Rivers and streams of northwestern California, the western slopes of the Coast Ranges and the other coastal mountains of southern California rush down narrow canyons into the Pacific Ocean. The two large Central Valley rivers meet in the California Delta, then drain west into San Francisco Bay and the Pacific Ocean. Rain and melting snow from the eastern Sierra Nevada and eastern slopes of the Northern Coast Ranges flow into the Sacramento or San Joaquin River, except the Kern River, which flows into an internal basin. Rivers of the Great Basin and the infrequently flowing channels of the deserts flow into inland salty seas. Many desert lakes dry up for months.

National Scenic Rivers, which are highlighted on this map, offer special protection to fish and riparian (streamside) vegetation. Californians seek these special places to swim, raft, kayak, and simply enjoy clear, flowing water.

This map does not show the important resource of groundwater, or water stored beneath the Earth's surface. Aquifers store water that seeps down through the surface. Forty percent of the state's total water supply is pumped up through wells each year. The current amount of groundwater withdrawn is greater than what is replaced naturally, which means the need to conserve water in farms and cities becomes more important each year.