

Parkway trust leader Dave Koehler to step down after 25 years

Dave Koehler, executive director of the San Joaquin River Parkway and Conservation Trust, walks in the river bottom in Madera County. He is stepping aside next year after a quarter century of service.

CRAIG KOHLRUSS — The Fresno Bee [Buy Photo](#)

Dave Koehler is stepping down next year as executive director the [San Joaquin River Parkway and Conservation Trust](#) after spending the last quarter century building a future for the river he loves.

Koehler, 59, who “lived to fish” at the river as a youngster growing up in Fresno, announced his decision last week to leave the trust, which has been instrumental in setting aside 4,000 acres along the river. He said his last day would be June 30.

Koehler said the parkway effort is going strong, and it’s the best time to step away and look for other opportunities.

“It’s been an incredible privilege to work for the trust and the board,” he said. “I don’t know what I will do next, but the apple won’t fall far from the tree. I love the work I do.”

For those who don’t follow the parkway, the ongoing mission is to create a greenbelt from Friant Dam to Highway 99. When it is complete, a 22-mile trail will span the parkway and 5,900 acres will be included. Seven miles have been established so far.

The knock on the parkway: It needs to be more accessible to the public. Koehler said it is a challenge to operate and maintain the parkway for public access while still protecting the habitat, but it can be done.

More than two decades ago, the biggest goal was to make sure the river habitat would survive.

How did Koehler fit in back then? He was president of the [Fresno Audubon Society](#) in the mid-1980s when Bee reporter Gene Rose broke the story about three developments planned along the river. Like many people, Koehler became active in the organizing effort to protect the river.

River activists, led by Mary Savala, Clary Creager and Peg Smith, formed the San Joaquin River Committee. Later, the parkway trust was formed in 1988. Donn Furman was the executive director until 1990 when he left for law school.

The parkway then hired Koehler, who has an environmental biology degree and had been working in a financial institution.

The nonprofit trust, which is focused on river protection, education and outdoor activities, had to break a gridlock among the three political entities surrounding the river — the city of Fresno, county of Fresno and county of Madera.

“It was not easy,” Koehler said. But we believe that having a healthy river system in this area is fundamental to our quality of life.”

People sometimes confuse the trust with the [San Joaquin River Conservancy](#), which is a state agency. The conservancy acquires and manages land. It has a place at the table when the state is handing out bond money to improve habitat. In 1992, Jim Costa, then a state Assembly member, pushed the legislation for the conservancy.

Looking back, Koehler said he is proud of the trust’s work in helping to acquire Rank Island, establish the [Lewis S. Eaton Trail](#) and put together the Coke Hallowell Center for River Studies. Hallowell has long been considered a

leading force in the parkway effort.

Koehler has led the trust with a steady hand and a creative approach, working with land owners and public servants. He said he sees great opportunities ahead for whomever leads the trust.

“With the passage of the water bond, Proposition 1, the conservancy will get another \$10 million for the parkway,” he said. “It’s an exciting time ahead.”

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