

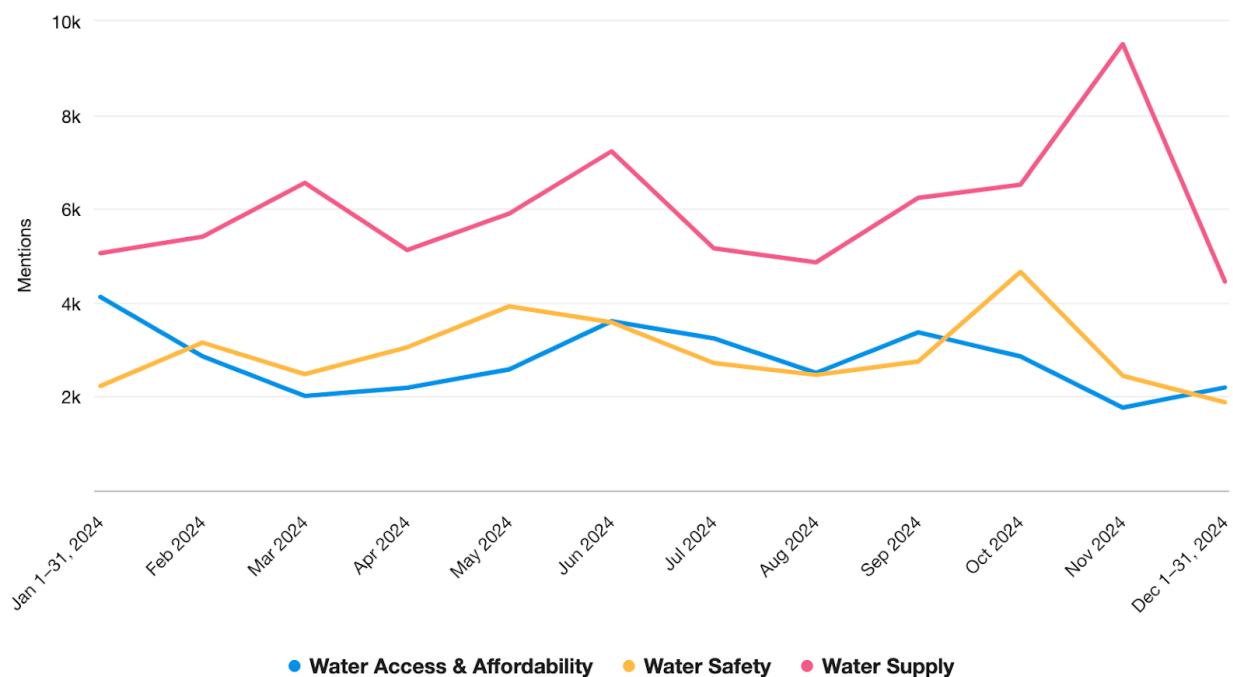
2024 national media scan

Weather whiplash and water infrastructure make headlines

Introduction

Media coverage of water in the U.S. declined by 33%¹ in 2024, compared to the [previous year](#). Based on our annual audits, water media coverage related to water supply, water safety, and water access and affordability news peaked in 2022 (243k articles), largely driven by worsening drought conditions in the West, the Colorado River crisis, and the catastrophic water infrastructure failure in Jackson, Mississippi.

As in years past, the Water Hub used a text-based keyword analysis in Meltwater to scan media coverage and understand themes in 2024 water news. News articles mentioning water supply search terms remained the largest source of water media coverage (51.2%) compared to the other queries. In 2024, 25.1% of news stories mentioned water safety terms and 23.7% mentioned access and affordability keywords.

