

The Confluence of Law and Science: A collaborative effort to manage water resources on the Teton River, Montana.

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Over the last one hundred years, disputes have risen over the limited water resources of the Teton River. Recently, water users have taken a different approach to decades-old water management practices by petitioning to enforce a watershed-wide Temporary Preliminary Water Court Decree.

Set by laws as old as the state of Montana, water rights are distributed according to the prior appropriation doctrine. A change in the distribution of water by priority along the 160-mile Teton River required a new understanding of how the river functions.

Hydrologists, water commissioners, and water users are working together to overcome distribution challenges along the Teton River and its tributaries. Part of the solution includes new water planning tools that provide flexibility in a rigid legal system. The result is a distribution project that is rooted in law but uses science and data to help manage water resources as efficiently as possible according to prior appropriation.