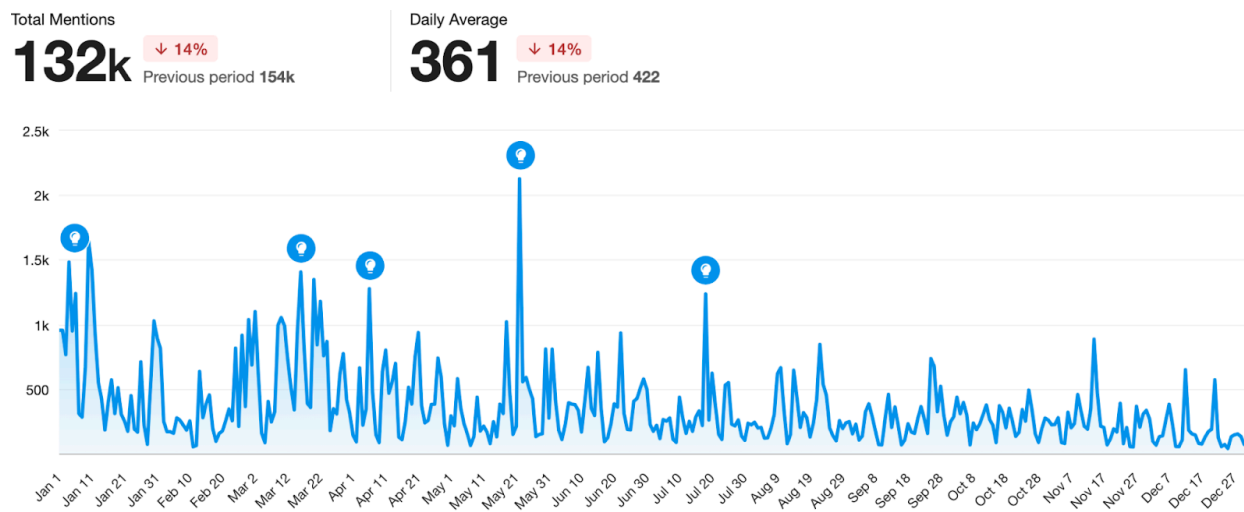
Similarly to past [Western water media scans](#) with drought-driven news cycles, water supply and use remain major news drivers in 2023. 64.1% of water news stories mention water supply search terms,<sup>2</sup> compared to 22.2% on safety, and 13.7% mention access and affordability key words. We have yet to scan wastewater and sanitation related news, but plan to add that into our regular practice beginning with a baseline scan for 2024.



<sup>1</sup> Any year-over-year comparisons are made using new software and new national queries, so we can't quite compare apples-to-apples with our Western water audits from years past, but will still note trends.  
<sup>2</sup> Compared to past years, supply-side news constituted 64.4% of national water articles in 2022, 57% in 2021, 33.2% in 2020, when there was a greater share of coverage (37.4%) on water access and affordability due to the pandemic.

# Water supply

Over the years, we've noticed a correlation between the weather cycle and the news cycle covering water supply and water use. As detailed below, seasonal stories are driven by speculation like if California's atmospheric rivers will lead to a "wet winter" with full reservoirs or what NOAA's spring forecast means for the Upper Midwest swinging between [flood risk](#) and drought conditions in the [Mississippi River Basin](#). We notice spikes in media coverage assessing big reports, like the [Fifth National Climate Assessment](#), and meaningful Colorado River moments such as the [Supreme Court ruling](#) against Navajo Nation's water rights, [Bureau of Reclamation](#) easing the Basin's water cuts, or updates on [interstate negotiations](#).

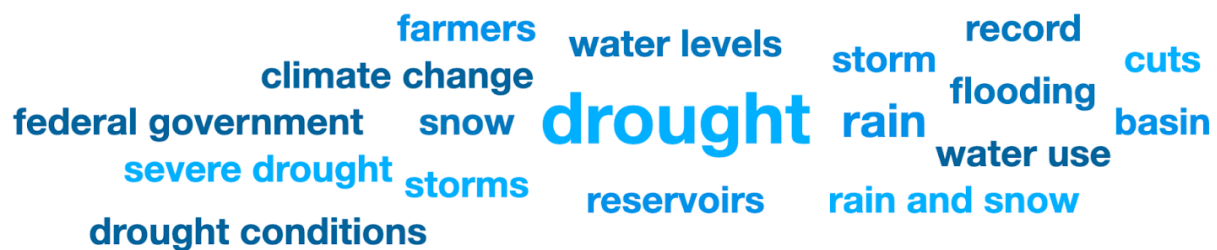


Big moments from 2023 include:

