

The Body of Water Opinion

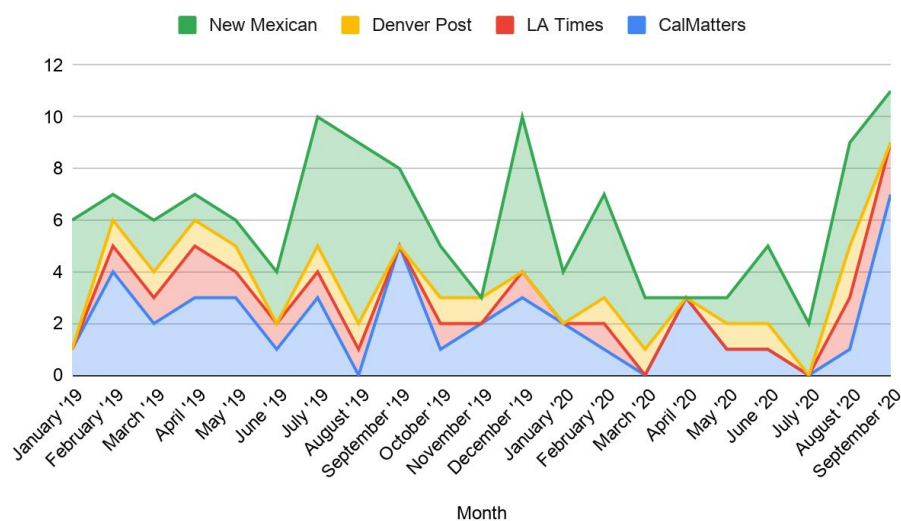
A scan of water op-eds in the West

The opinion pages have long been a go-to for water advocates and experts to shape public opinion and move people to action. We've noticed — and are hearing from partners — that it feels harder than ever to get them published. We conducted an analysis of water op-eds in four western news outlets to get a snapshot of the quantity and topics of water commentary, as well as learn about the types of voices published most frequently.

We compiled water-related op-eds in four media outlets (Santa Fe New Mexican, Denver Post, Los Angeles Times, and CalMatters) to get a sampling from a national newspaper, a digital-first publication and local papers, big and small, in three western states. In total, 128 water op-eds were published in these outlets between January 2019 and September 2020.¹

What did we learn?

Total op-eds by month



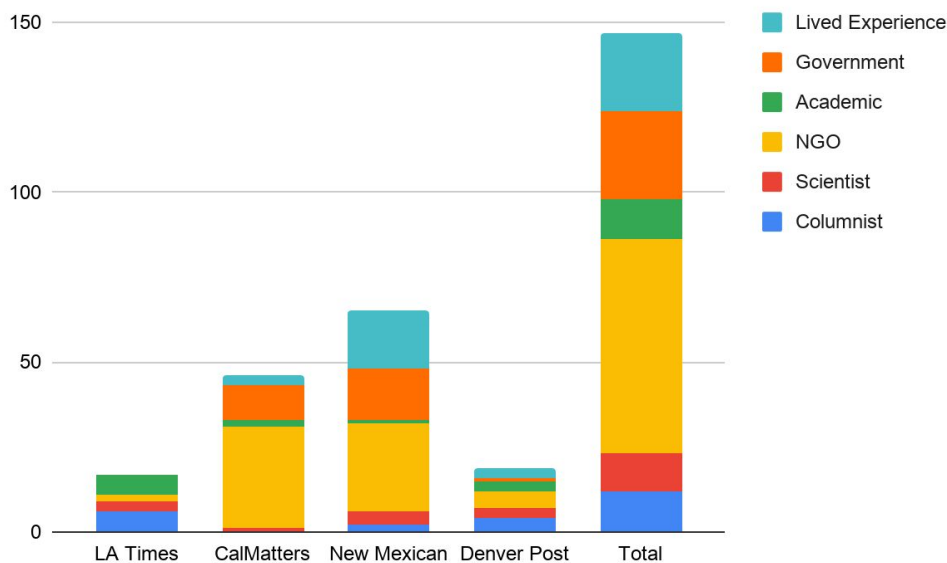
- While our [June media analysis](#) picked up a drop in water news during the pandemic, without a larger sample size it's difficult to say whether there was a corresponding (and statistically significant) dip in water op-eds between March - July 2020.²

¹ Op-eds where fresh water topics were the primary subject were included. Each op-ed was hand-coded by topic (Water Quality & Safety, Water Supply, Access & Affordability, and Climate) and author affiliation (Government, Academic, NGO, Scientist, and Lived Experience).

² In July, the hot op-ed topics included pandemic response, school re-opening, the election, and racial justice.

- We have heard from editors that the events of this year — including the pandemic, protests for racial justice, and the election — have caused a real uptick in op-ed submissions, making placement increasingly difficult.
- The ebb and flow of the news cycle, legislative calendar, and seasonal conditions all impact the current of water opinion; however, our scan didn't find clear trends in volume by month.
- Water op-eds ran more frequently in online and local outlets. Only 1% of op-eds published in the Denver Post and LA Times (roughly one every few weeks) were about water, while the Santa Fe New Mexican published a water-themed op-ed more weeks than not.³

Op-ed author affiliations⁴



- Larger newspapers tend to center traditional expertise, with most water op-eds authored by [academics](#). They also have more in-house opinion writing capacity, with [columnists covering water](#) relatively frequently.
- Outlets focused on the happenings at a state capital, like CalMatters and the New Mexican, featured more op-eds [authored by advocates](#) working to [shape public policy](#).
- Regional outlets provide more opportunity for [community voices](#) (people sharing their lived experience of an issue versus, or in addition to, a professional perspective). For

