

## Passion for the Outdoors

In the summer of 2021, the River Parkway Trust's board and staff met in person for the first time in over a year to reflect on how our organization should continue to adapt to the changing times precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The past year and a half demonstrated the critical need for access to quality green space for the health and well-being of people in the Central Valley. The River Parkway Trust's work to preserve and restore San Joaquin River lands, educate the public and provide ample opportunities to explore and enjoy the Parkway felt more critical than ever before.

As you read through this 2021 Annual Report, you'll see many people discovered the value of the protected open space areas along the Parkway. More visitors than EVER enjoyed time at the River Center, Sycamore Island, and Sumner Peck Ranch. On any given day, families, hikers, cyclists, and bird watchers could be spotted enjoying these places you support.

Our education staff shared stories about campers and students who discovered the San Joaquin River for the first time in 2021. Parents took the opportunity to get their kids outside after a year of virtual learning through River Camp and public Weekend Programs. Many cooped-up kids were let loose to enjoy the outdoors and reconnect with their peers. The River Field Trip program served more students because local school districts recognized the value of the Parkway.

In 2021, new Parkway operations and maintenance funding sources became available through the City of Fresno and State Conservancy. Measure P will generate funding to enhance Fresno's parks, including a special allocation for the San Joaquin River Parkway. Assemblymember Dr. Joaquin Arambula led the charge to secure state funds to maintain and operate the Parkway and presented the State Conservancy with a \$15 million check. The River Parkway Trust is working with the City and Conservancy to plan for Parkway improvements for the year ahead.

Thanks to you, the River Parkway Trust not only weathered the continued challenges of the pandemic but grew to provide more programs to ignite a passion for the outdoors.

Julia O'Kane  
*Board President*



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Annual Report  
2021  
RIVER PARKWAY TRUST

# Message from the Executive Director

Dear Members and Supporters of the San Joaquin River Parkway:

2021 was a fantastic year for land conservation, specifically for expanding the land base and improving operation and maintenance funding for the San Joaquin River Parkway.

Although I'm writing this near the end of 2022 due to the timeframe for completing our annual financial audit, it's exciting to look back and think about some of the amazing changes that have taken place for land conservation at the national, state, and local levels.

## New land conserved for the Parkway

At the beginning of 2021, the Trust celebrated the acquisition of Sumner Peck Ranch, a 76-acre connector between the already-conserved Ball Ranch and Ledger Island properties. I was pleased to greet many of you onsite during our weekend open houses and the first season of u-pick citrus sales. Our first year of operations had its share of challenges, like weekly vandalism and fuel theft in the late spring and summer. But there were many triumphs, including leasing the front buildings to Solitary Cellars to add a new visitor component to the San Joaquin River Parkway, hosting our River Camp Young Explorers Program onsite, and offering new weekend programs for preschoolers and teens. Our first wine grape harvest season was a success, and it was a joy to watch the grapes loaded for shipment to Gallo Winery.

The State Conservancy completed two other exciting conservation projects in 2021. The acquisitions of the 21-acre Lanes Road Property adjacent to Jensen River Ranch and the 35-acre Slenders Property in Madera County provide important connections and access to the river for the future.

## Global, State and National priorities for Conservation

You may have heard about 30x30, the global effort to increase the pace and scale of conservation dramatically. The goal is to conserve 30% of the world's land and water by 2030, to restore biodiversity, reduce the rate of natural habitat destruction, and ensure the long-term sustainability of life on our planet. California is a leader in this effort, with Governor Gavin Newsom signing Executive Order N-82-20 in October 2020, committing to conserving 30% of our land and coastal waters by 2030. President Biden announced the United States' commitment to the 30x30 initiative with Executive Order 14008, *Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad*, issued on January 21, 2021.

California has developed an action plan called *Pathways to 30x30: Accelerating Conservation of California's Nature*, which you can find on [californianature.ca.gov](http://californianature.ca.gov). At the national level, the US Department of the Interior has created the *America the Beautiful* initiative to provide reports and updates tracking progress toward the goal. These initiatives and related funding sources make this an exciting time to work on land conservation.

