The San Joaquin River

Elizabeth Berry of San Jose balances on a log bridge while hiking on Thousand Island Lake in the Ansel Adams Wilderness in September 2004. The lake is the birthplace of the San Joaquin River.

River of maps and memories

Central Valley water source one of twists, turns

Editor's note: On maps of California, the San Joaquin River flows down the Sierra Nevada through much of the Central Valley. In reality, almost all the water is channeled north and south from Friant Dam, feeding some of the nation's most productive farmland. Many growing towns also owe their existence — and their future — to the diverted water. And now thirsty new rivals are eyeing the same flows.

By JULIANA BARBASSA
The Associated Press

ANSEL ADAMS WILDERNESS — Follow the elegant curves of the San Joaquin River on a map. Let your finger trace it as it cascades down the Sierra Nevada, gathering snowmelt. Meander through the Central Valley...

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Old tires, furniture, car parts and other rubbish are seen in March on what was once the San Joaquin River where the river dries up in Mendota. Environmental factors like damming and pollution have dried up the river, which once flowed from the mountains into the Pacific Ocean.

Coming tomorrow:
The diverted water of the San Joaquin River is the lifeblood of many valley farm towns.