- In [early January](#) and [again in February](#) and [March](#), a slew of storms dropped record rain and snowfall across parts of California, boosting [water supplies](#), but also putting communities in harm's way from [flooding and landslides](#) in Northern California and [overpowering levees](#) in Pajaro, CA. This wild winter accounts for large spikes in media coverage observed in January and March 2023.
- March was a big month for water news. The United Nations held the [first global water conference](#) in fifty years in New York, bringing attention to water scarcity and the plight of [the world's rivers](#), but [lacking binding commitments](#).
- In May, with [\\$1.2 billion in promised funding](#) from the Inflation Reduction Act, Arizona, California, and Nevada [announced an agreement](#) to conserve 3 million acre feet of water through 2026 to stabilize the Colorado River's drying reservoirs.
- Tracking regional precipitation was top of mind in June as drought and dropping Potomac River levels [hit the D.C. metro area](#) and, on the flip side, [beneficial storms](#) brought much-needed moisture to the Midwest. [Young people in Montana](#) went to trial against the state's climate inaction, citing drying rivers, wildfires, and reduced snowpack.

- In the West and Southwest, [Arizona stopped approving](#) new homebuilding as climate change and years of overuse stress groundwater supplies. The [Supreme Court ruled against the Navajo Nation](#) in its Colorado River water rights case, and additional coverage of the [historic inequities Tribes face](#) accessing their water rights.
- Extreme heat and drought in Texas [taxed irrigators](#) and [city water supplies](#) alike, lasting from [July](#) through September, [damaging critical water infrastructure](#).
- In the fall, saltwater intrusion in the Mississippi River due to drought and dredging [threatened New Orleans drinking water](#). While [coastal communities](#) of Plaquemines Parish didn't have safe drinking water for months, the story became a national crisis when it seemed the saltwater wedge would reach the Big Easy's drinking water intakes. As the [immediate threat to New Orleans subsided](#), the [impact in Plaquemines persisted](#), and the threat of corrosive saltwater intrusion across the U.S. will only [continue to grow](#).
- Reporters across the U.S. covered worsening water impacts highlighted in the Fifth National Climate Assessment, including regional [reporting on the Southwest](#) and [Mississippi River basin](#).

## Water supply keywords 2023



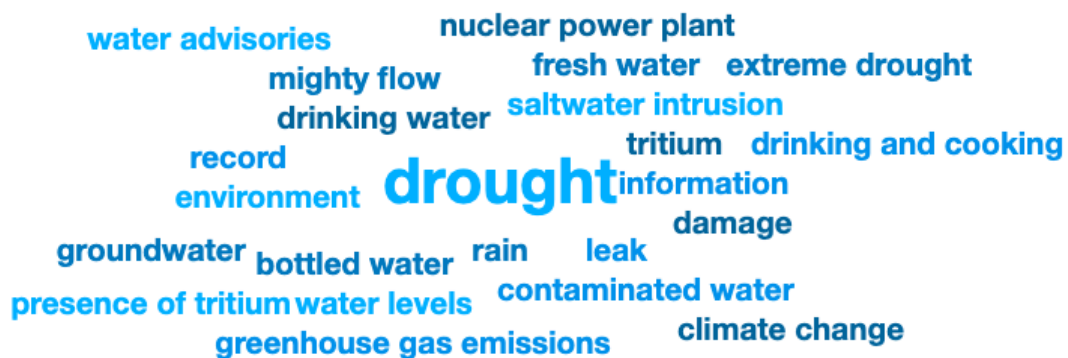
## The Mississippi River Basin

More than 11,000 news stories in this scan mentioned the Mississippi River in 2023. As described above, the developing story around saltwater intrusion and the impact on drinking water in coastal Louisiana was a major media moment. We also noticed agricultural stories in the Upper Midwest pop more around [weather conditions](#) and agricultural production than water quality or agricultural pollution. We're not sure if this result is due to a true lack of news coverage or whether our initial keyword choices influenced the result and plan to investigate that more.

