



Study tries to find way to make river viable for fish, but it could cost city water

## Could steelhead come to Santa Maria?

By Brian Bullock/Staff Writer [bbullock@santamariatimes.com](mailto:bbullock@santamariatimes.com) | Posted: Wednesday, September 28, 2011 12:30 am

Looking at the Santa Maria River, with its sandy, sagebrush covered bed, it would seem the only way for a fish to get up stream would be to walk.

But a study of how much water from Twitchell Reservoir it would take to maintain a stream passable for southern steelhead, a federally endangered species, could eventually rob the Santa Maria Valley of water.

The second public meeting of the Santa Maria River Inflow Study unveiled the relatively dry history of the river both before and after Twitchell Dam was constructed in the early 1960s to control flood waters and recharge the groundwater basin.

And Stillwater Sciences hydrologist Derek Booth said there hasn't been a big change over the years.

Despite its arid personality, the river is considered by wildlife biologists a key asset in the effort to re-establish populations of southern steelhead into the Sisquoc River watershed, and it's the focus of a study to determine how much water must flow through the riverbed to allow the passage of the fish.

That water would have to come from Twitchell Reservoir, which Santa Maria Utilities Director Rick Sweet said could be anywhere from 500 to 2,000 acre feet per year - one acre foot is 326,000 gallons.

"I think any proposal to remove water from the groundwater basin will eventually affect the amount of water that can be stored in the basin and the health of the basin," Sweet said following the meeting. "What they're proposing at this point is much better than what we initially feared."

Back in November 2010, the city worried the effort could cost up to 28 percent of the water Twitchell Reservoir provides to recharge the basin.

Stillwater Sciences and Kear Groundwater are doing the study for the California Department of Fish and Game, which will make recommendations to the Water Resources Control Board.

Based on those recommendations, the water board could order controlled releases from the reservoir to keep the passage open certain days of the year to allow the fish to travel from their inland spawning streams to the ocean.

The old argument of man versus fish has local farmers, land owners, business people and city administrators paying close attention to the progress of the study.

Booth said flows between 100 and 200 cubic feet per second (cfs) create a passable flow for the fish, and there are only an average of about six days each year the river meets those standards at its Guadalupe monitoring station, the area he called the critical area of the study.

"The Santa Maria River is dry two out of every three years. That's just how it is," Booth said. "If you're a steelhead, you better go find somewhere else because you're not going to make it."

Even last winter's heavy rains won't sustain the stream long enough to make up for years of drought, said Mark Capelli of the National Marine Fisheries Service.

"One good water year does not make a good run," Capelli said. "It takes a number of good years."

The study's draft recommendations are due out in February 2012, with the final draft ready in March.

Information on the study is available on the Internet at [www.stillwatersci.com/case\\_studies.php?cid=66](http://www.stillwatersci.com/case_studies.php?cid=66) or by calling outreach coordinator Stephanie Wald, of Central Coast Salmon Enhancement, at 473-8221.