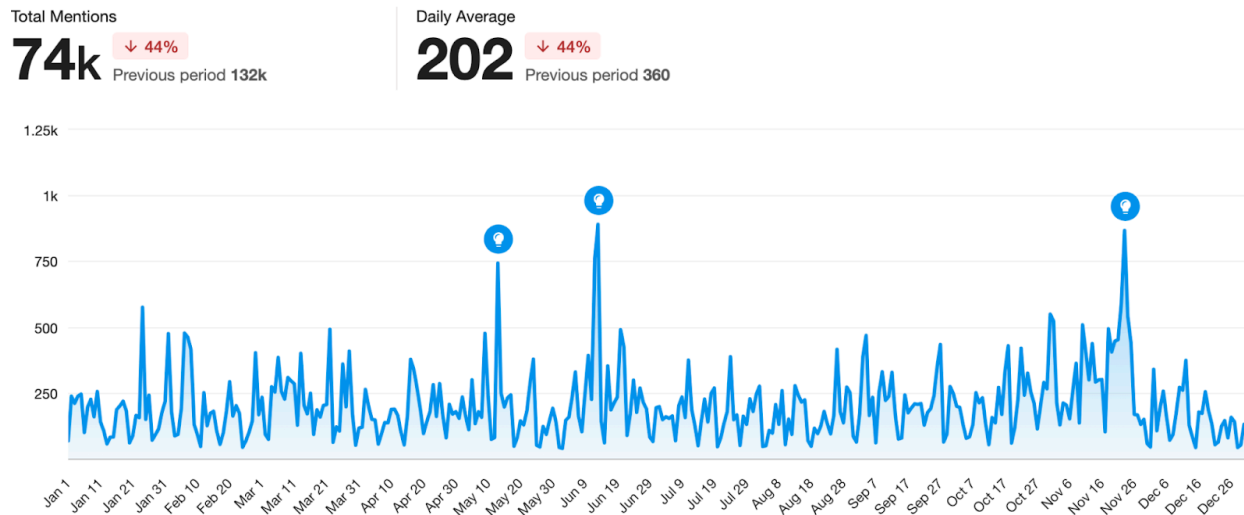


¹ 140k articles 2024 compared to 211k the previous year. Water supply news dropped by nearly 50% from 2023 to 2024. Media coverage of water safety news dropped 28% (nearly 50k news articles in 2023 compared to 35k in 2024, while media coverage of water access and affordability increased by 8% (33.3k articles in 2024 compared to 30.1k in 2023).

Water supply


This year's water supply coverage was driven by new research on shifting climate patterns, extreme weather — from drought in the Southwest and Upper Midwest to a more active hurricane season — and regulatory updates on binational rivers like the Colorado and Rio Grande.

Mentions Trend



Drought remained the most heavily covered topic (57.8k), covering the usual [snowpack reporting](#), [torrential rains](#) in parts of [California](#) and [Texas](#) that brought the threat of flooding and [mudslides](#). Drought [in the Midwest](#) impacted farmers from [Ohio](#), all the way down the Mississippi River, to [crawfish farmers](#) in Louisiana. Some farmers who want to use regenerative farming techniques to adapt to hotter, drier conditions, came up against unexpected barriers like [crop insurance](#). By May, rains in [Missouri](#), [Wisconsin](#), and [Iowa](#) finally alleviated drought conditions. Tracking water levels was a roller coaster as October in the region was “[bone dry](#)” again and the [weather whiplash](#) that relieved drought downstream may also cause flooding upstream. Unexpectedly dry conditions in the Northeast even led to October [wildfires](#) in New Jersey and Connecticut, leading some experts to call for water [behavior change](#) in the region.

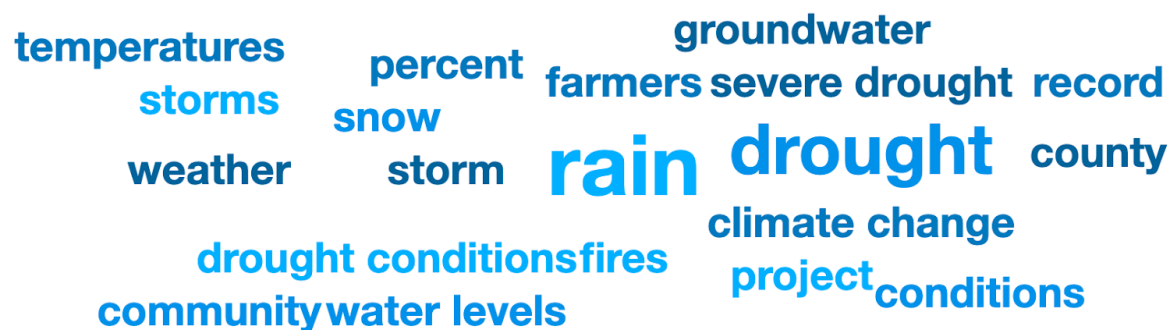
Climate change was another key theme of water supply media (19.9k), mentioned in nearly one third (30%) of drought coverage. New research studied climate [effects on snowfall](#) in the United States, the West’s “[hot drought](#),” and a new UCLA study that looked at how reduced rainfall is just [one driver of drought](#). Groundwater (11.3k) was the third hot topic, with [groundwater depletion accelerating](#) in many parts of the world, [including the United States](#). In December, the [Arizona Attorney General](#) even sued a Saudi Arabian firm for overpumping.