Other key moments included:

- NOAA’s [January 2023 report](#) says extreme weather caused \$165 billion in damage in the U.S. in 2022, calling out the “\$22.2 billion in damage from a western and midwestern drought that [halted barge traffic on the Mississippi River](#).”
- In February, a tale of two river basins converged, with [a lot of mythbusting](#) as to why it would be a really bad idea to pipe and pump water from the Mississippi River into the arid West.
- A [recurring leak of radioactive wastewater](#) at the Monticello Nuclear Generating Plant in Minnesota made headlines throughout the year, tracking the [potential impact to the Mississippi](#) and drinking water supplies. Xcel energy was eventually [fined just \\$14,000](#) related to the tritium leak, and no downstream effects to public drinking water supplies or private wells were found.
- Lastly, in May 2023, the Supreme Court issued its decision in the Sackett vs. EPA case, watering down Clean Water Act protections for small streams and wetlands. Journalists investigated what this would mean for the Mississippi River Basin from the [headwaters in Wisconsin](#) to [Louisiana's coastal wetlands](#).

## Mississippi River keywords



We noticed the majority of keywords that popped in this scan were focused on problems and crises facing the Mississippi River watershed. We separately scanned Mississippi River coverage to get a baseline for media coverage around solutions like green stormwater infrastructure, river protection and restoration, and climate and water smart agricultural practices. We found:

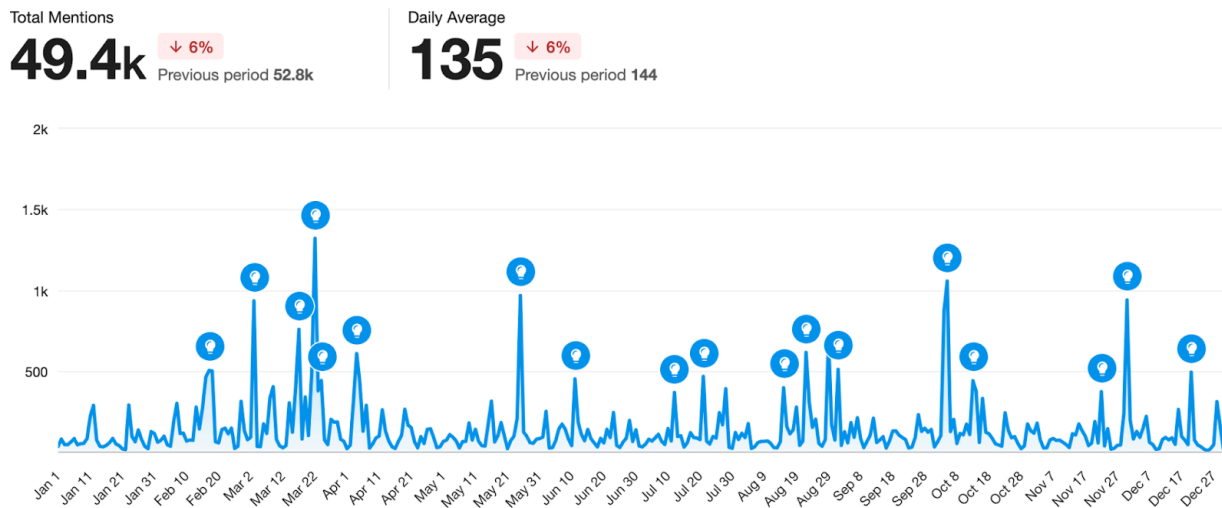
- Less than 3% of Mississippi River stories mention the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law or Inflation Reduction Act by name. Mentions include both investigations into controversial [carbon capture](#) provisions in the IRA as well as solutions stories on federal funding for [nature based solutions](#) to address weather whiplash or [restore floodplain forests](#).
- Less than 1% of articles mentioned green infrastructure solutions. Examples of those that did include how “[unbuilding](#)” can help communities weather water extremes, how [education around nature-based solutions](#) can help transform the Mississippi River as a force to be feared into an ally to be invested in, and how status-quo flood control based on old data won’t be enough to help communities [plan for future flooding](#).

- 500 stories (1.5%) mentioned agricultural solutions like efforts to [plant cover crops](#) to reduce agricultural runoff, a [Wisconsin distillery](#) partnering with local farmers who use no-till, organic farming practices, and how [low-tech solutions](#) like field buffers could help Iowa farmers and local waterways.
- 875 (2.4%) articles mention keywords around river and ecosystem protection or restoration. A [Tulane professor](#) explores ways working with nature will help the future of the Mississippi, [Futurity](#) looks at the ways meandering rivers change over time, and [construction broke ground](#) on Louisiana’s largest coastal restoration project.

