

# Western water news

## February 2021 media analysis by the Water Hub

### Methodology

The Water Hub team used Cision and Meltwater to measure the overall volume of water news in the Western United States, and explore the coverage on various topics. Because water is such a broad issue, we focused our media analysis on three key issue areas: water supply, water quality, and drinking water access and affordability. These are the same areas covered in our [July 2020 “Water News in COVID Times” report](#). Here, in addition to looking at volume trends, we used automated text analysis to explore key themes within each issue area. Lastly, our team read the headlines within each dataset as well as a randomized sample of full article texts to get a better sense of story focus and framing, and pull out some representative examples.

### Western water supply

With much of the West [locked in drought](#), water supply<sup>1</sup> concerns continue to dominate water news across the region, with the overall volume of stories remaining around the levels [we saw in 2019](#). There was a steep dropoff during the first weeks of 2021, which we attribute to the crush of political news during that time.

Volume tends to peak around the [release of major scientific studies](#), [snowpack](#) and [reservoir reports](#), and [storms](#).<sup>2</sup> Major policy and [project](#) milestones also generate considerable coverage.



<sup>1</sup> 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. NOTE: The article counts are high because they include syndication across many smaller digital platforms, including blogs that aggregate news.

<sup>2</sup> The big spikes seen on the chart above were driven by [this AP story](#) about a US Drought Monitor report, [this one](#) about a Bureau of Reclamation study, and [this one](#) about a proposed geothermal plant in Nevada.

We used automated text analysis to understand the main issues journalists have been tracking on water supply over the past year,<sup>3</sup> and include a chart below showing the relative number of stories on key themes.

More than one in six Western water supply stories over the past year mentioned the Colorado River, discussing [climate change impacts](#), [drought planning](#), [alternative supply projects](#), and [water rights](#). The [drying Rio Grande](#) has also received significant coverage, as has the [ongoing controversy](#) over the [tunnel proposed](#) for the [Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta](#).



We have seen a real increase over the past several years in the number of [weather stories that talk about water supply implications](#), as well as the number of [water stories that talk about climate change](#). As the chart below shows, nearly half the water supply stories picked up in this scan talked about climate change, from [atmospheric rivers](#) to [wildfires](#) and [aridification](#).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given farming's huge water footprint, about one third of Western water supply stories touch on agriculture. In [California](#) and [Arizona](#), reporters are following groundwater management news closely. Across the region, there is heated discussion over proposed supply projects, from [desalination plants](#) to [pipelines](#).

Another major story from recent months has been the [start of water trading](#) on the Wall Street futures market, which was covered from the [New York Times](#) to [CalMatters](#) and the [Colorado Sun](#).

Interestingly, our scan found that more water supply stories mention impacts to [fish](#) and [wildlife](#) than to drinking water. These categories are not mutually exclusive--most stories [touch on a range of concerns](#)--but there remains strong interest in the plight of [salmon](#), [trout](#), [birds](#) and other animals.

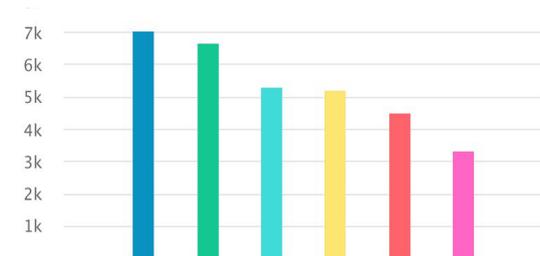
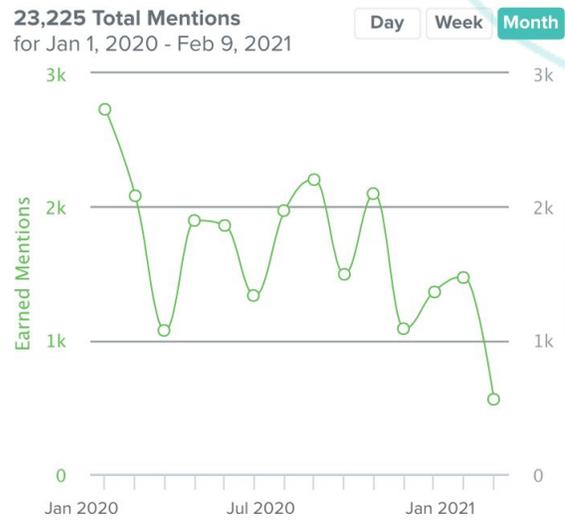
When drinking water is mentioned, it's often just in passing, noting that [40 million people rely on the Colorado River for drinking water](#), or that the [Rio Grande delivers both drinking water and irrigation supplies](#). By contrast, stories about [outdoor recreation](#) often go deep, talking about [economic impact](#) as well as the [activities themselves](#).

<sup>3</sup> The categories in the key messages chart are not mutually exclusive: many stories touch on both ecosystems and human health, health and fossil fuels, etc.

## Western water safety

Our scan of water quality<sup>4</sup> news showed the same steep drop off in coverage during the first weeks of 2021. In general, the volume of coverage remained fairly steady last year, hovering around the same level as we [saw in 2019](#). The spikes on this chart were mostly driven by news about Trump administration environmental rollbacks, including coverage on [the Clean Water Act](#) and [coal plant pollution standards](#), and [this widely syndicated op-ed](#) on the choice before voters in the presidential election.

As the chart below shows, COVID-19 was another major theme in this scan, earning mentions in more than a third of the stories. Many noted the [essential role that clean water plays in protecting public health](#) or the challenges the pandemic has created in [protecting waterways](#) and [delivering safe water to communities](#).