Coverage of Tribes and Indigenous communities (13.9k) was another top theme. In Wisconsin, climate change threatens [traditional spearfishing](#) and the Oneida people are [adapting to flooding](#) that has destroyed white corn, a traditionally important crop. In the [Colorado River Basin](#), [Tribal water rights](#) settlements are a hot topic.

Major river systems, like the Colorado River (7.89k) represented another theme in water supply news. Journalists continued to follow developments in Colorado River [management decisions](#), as the states, Tribes, Mexico, and [federal government](#) proposed options for water sharing. While conditions remain strained, a summer report found water use in the lower Basin states, led by Nevada, was at a [40-year low](#).

Water supply keywords




The Mississippi River Basin

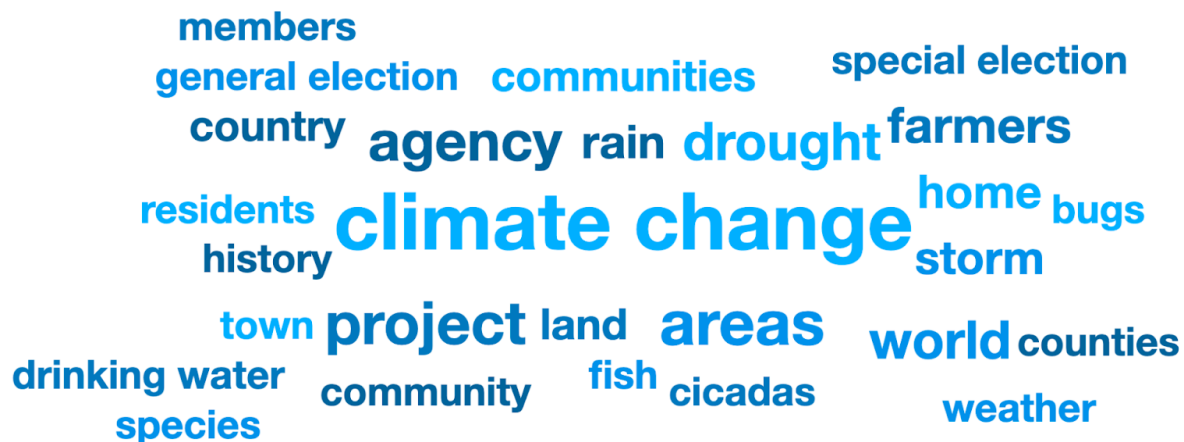
In 2024, our scan picked up nearly 19,000 news stories mentioning the Mississippi River, a 37% decrease from the previous year. These results are consistent with our overall finding of less water-focused media coverage.

Key moments along the Mississippi River included:

- In February, Louisiana's [shrinking coastal wetlands](#) were in the spotlight as scientists at Tulane studied the dire impact of sea level rise on the region's natural hurricane buffers.
- Each March, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's [spring outlook report](#) drives news coverage around the outlook for flooding and drought across the United States, including the Mississippi River region. Though the spring outlook was positive, the Upper Midwest still [experienced flooding](#) along the river in late spring and early summer.
- Extreme heat, drought, and saltwater intrusion in the Gulf in 2023 caused a major disruption in 2024's crawfish harvest. This led to the Louisiana Governor [issuing a](#)


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- [disaster declaration](#) over the shortage that made [national headlines](#).
 - In the Great Lakes region, a big increase in news volume in April stemmed from the decision of U.S. wildlife officials [not to list lake sturgeon](#) as an endangered species.
 - A [June report from the Associated Press](#) found that flooding has pushed people living along the Mississippi River from their homes at a 30% higher rate than the rest of the United States.
 - In July, the Louisiana-based environmental justice nonprofit, The Descendants Project, [purchased Woodland Plantation](#), bringing the site of a historic slave revolt under Black ownership for the first time.
 - In November, for the third year in a row, saltwater from the Gulf of Mexico pushed into the Mississippi River. WNNO and the Mississippi River Ag & Water Desk collaborated on a [feature story](#) looking at long-term solutions for the region.