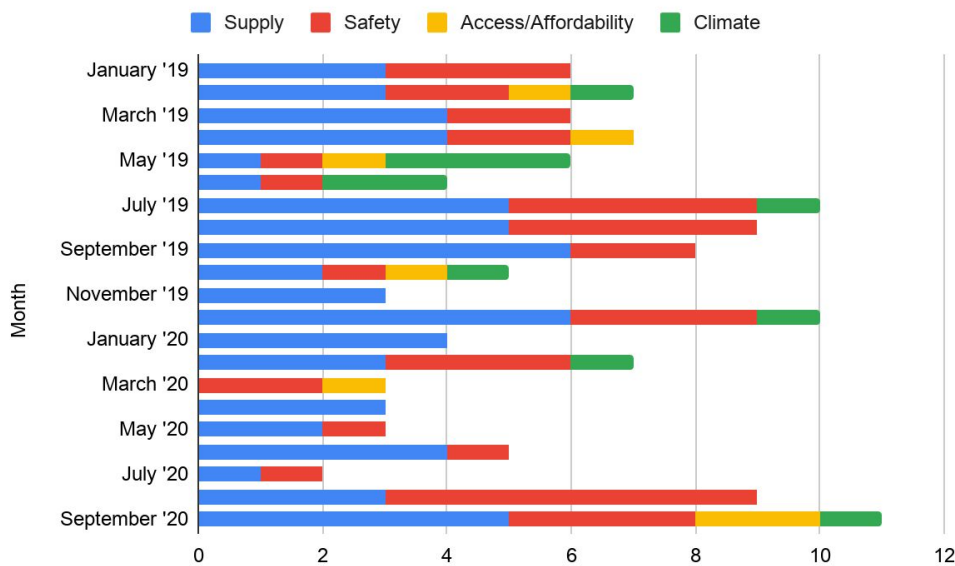
³ We counted the total number of op-eds published in each outlet over several random weeks to extrapolate a rough estimate. Additionally, we noticed the Denver Post was also most likely to publish nationally syndicated columns alongside local commentary.

⁴ The total number of affiliations equals more than the total number of published op-eds because some op-eds are published with multiple authors and some authors describe several affiliations.

example, the [August 2019 series](#) in the Santa Fe New Mexican authored by members of the Santa Fe River Traditional Communities Collaborative.

- Digital-first publications may have more space for op-eds generally, making them slightly less competitive. For example, CalMatters publishes far more water op-eds than the Denver Post or LA Times, and its content is frequently syndicated in other outlets.⁵

Op-eds by topic



- With much of the West locked in drought, our op-ed scan found water supply remains the hottest topic, with authors weighing in on water projects like the [San Francisco Bay Delta](#) and the [Gila River diversion](#) project in New Mexico. Opposing views on [desalination plants](#) in California and [drought](#) were also hot topics.
- Issues of water quality — both drinking water safety and the health of waterways — continue to be timely, with op-eds focusing on [rollbacks to the Clean Water Act](#), [local watersheds](#), and [PFAS](#) contamination.
- Water experts also continue to connect the dots between the pandemic and [access to safe, affordable water](#).
- In New Mexico, op-eds arguing to [curb oil and gas](#) in the state most often focused on the impact to [water safety and quality](#).
- We also tracked op-eds at the nexus of climate and water. While there's a lot of overlap between the impact of the climate crisis on both water quality and supply, it felt important to call out items that specifically focused on the issue, including the impact of extreme weather like [wildfire](#) and [water policies that build climate resilience](#).

⁵ CalMatters publishes approximately 18 op-eds per week, compared to 11-13 in the newspapers surveyed.

Recommendations

Given the increased competition for space, it is more important than ever for advocates and experts to time and target their op-eds wisely. Below, we offer a few recommendations and resources:

- **Know your audience.** There is no “general public.” A goal of influencing a decision-maker or mobilizing a particular community, for example, will determine different outlets to target with an op-ed, or whether to choose a different approach entirely.
- **Keep it local.** If you are trying to influence state or federal lawmakers and decide to pursue an op-ed, consider aiming for publications in their district rather than statewide or national ones.
- **Pick your moment.** Getting published, especially in large, traditional papers, is getting harder. Most outlets have a limit on bylines from the same author or organization. So, if an op-ed is the right move, make sure it’s timely with a clear message.
- **Stick to the basics.** They never go out of style. Resources like Climate Nexus’s [Writing and Pitching Op-Eds](#) & the [Op-Ed Project’s Tips and Tricks](#) are full of timeless advice and best practices.
- **The messenger matters.** It’s not just about what an op-ed says, but also who is saying it. It’s important to understand the types of experts being published. While the old-school definition of expertise keeps too many voices off the page, many editors are looking for new perspectives - especially unlikely allies. For example, commentary on the importance of climate-resilient ag has more juice [coming from two female farmers](#).
- **Have a back up plan.** If at first you don’t succeed, try again. Refresh your lede and submit somewhere else or, for rapid response, get right-to-the-point with a letter to the editor. Try online outlets, self-publish a blog, or think outside the op-ed box and turn your message into a video or radio pitch.

Get help from the Water Hub

If you’d like support crafting the perfect op-ed or, better yet, thinking outside the box, we’re here to help! You can reach Water Hub Strategic Communications Director Sarah Bucci at sbucci@climatenexus.org.