## Water safety

The biggest spikes in water safety news coverage were driven by extreme weather events, man-made disasters that affected drinking water quality, and the ruling and aftermath of the Supreme Court’s decision in Sackett vs. EPA. As previously mentioned in the water supply section, the United Nations made waves in March 2023 with a conference and new report drawing attention to the lack of access to clean drinking water for billions around the globe. The other key theme that dominated water safety coverage in 2023 is lead in drinking water, largely driven by the Biden administration’s proposed Lead and Copper Rule Improvements and administration official visits to locations impacted by lead pipes and receiving federal funding.

### Mentions Trend



The biggest spikes in news coverage include:

- In February, a Norfolk Southern [freight train carrying vinyl chloride derailed](#) in East Palestine, Pennsylvania, the chemical spill killing 3500 fish in Ohio streams and tributaries and raising alarm bells for drinking water intakes along the Ohio River.

- Around the same time, [news coverage](#) picked up around the EPA's impending proposal to limit PFAS toxic forever chemicals for the first time. PFAS was in the news throughout the year as a new study found [nearly half of U.S. tap water](#) may be contaminated with PFAS, chemical companies DuPont de Nemours Inc., The Chemours Co. and Corteva Inc. reached a [\\$1.8 billion settlement in June](#), [Hawaiians called for clean up](#) near the Red Hill fuel storage facility, and [Wisconsin passed](#) its own water infrastructure improvement program.
- In May, the Supreme Court ruled against the Biden administration in [Sackett vs. EPA](#), narrowing the scope at which the U.S. EPA can set protections to “non-navigable” water bodies like wetlands and seasonal streams. Later that year, the [Biden EPA announced new](#), less protective, Clean Water Act rules to comply with the SCOTUS decision. The decision means wetlands protections are left [up to the states](#). Local journalists dove into reporting on what it meant for their local community from [Tampa Bay](#) to [Kentucky](#), [Michigan](#), and [New Mexico](#), to name a few. Local advocates spoke up too like this op-ed from Bayou City Waterkeeper in the [Houston Chronicle](#).
- In August, the deadly Lahaina wildfire swept across Maui, exacerbated by [drought](#) and [colonization](#). The fire not only killed residents and destroyed property, but melted water pipes and [polluted the local drinking water supply](#).
- As mentioned above, lead pipes were a major driver of safe drinking water media coverage. The Associated Press water beat was on top of it, investigating [EPA misallocation of lead service line replacement funds](#) and shining a light on four states (Washington, Oregon, Maine, and Alaska) that [declined all or most of their available lead replacement funds](#).
- After winning back some environmental protections along the border [earlier in the year](#), in October, the Biden administration [waived federal environmental laws](#) like the Safe Drinking Water Act to expedite construction of the Southern border wall, [over the concerns](#) of conservation organizations.

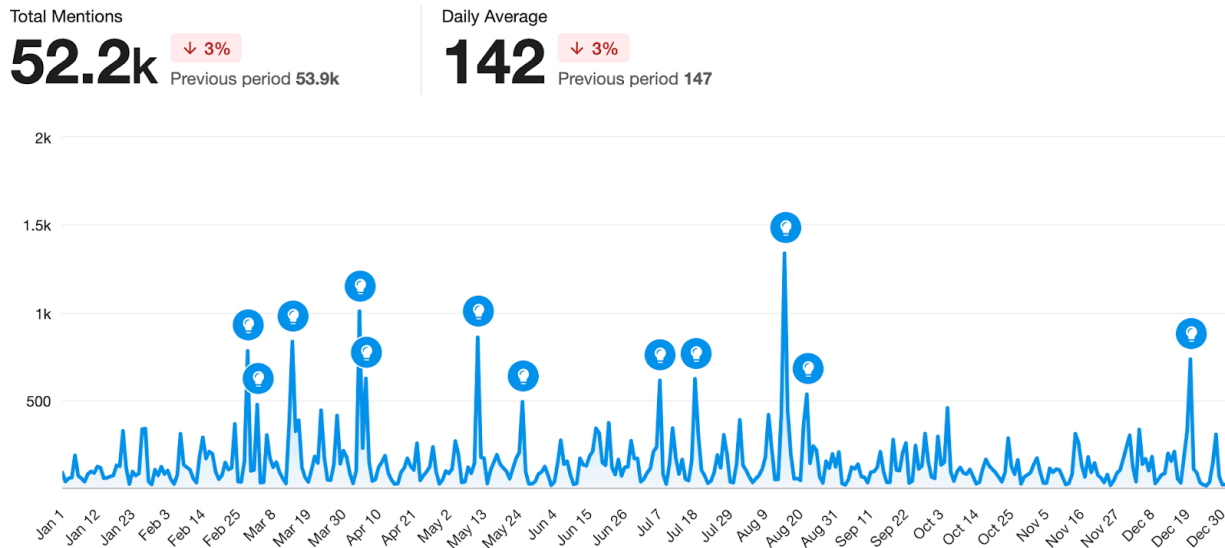
## Water safety keywords

contaminated water   coverage of water   bottled water  
 government   drinking water   clean water   lead pipes  
 plant  
 lead   **safe drinking water**   chemicals  
 environment  
 decision   access   childrenagency   biden administration  
 rule   access to safe drinking water   statement