Mississippi River keywords



Like last year, we wanted to look at how the media is covering solutions-focused stories in the Mississippi River Basin. We found:

- 836 stories mention agricultural solution keywords, an 85% increase over the previous year. Media coverage throughout the year looked at [strategies to reduce runoff](#) from farms, but also [lagging progress](#). This was mainly driven by media coverage of a [January EPA report](#) on the lack of progress in curtailing stubborn agricultural runoff pollution flowing in the Gulf of Mexico, causing a dead zone. NPR's climate solutions team also [took a critical look](#) at the benefits of large-scale investments in regenerative agriculture. A [new study from UW-Madison](#) mapped abandoned farmland that could be used for other climate solutions like restoring floodplains or building renewable energy projects.

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- 862 stories mentioned river and ecosystem restoration, a modest 13% increase from 2023. The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel published several stories about [floodplain forests](#), including [efforts by volunteers](#) to save acorns as a way to restore these oak forests inundated by floodwaters.
 - Less than 1% of articles mentioned federal funding in connection with the Mississippi River. Mentions include [Inflation Reduction Act funding](#) for climate-smart programs that reduce runoff from farms, [lobbying efforts](#) from conservation organizations to bring more infrastructure dollars to the region, and funding for ecosystem restoration and resiliency in [national wildlife refuges](#) and [state wildlife areas](#) along the Basin.
 - Only 240 articles mentioned green infrastructure, about the same as 2023. Stories include coverage of a new Wisconsin law [aimed at restoring wetlands](#) to prevent flooding and how [Mississippi River towns are working together](#) to come up with solutions, like the benefits of greenspace in flood mitigation and removing concrete so rivers have more room to move.

Water access & affordability

Media coverage of water access and affordability in 2024 was shaped by a mix of chronic infrastructure issues and acute climate disasters. Most notably, media coverage corresponded with extreme weather events and underscored the vulnerability of aging water systems.

We saw three major spikes in media coverage on water access throughout the year corresponding with extreme weather or major infrastructure disruption. In January, winter storms in the Southeast caused widespread water outages and boil notices. The deep freeze caused broken water pipes, [boil notices](#), and water outages in small towns in [Tennessee](#) and [Arkansas](#), also hitting [Memphis](#) particularly hard.

In the summer, Atlanta experienced major water main breaks and outages. These outages impacted residents and [regional hospitals](#). [Boil notices](#) were lifted after nearly a week of disruption. The disruption in the major metropolitan area brought to light [long-standing water infrastructure struggles](#), and generated significant [national attention](#). Later local coverage has focused on [investigating the causes](#) of Atlanta's water woes and covering a [customer base split](#) on [rate hikes](#) to fix a backlog of needed infrastructure improvements.

Hurricanes caused major disruptions. In July, [Hurricane Beryl caused a massive sewer spill in Houston's bayous](#) and many area residents had to [boil water](#) due to power outages. In September 2024, Hurricane Helene caused widespread devastation in Asheville, North Carolina and surrounding communities, [killing over 100 people](#) and [decimating water infrastructure](#). Many residents were [without water access](#) for weeks. Weeks later, Hurricane Milton caused [boil advisories](#) in 11 Florida counties.