We're excited to do our part to contribute to the 30x30 effort. The River Parkway Trust will continue to work with willing sellers throughout the Parkway reach of the river to conserve land for wildlife habitat or recreational use. And by the way, if you are a river bottom landowner, I would love to talk with you about a fee title sale or placement of a conservation easement on your property!

## Partners New and Old

2021 also saw the addition of some exciting new partners on Parkway Projects. Fresno Building Healthy Communities received a grant from the State Conservancy for the Western Reaches Access Activation Plan – a planning process to reactivate Camp Pashayan and conceptualize the trail alignment between that site and the Milburn Unit of the San Joaquin River Ecological Reserve. Through community meetings, Fresno BHC gathered input on the concept and has now transitioned to the more technical part of the planning process to create 65% design drawings and initiate environmental review. You can review the site analysis and initial concepts at [fresnobhc.org/wraap](http://fresnobhc.org/wraap).

The US Green Building Council Central California Chapter is another new partner in the Parkway effort, receiving a grant to envision and create the conceptual design for an Indigenous and Environmental Resource Center at the State Conservancy's Circle V property in Madera County. The conceptual plan is ambitious and inspiring – check it out at [usgbccc.org/CircleV](http://usgbccc.org/CircleV).

River Partners is a statewide nonprofit with which the River Parkway Trust has worked for over a decade on habitat enhancement projects along the river. In 2021 they began work on a Flood Managed Aquifer Recharge (MAR) project at Ball Ranch, to determine whether the old gravel pits on the property could be used to take flood flows during high water years and recharge the groundwater basin. We look forward to the final analysis of this potential use of conserved lands.

And finally, the project we're all waiting for – Fresno River West! In fall 2021, the State Conservancy granted funds to the City of Fresno to create the final design, permitting, and construction bid documents for this long-awaited extension of the Lewis S. Eaton multi-use trail. We expect bid documents and permitting to be complete within two years. We're grateful that the controversial design and environmental review processes are finally complete, and we look forward to celebrating the construction of this new community amenity within 5 years.

## New Operations Opportunities

As the nonprofit that started the San Joaquin River Parkway effort, the Trust is committed to fully implementing the planned 22-mile Parkway. We look forward to a future of well-managed public and private land with a continuous multi-purpose trail system stretching from Friant Dam to Highway 99, with numerous entry and exit points, biodiverse habitat, safe places for children to play, clean restrooms, picnic tables, and other visitor amenities. Can you see it? That future is nearer than you might think.

Thanks to the leadership of Assemblymember Joaquin Arambula, the State Conservancy received \$15 million in operations and maintenance funding in the 2021 California State Budget Act. It's a previously un-imagined sum for the most challenging aspect of providing recreational access to the San Joaquin River – the appropriate management and maintenance of public land. There are limits on this funding – it can only be used on properties owned by the State Conservancy and must be expended within 5 years. Still, it's an extraordinary opportunity to improve management of the Parkway.

At the same time, the City of Fresno's Measure P went into effect, with an estimated \$750,000 per year dedicated to the San Joaquin River Parkway. Again, these funds have limits – they can only be used within the City of Fresno and are controlled and managed by the City, but they provide opportunities for better management of Parkway lands in the future.

## The Future is Now

I've witnessed progress over the 23 years I've had the privilege of working to create the San Joaquin River Parkway. We've purchased land, planned and built improvements, and offered programs to thousands of children and adults to share the beauty and value of the San Joaquin River with the community. But I admit I sometimes think, will we ever really get there? Will we really have the 22-mile trail and well-managed amenities that we're all dreaming about?

Today I can give a resounding YES to that question. The land acquisitions have continued quietly and are still in progress, but we're very close to having the corridor we need to complete the multi-purpose trail system. In the meantime, there are abundant natural surface trails connecting to neighborhoods in both Fresno and Madera. The future of the Parkway is arriving right before our eyes.

If you share my excitement at our progress on creating this unique community amenity, will you make a special gift to continue the work? Your gift matters, no matter its size. You can help make the Parkway more accessible, more beautiful, and more biologically diverse in the years ahead. Join us!

Sincerely,

Sharon Weaver  
Executive Director



