

7. SANTA MARIA RIVER

Tributaries: SISQUOC RIVER, CUYAMA RIVER

The Santa Maria River basin in northern Santa Barbara County covers 1,880 square miles, making it one of the larger coastal drainage basins in California. The Santa Maria River is formed by the confluence of the Cuyama and Sisquoc Rivers 20 miles from the coast, it then flows westward to the Pacific. It is home to the Santa Maria Project, a large-scale federal water project that captures seasonal floodwaters draining to the Pacific Ocean.³⁵ The region is characterized by a brief rainy season in the winter months and a long dry season the remainder of the year, though annual precipitation can fluctuate wildly.

From its headwaters above 8,000 feet in the Chumash Wilderness Area, the Cuyama River flows 66 miles to the Twitchell Reservoir. From the reservoir, it flows about six miles to its confluence with the Sisquoc, another six miles to where it joins the Santa Maria River, then continues for 20 more miles to the sea. The Cuyama River is dry much of the year, with a sizable stream flow occurring only after wet-season storms. Displacement along faults has played a key role in determining the river's course.³⁶

Most of the Sisquoc River is part of the Santa Maria Project; this river flows within the San Rafael Wilderness and downstream to the Los Padres National Forest boundary.³⁷ The Sisquoc offers excellent opportunities for solitude and wilderness-oriented activities.³⁸ The chaparral-covered San Rafael Mountains range in elevation from 1,166 feet to more than 6,800 feet; within this range, the river tumbles through pools and oak-shaded grasslands, over waterfalls,



and past archaeological sites.³⁹ A 33-mile reach of the Sisquoc has been designated as wild and scenic, and all but two of these miles are within the wilderness. The Sisquoc Condor Sanctuary also lies within the wilderness area.⁴⁰ Black bears and mountain lions reside in this watershed.

Public Access and Recreation

The river is too rocky and shallow for whitewater rafting or kayaking, except perhaps in spring high water. There are more than 125 relatively rugged miles of trails that receive moderate use, and campsites abound.⁴¹

Fish Species of Interest

Arroyo chub.