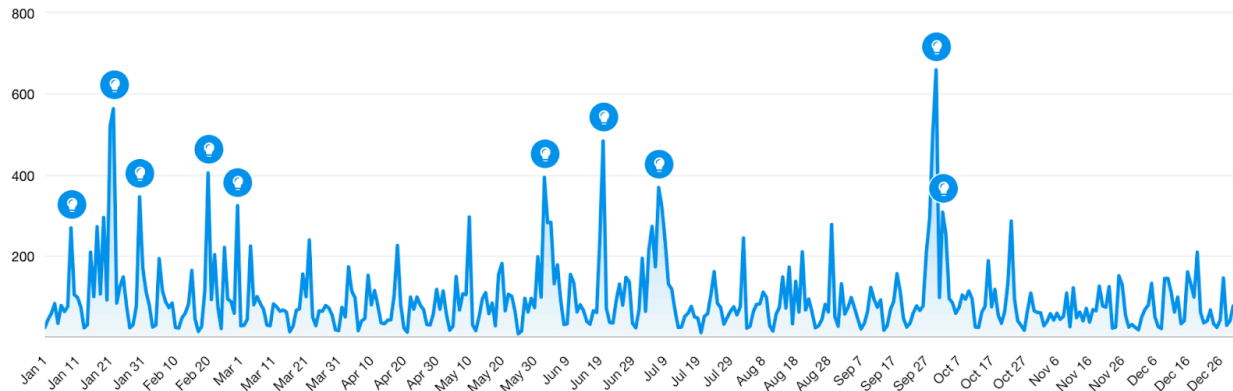
Mentions Trend

Total Mentions

34.2k ↑ 10%
Previous period 31.1k

Daily Average

93 ↑ 10%
Previous period 84



Other recurring themes included local reporting on water and sewer rate increases. From [North Texas](#), to [Canton](#) and [Kent](#), Ohio, [Bloomington](#), Indiana, to [Juneau](#), Alaska, dozens of communities faced rising water rates in 2024. Coverage often framed the issues around the rising costs for utilities facing aging infrastructure in need of repair. An [April Newsweek report](#) mapped planned water rate increases in Pennsylvania and New Mexico, including to fund Philadelphia's water assistance program for low-income residents.

Infrastructure failures across the country led to service disruptions, particularly in cities with older water systems, such as in [Indiana](#). The connection between infrastructure and access, and water affordability included major reporting from the [Associated Press](#) on broken pipes, water loss, and unaffordable water bills in Prichard, Alabama. Another example was reporting in [Flint, Michigan](#) where the city threatened thousands of residents with property liens and possible foreclosure due to unpaid bills. Residents in the story express distress due to a lack of trust following the Flint water crisis and the expense of double paying for water, once for city water they have lost trust in and separately buying bottled water to drink.

There was limited coverage on water affordability and assistance programs. Only about 300 stories mentioned customer assistance programs or the federal Low-Income Household Water Assistance Program (LIHWAP), which ended in 2024. Examples of water bill assistance coverage was mostly driven by utilities [promoting](#) programs to [their customers](#). However, some new legislation made news as well. California's Senator Alex Padilla [introduced a bill](#) in March. Michigan's Congresswoman Debbie Dingell and Rashida Tlaib [introduced new water affordability legislation](#) in the U.S. House in November as well, and lawmakers in [Michigan](#)

re-introduced a state affordability program in December. [Local news in Kentucky](#) reported a new Appalachian Citizens Law Center study on unaffordable water rates in the state. After the election, [the water sector](#) encouraged President-elect Trump to prioritize water, including re-authorizing LIHWAP.

Water access & affordability keywords



Water safety

A confluence of extreme weather events, federal action on drinking water infrastructure and ongoing public health concerns like PFAS, toxic forever chemicals, and lead pipes, were major drivers in water safety news in 2024.

Drinking water remained the most used keyword in water safety media coverage in 2024 (28k mentions or more than 75% of water safety articles). This was largely due to drinking water concerns following extreme weather events like [Hurricane Beryl](#), [Hurricane Helene](#), and [flooding in the midwest](#), covered in the water access section of this report.

Major sub-themes in water safety reporting were often focused around public health, the finalization of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's PFAS, toxic forever chemicals, and lead pipe regulations, and federal and state funding announcements for drinking water infrastructure.

Nearly 5k water safety mentions focused on PFAS. In April, the [EPA finalized the first-ever limits](#) on toxic forever chemicals in drinking water, generating a lot of media coverage both [nationally](#), and in local news providing readers with context and reactions in their states. Take the local reporting in [Louisiana](#), [Massachusetts](#), [New Hampshire](#), and [Pennsylvania](#), as an example.

The new regulations also faced [backlash from chemical companies](#). Ongoing PFAS reporting continued throughout the year, including a major [New York Times report](#) about allegations of human rights violations at the

