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The vast majority of large river systems in the United States cross (or comprise) one or more state lines, creating numerous administrative challenges. Addressing these multijurisdictional challenges in an efficient and equitable manner often requires the development of sophisticated institutional arrangements. Several types of "regional organizations" have been created for this purpose, including compact commissions, interstate councils, basin interagency committees, interagency-interstate commissions, federal-interstate compact commissions, federal regional agencies, and the single federal administrator format. These organizations feature a wide variety of authorities and responsibilities; what they inevitably share in common is a hostile political environment, a consequence of political geography and bureaucratic entrenchment.

In this study, the challenges associated with the governance, administration, and management of interstate water resources are examined, using the Colorado River Basin as a case study. The Colorado is the only major river in the United States utilizing the "single federal administrator" format, an institutional arrangement that is often criticized for its subordination of the states and its concentration of policy-making authorities in the hands of administrators. When evaluated against carefully defined normative criteria, the Colorado is shown to feature many institutional deficiencies that are, in part, derivative of the Colorado's unique institutional arrangements. The primary objective of this study is to determine if the governance and management of the Colorado could be improved by the establishment of an alternative form of regional water organization. It is concluded that a type of federal-interstate compact commission, if carefully tailored to the political realities of the region, could improve many of the observed institutional deficiencies. This study also presents a widely-applicable methodology for the description and evaluation of institutional arrangements.