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● COVID	<b>7,054</b>
● Ecosystem	<b>6,668</b>
● Trump	<b>5,329</b>
● Public health	<b>5,209</b>
● WOTUS	<b>4,502</b>
● Fossil fuels	<b>3,329</b>

While COVID-19 was the biggest public health story of last year, our scan picked up two other big ones. One was forever chemicals, or PFAS, where newspapers reported on [widespread contamination](#), [new safety standards](#) and efforts to [curb their use](#). The other was on the [water quality impacts of last year's catastrophic wildfires](#), a topic on which the Water Hub hosted a [media briefing](#) in November.

Many water quality stories explore impacts on fish, wildlife and ecosystem health as well. The stories in this set ranged from coverage of harmful algal blooms in [California](#) and [Colorado](#) to [restoration efforts aimed at bringing back salmon](#), and [nonpoint source pollution prevention](#).

Another key theme over the past year was the Trump administration's impact on water quality.

<sup>4</sup> 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.

The [rollback of Clean Water Act protections](#) for small streams and wetlands was the biggest story here, followed by the [suspension of EPA enforcement efforts](#). Strong organizing and outreach by water advocates helped to elevate the Waters of the United States story in the West, emphasizing the [risk to rivers](#) and [drinking water](#).

The final theme we want to call out is fossil fuels, where coverage picked up considerably around the election, with speculation about [what a Biden presidency would mean for the industry](#), and implications for both [water quality](#) and [supply](#).

### Western water access and affordability

Our [July 2020 media scan](#) found that the pandemic had driven an increase in coverage around water access and affordability,<sup>5</sup> and that attention has continued over the past year. Spikes in this chart were driven by [this widely syndicated story](#) on water shutoffs, the [release of Governor Newsom's water resilience plan](#), and a [study showing Californians owe \\$1B in water debt](#) (which the Water Hub team helped to publicize).

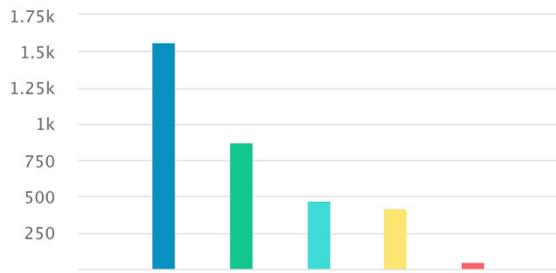


The COVID-19 pandemic is exacerbating existing water access and affordability issues, having [shut down water filling stations](#) and driven up unemployment, [leaving many families unable to pay water bills](#). So it's no surprise that more than half the stories in our scan mentioned COVID-19. In addition to touching on the challenges created or compounded by the pandemic, dozens of [news stories](#), [op-eds](#) and [editorials](#) emphasized the importance of protecting and expanding access to safe, running water to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

With many [local and state shutoff moratoria ending](#), and advocates [pushing hard](#) for a nationwide moratorium, reporters continued to track the issue (some [acknowledging the lack of good data](#), or [reporting on efforts to collect it](#)). About one third of the stories in our scan mentioned water shutoffs.

<sup>5</sup> 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.

Note: The February 2019 spike in the chart was driven by [this NPR story](#), which was syndicated hundreds of times.



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● COVID-19			<b>1,563</b>
● Shutoffs			<b>873</b>
● Water access			<b>477</b>
● Water debt			<b>425</b>
● Water systems			<b>54</b>

Slightly fewer talked about water access challenges, and these tended to focus on [challenges in the Navajo Nation](#), despite the fact that many other communities, from [California's Central Valley](#) to [Hopi](#) and [Pueblo lands](#) in the Southwest, lack safe running water.

Water debt was not a major topic in our July scan, but advocates have worked hard to elevate this issue, with a [valuable assist from The Guardian's Nina Lakhani](#). The release of California's water debt study generated more than 20 stories, from [The Guardian](#) to [CBS](#) and [Central Valley Public Radio](#).

Research on the [financial impact](#) the pandemic has had on [water systems](#) has gotten less attention outside niche outlets like [Circle of Blue](#) and local newspapers like the [Fresno Bee](#). [Calls from water agencies](#) for federal partnership to ensure affordable water for all have also gone largely unnoticed. In the energy sector, there is a whole cadre of reporters that track utility news. The Water Hub is working with the Water Foundation to create a similar level of awareness and accountability for water providers, starting with a monthly media note tracking news around water access and affordability.

## Conclusions

The COVID-19 crisis has created both challenges and opportunities for water communicators. At times, pandemic (and political) news has crowded out water stories, but we still see strong coverage around research releases, key project and policy decisions, and weather extremes. The number of articles in our scan that mention COVID and climate change suggest that reporters are especially interested in stories that tie long-term issues to current events. In the past year, we have seen a real increase in coverage around drinking water access and affordability, thanks to the work of local advocates. We have also seen more stories about the ways climate change is impacting water, and the projects and policies needed to prepare for an uncertain future. There are a handful of reporters that have covered water for years, including The Republic's Ian James, KUNC's Luke Runyon, and Zak Podmore at the Salt Lake Tribune, but we are also seeing in-depth coverage from local journalists like Monica Vaughn at the Fresno Bee, Rachel Becker at CalMatters, and Heather Sackett at Aspen Journalism. These local reporters are often able to follow stories in a way their colleagues at statewide or regional outlets cannot, creating an opening for stories that dig deeper into the roots of current challenges and explore a range of solutions.