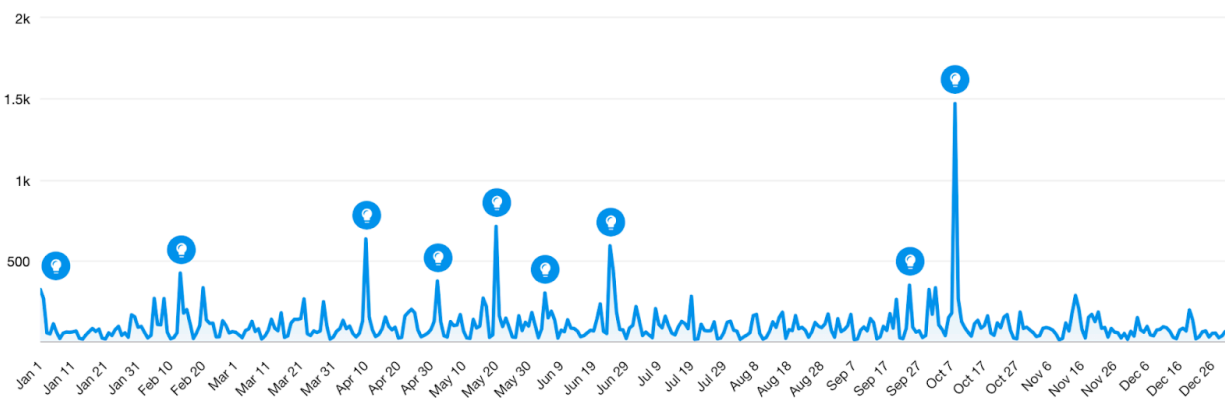
Mentions Trend

Total Mentions

36.2k ↓ 27%
Previous period 49.4k

Daily Average

98 ↓ 27%
Previous period 135



Cape Fear River chemical plant in North Carolina and a PFAS hot spot in [Cape Cod](#). An October study estimated [1 in 5 Americans](#) now drink water tainted with PFAS and other reporting investigated how PFAS affect households who get their water [from private wells](#).

Lead pipe replacement was another sub-theme (5.32k mentions). The 10 year anniversary of the [Flint Water Crisis](#) was a focus for even [international journalists](#). Throughout the year, consistent reporting on federal funding announcements to address lead pipes across the U.S. made headlines ([Pennsylvania](#), [Michigan](#), [North Carolina](#)) and, in October, the Biden administration [finalized the updated Lead and Copper Rule](#) with a 10-year deadline to replace lead pipes in most communities. We observed a big spike in media coverage around this announcement as [then-President Biden returned](#) to the campaign trail for the first time after dropping out of the race to stump for the administration's water infrastructure investments. Narrative driven stories like reporting on the impact of lead poisoning on [one Wisconsin family](#) grounded the issue in a story of home and health.

Stories about water infrastructure funding (6.57k mentions) were most-often [quick hits](#) announcing [dollar amounts delivered to states](#) for drinking water and wastewater infrastructure, rather than in-depth reporting. However, we observed great state-wide reporting covering the bipartisan [Texas Water Fund](#), cuts to drinking water investments in response to [California's](#)

Water safety keywords



Coastal Fisheries

This year, we also looked back at 2024 media coverage trends for coastal fisheries in the Gulf of Mexico.² Our scan picked up nearly 4,460 news stories mentioning the Gulf and coastal fisheries, a 31% decrease from the previous year. Unsurprisingly, fish and farmers are the most prevalent keywords.



Key moments and themes in coastal fishery coverage were:

- As previously mentioned, a [major EPA assessment](#) in January found the U.S. making little progress to address nitrogen and phosphorous pollution from agricultural runoff that contaminates drinking water and causes a dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico.
- The connection between Midwest farms and coastal fisheries in the Gulf was a major theme throughout the year. The [Chicago Tribune](#) reported on the connection and challenges faced by Illinois farmers to reduce pollution impacting shrimpers downstream.
- In the summer, scientists announced they expected a [larger-than-average](#) dead zone in the Gulf — large areas of low-oxygen water that kill shrimp and other species or force them to flee to new habitats. About 13% of news stories scanned mention the [dead zone](#).
- Nearly half of the coastal fisheries stories scanned mention climate change (45.5% or 2.03k mentions). [New research showed](#) that heavy rains worsen these downstream impacts by pushing agricultural pollution from the Midwest down into the Gulf. Entertainer and Captain America star Anthony Mackie got involved in [Shark Week programming](#) in hopes of raising awareness of climate impacts on the Gulf coast from sea level rise to disappearing oyster farms.

² In January 2025, President Trump signed an executive order renaming the Gulf of Mexico as the Gulf of America. Since our search is through 2024, we only looked at the search term “Gulf of Mexico” and the Water Hub will follow [AP Style guideline](#) regarding the naming convention in this write up.

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")

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"

Coastal fisheries

("Gulf of Mexico" AND ("coastal fisheries" OR "coastal fishery" OR fisheries OR fishery OR chinook OR oysters OR menhaden OR snapper OR crab OR shrimp OR crawfish OR grouper OR mackerel OR tuna) AND ("dead zone" OR "nutrient pollution" OR "farm runoff" OR "agricultural runoff" OR "drought" OR habitat OR ecosystem OR "climate change" OR overfishing OR "saltwater intrusion" OR pollution OR nitrogen OR phosphorous)