



## Public comments on steelhead migration study

By **Julian J. Ramos** / Staff Writer / [jramos@santamariatimes.com](mailto:jramos@santamariatimes.com) | Posted: Tuesday, November 16, 2010 12:00 am

Whether changes to water flows in the Santa Maria River are worth the time and the money to study how they would help steelhead trout migrate from the ocean upstream to spawn loomed in the minds of many during the first public meeting about an in-stream flow study of the river.

Held Monday in Shepard Hall of the Santa Maria Public Library, the meeting drew about 80 people interested in details of the study, which is in its early stages.

Results of the \$600,000 study could lead to state Department of Fish and Game recommendations to the state Water Resources Control Board to issue new Twitchell Reservoir flow releases meant to maintain sufficient water in the lower Santa Maria River, which is dry most of the year.

The releases are aimed at allowing adult Southern California steelhead trout to migrate from the estuary upstream to access appropriate spawning and rearing habitat near the confluence of the Cuyama and Sisquoc rivers.

Many in the standing-room only crowd questioned why the river is even being studied, as it is parched almost year round and has no water flow.

“You’re kind of wasting our time,” said Robin Hayhurst, executive director of the Santa Maria Valley Contractors Association.

Some said there are no steelhead in the river, and they have never seen any in the river in their many years in the Santa Maria Valley. Others added that there is fear of lost water and its impact on agriculture and other industries, and called on officials to tap into the wealth of institutional knowledge in the Santa Maria Valley about the river.

Representatives of the agencies tasked to the “Santa Maria River Instream Flow Study” said the study, the first in 40 years on the river, could end up saying no changes are needed in water flows from Twitchell.

However, the study will have to run its course before any determinations are reached, they said.

The agencies are: state Fish and Game, the Ocean Protection Council, the state Water Resources Control Board, and National Marine Fisheries Service.

The study is funded in part by funds from Proposition 84, a state ballot measure also known as the 2006 Safe Drinking Water Bond Act.

There is “very little if any” information on in-stream Santa Maria River flows, said Derek Booth, president and senior geologist of Stillwater Sciences, which has been contracted by the Ocean Protection Council, a state agency, to conduct the study.

It is possible no changes could be proposed if “that makes sense,” he said, or there could be ranges of proposed options for water flow changes and subsequent consequences.

“We do not know what the answers will be,” Booth said.

Built in the early 1960s, the Santa Maria River Project — the Santa Maria River Levee and Twitchell Dam — serve two purposes: flood-control and groundwater basin recharge.

Controlled releases from Twitchell Reservoir provide 32,000 acre-feet per year — one acre-foot is equal to 326,000 gallons — to the Santa Maria Valley for groundwater use, Santa Maria Utilities Director Rick Sweet said before the meeting.

Total groundwater use in the valley is 114,000 acre-feet per year, he said.

From 1940 to 1960, 30 percent of the years on the river were dry while 40 percent of the years were dry from 1960 to 1990, according to the Stillwater Sciences presentation of pre-dam and post-dam water flows.

Dirk Pedersen, a Stillwater Sciences biologist, said flow recommendations will be meant to reflect pre-Twitchell era "unregulated flow regimes."

Releases from the reservoir, located east of Santa Maria on the Cuyama River, also help to flush groundwater and improve water quality within the valley. The reduction or elimination of this water source could seriously affect the economic vitality of both agriculture and urban users in the valley, Sweet said.

Zoey Diggory, Stillwater Sciences project manager, said the study area is a 35-mile reach of the river for the lower Sisquoc river to the Santa Maria River estuary, west of Guadalupe.

The initial phases of the study began this August and its scope is expected to continue to April 2012.

Another public meeting is anticipated for summer 2011, but that could change, said Stephanie Wald of Central Coast Salmon Enhancement, an Arroyo Grande-based group promoting local public outreach for the study.

Michael Bowen of the Ocean Protection Council said the study is in its infancy, and Monday's hearing is the beginning of a long process expected to continue to 2012.

"This is very early on in the process," he said.