# Water infrastructure

Water infrastructure continued to be a focal point in both national policy and media coverage. There was a clear emphasis on climate resilience, including government [investments in green infrastructure](#), and how extreme weather like flooding and sea-level rise made climate change [threaten drinking water and wastewater infrastructure](#). 1 in 3 water infrastructure stories mentioned climate change. 36% of articles in the search mentioned water infrastructure investments, with spikes around funding announcements and campaign events, with a focus on emerging contaminants like PFAS and lead pipes. For example, in December, then-candidate [Biden stopped in Wisconsin](#), touting lead pipe replacement as a central campaign talking point. While these funding announcements are the largest chunk of water infrastructure coverage, it's interesting to note that articles were less likely (1 in 7) to mention the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law or Inflation Reduction Act by name, instead mentioning the EPA, state agencies, and [specific programs](#).

## Mentions Trend



Hot water infrastructure topics included:

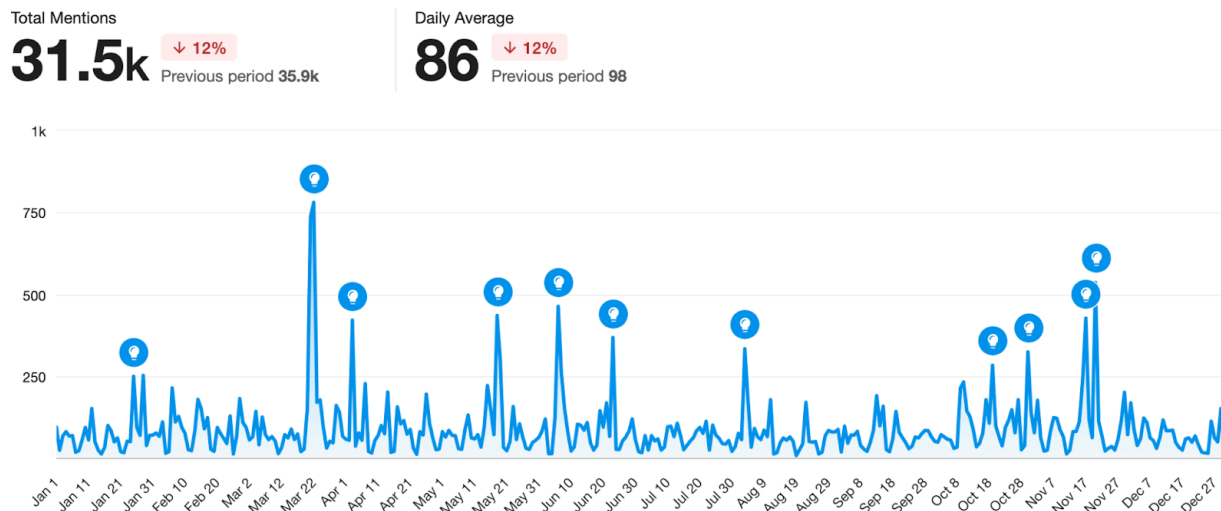
- Throughout the year, stories about the water infrastructure-energy nexus forced on the potential for [floating solar](#) to generate clean energy while providing water savings on [canals](#) and [reservoirs](#). In June, [New Jersey](#) celebrated the largest such project to date, powering the Canoe Brook Water Treatment Plant.
- Climate impacts on water infrastructure was another hot topic. Studies in the [Bay Area](#) identified the threat of sea level rise pushing up the water table to water infrastructure and safety. [CNN coverage](#) in New Orleans of the saltwater wedge and drought on the





[California](#) and [Arizona](#) mean for water bills; the [water debt crisis in Highland Park, Michigan](#) and the connection between aging infrastructure and water affordability; the ongoing struggles to fund safe, reliable water in [Jackson, Mississippi](#); and the unique challenges faced by tenants like [in this Indiana mobile home park](#), when their landlords don't pay the water bill.

