

Alberta's water priority system

FACTS AT YOUR FINGERTIPS

First in time, first in right' (FITFIR) has been a key principle of granting and administering water allocations in Alberta since 1894.

Priority system

Alberta's water priority system is based on seniority. Each licence (or registration) is given a priority number that corresponds with the date that a complete application was received. A licence which has an earlier priority date is considered to be a more senior licence than another licence which has a later priority date (junior licence)

The priority system does not apply to some types of allocations which do not need a licence.

Each licence is composed of five components:

- priority
- maximum annual water volume
- maximum diversion rate
- source and location
- purpose for use

All licences other than household use are ranked according to seniority, not according to purpose for use.

This 'First in time, first in right' (FITFIR) system has been a key principle of granting and administering water allocations in Alberta since 1894. The Alberta government is responsible for enforcing FITFIR, under the *Water Act*

A seniority (priority) call is usually made only when there is not enough water to meet all of the licensee needs in a particular basin. For example, during water short periods, a licensee with a more senior licence has the right to divert all its allocation, subject to its licence terms and conditions, before another licensee that is more junior.

Managing during water shortages

Managing water during a water shortage requires identification of the limits of water and how water is managed by each user.

In all situations where a water shortage occurs, the *Water Act* has provisions to allow water users to either "call priority" (Section 30) to assert their priority to water and/or "share" water (Section 33) via an assignment agreement, or transfer (Section 81) which is either:

- Seniority-based (identifying the most senior licence, followed by the next most senior, etc.);
- Sharing-based (distributing existing licensed allocations between licensees through the use of assignment agreements);
- Transfer (temporarily or permanently transferring an allocation to another licensee or new water user) or a
- Combination of the priority, sharing and transfer

Note that transfer provision has only been enabled in the South Saskatchewan River Basin as part of the approved water management plan.

What is meant by water mastering?

Water mastering is the monitoring and enforcement of the *Water Act's* "first in time, first in right" priority allocation system.

Under water mastering, water licensees with low priority are told to cease or limit diverting water in order to satisfy the water requirements of licences held by senior licensees.

Water allocation decisions are based on, but not limited to, historical available water supply, river system modeling, and current environmental flow needs. Water management orders may be issued to selected licensees to stop diversions of water and withdrawals are monitored by regional approvals staff, compliance staff, and the Director.

More information

For more information about Alberta's water priority system, call 310-0000 (toll-free) and ask for the Alberta Environment regional office nearest you.

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