Physical Geography

California is the third largest state in area after Alaska and Texas. The northern coastline is mostly rocky headlands and small beaches. South of Santa Barbara, broad, sandy beaches are typical. The Coast Ranges rise above the ocean, and stretch from the Oregon border to Point Conception, which is the tip of land north of the Channel Islands.

The Sacramento and San Joaquin Valleys fill the middle of California. Together, these two valleys make up the Great Central Valley. This is the most productive agricultural region in the world. The Sacramento and San Joaquin Rivers meet in the California Delta, and flow west into San Francisco Bay. This is the only location where water from interior California reaches the Pacific Ocean.

East of the Great Central Valley, the Sierra Nevada stretches 400 miles from the northern volcanoes of Mt. Lassen and Mt. Shasta to the Tehachapi Mountains. The winter snowpack here provides water for crops and homes throughout much of California. Farther south, the San Gabriel, San Bernardino, and Peninsular Ranges divide the densely populated cities of Southern California from the arid Mojave Desert.