## Mentions Trend



Other key moments in 2023 include:

- Reporting on the fallout and recovery from 2022 Jackson, Mississippi water crisis remained in the news throughout the year, with national exposes in the [New York Times](#) or this NPR story about [17-year old Georgianna McKenny](#) and her award-winning podcast about what it's like to finish high school without clean water.
- The Biden Administration stumped for its “Invest in America” agenda touting funding for water infrastructure provided through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law from [Minnesota](#) to [Jackson, MS](#).
- In June, in a major water rights case, the Supreme Court ruled 5-4 [against the Navajo Nation](#), stating that the federal government is not required to ensure the Tribe has access to water.
- In October, Michigan Congresswomen Debbie Dingell and Rashida Tlaib [introduced the Water Access Act](#) to extend the soon-to-expire Low-Income Household Water Assistance Program.
- Activists worked to put gender equity on the agenda at COP28 in Dubai, urging policymakers to “respond to climate change’s disproportionate impact on women and girls,” including in [access to clean water](#).
- The water crisis in Gaza [gained media attention in the U.S.](#) at the end of 2023 as the United Nations warned of the lack of clean water and sanitation for Palestinians.

## Water access & affordability keywords



A word cloud of keywords related to water access and affordability. The words are in various shades of blue and green, with 'access' being the largest and most prominent. Other words include 'clean drinking water', 'family', 'program', 'school', 'report', 'home', 'climate change', 'bill', 'person', 'families', 'children', 'residents', 'customers', 'communities', 'life', 'sanitation', 'community', 'clean water', 'water bill', 'water system', 'economic development', and 'organization'.

## Methodology

### Search terms

#### Water safety

(river OR reservoir OR lake OR "drinking water" OR "tap water" OR stream OR creek OR aquifer OR groundwater) NEAR/20 ("safe water" OR "safe drinking water" OR "unsafe water" OR "clean water" OR "clean water rule" OR "clean water act" OR "waters of the US" OR "water safety" OR "water contamination" OR "contaminated water" OR "water pollution" OR "polluted water" OR "exceeds safe levels" OR "lead pipes")

#### Water supply

(river OR reservoir OR aquifer OR groundwater OR lake OR stream OR flow OR precipitation OR rain OR snowpack) NEAR/20 ("water supply" OR "water shortage" OR "water source" OR "water use" OR "water allocation" OR "water demand" OR "water deliveries" OR "drought")

#### Water access & affordability

(water ONEAR/4 ("shutoff" OR "shut off" OR "service shutoff" OR "service shut off" OR "affordability" OR "unaffordable" OR "service turned off" OR "shut off moratorium" OR "ratepayer support" OR "ratepayer assistance" OR "bill assistance" OR "shutoff moratorium" OR "shut off moratoria" OR outage OR "lack access")) OR ("water debt" OR "water debt forgiveness" OR "water failure" OR "drinking water access" OR "water bill" OR "access to clean water")

#### Water infrastructure

infrastructure AND ("drinking water" OR wastewater OR stormwater OR sewage) AND country:us AND infoType:"news"

## Mississippi River

("Mississippi River") AND (drought OR megadrought OR "mega-drought" OR aridification OR "mega drought" OR "water shortage" OR "water conservation" OR "climate change" OR "global warming" OR "drinking water" OR irrigation OR irrigate OR farming OR agriculture OR "water rights" OR Tribes OR Indigenous OR Tribal OR "demand management" OR "water efficiency" OR "water recycling" OR "water reuse" OR resilience OR "saltwater intrusion" OR "pollution" OR "runoff" OR "water quality" OR PFAS OR "water treatment" OR "water infrastructure")

## Green infrastructure

("Green Infrastructure" OR "Nature-Based Solutions" OR "Natural Infrastructure" OR "Bioswale" OR "Green Streets" OR "Green Alley" OR "Stormwater Capture" OR "Rainwater harvest" OR "Rainwater Capture" OR "rain gardens" OR "green roofs")

## Agricultural solutions

"cover crops" OR "no till" OR "no-till" OR "precision fertilizer" or (CAFO AND "regulation OR rules") OR "discharge requirements" OR "conservation tillage" OR "grazing management" OR "crop rotation" OR "nutrient management" OR "conservation drainage" OR "field buffers"

## River restoration

"river protection" OR "river restoration" OR "forest restoration" OR "forest protection" OR "habitat restoration" OR "habitat protection" OR "wetlands restoration" OR "wetlands protection" OR "ecosystem restoration" OR "ecosystem protection"