

## Andy Otto: Watershed Association Director has led a Meandering Life

Andy Otto is a watershed expert and the new executive director of the 2-decade-old Santa Fe Watershed Association



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**By Staci Matlock**  
**The New Mexican**

Andy Otto's path to his role as the new executive director of the Santa Fe Watershed Association has been anything but a straight trajectory.

Like the wild rivers he loves to fly fish and hike along, Otto's life has meandered. Always he's sought out jobs that allowed him a measure of independence and time in nature.

"I've always loved being outside," said Otto, 62.

Otto earned a degree in watershed management and natural resources recreation in 1973 from the University of Arizona in Tucson. "We all wanted to be wilderness rangers," Otto said of his class.

For a couple of years, he made his living as a commercial photographer in Colorado. Then he moved to Truckee, Nev., where he learned on his own how to renovate houses and resell them. He said, "It was sometimes me, my hammer and a Sunset Book" — construction books for do-it-yourselfers.

With a partner, he owned two restaurants for a few of those years — Rosie's River Street Cafe in Truckee and Rosie's Cafe in Tahoe City. "You learn a lot of business skills running a restaurant," he said.

He went on to sell commercial real estate in Truckee for Coldwell Banker before taking a job as director of land use compatibility for the Truckee River Watershed Council. He started four programs for the council in river-friendly landscaping, weed removal, aquatic invasive species prevention and Adopt-A-Stream.

He and his wife raised three children in Truckee.

Otto isn't from New Mexico, but he's spent the last three decades coming here. His mother was a Santa Fe resident for 20 years, and his brother worked in New Mexico. After his mom died, he continued to come to Santa Fe every few months. "I ran up this way often," he said.

The watershed job allows him to work in something he loves and live in a town he's wanted to make his home, he said.

Otto is no stranger to rural life. He grew up in small Northern California towns and spent summers and holidays at his stepfather's Bear Tooth cattle ranch in Montana. They moved the cattle on horseback and camped. "We fixed fence. We patched irrigation ditches," he said. "I had to catch the horses from the pasture in the morning. That was my job."

Attorney Kristina Fisher, president of the Santa Fe Watershed Association board, said Otto was the pick out of 50 applicants for the position, in large part because of the diversity in his experiences. "We liked the fact he had spent time on a ranch and time running a restaurant," Fisher said. "His diversity of life experience is really going to be beneficial. We felt Andy's background put him in a good position to roll with whatever came."

Fisher said Otto has a real passion for watershed issues, both from the environmental side and the community outreach side. "I think the watershed association has done a great job of reconnecting the community to its river," she said. "We wanted someone who would continue that."

The 15-year-old organization has only two full-time employees, several part-time staff and a cadre of volunteers who help with river cleanups, tree planting, school education programs and advocacy for the 285-square-mile watershed.

The Santa Fe River stretches 46 miles from the Sangre de Cristo Mountains to the Rio Grande at Cochiti.

The group lobbied hard for a city ordinance passed in 2012 that commits up to 1,000 acre-feet of water a year to the river. One acre-foot is enough water to cover a football field 1 foot deep, about 325,800 gallons. The water is allowed to bypass the city's two municipal reservoirs in the Santa Fe Canyon and flow down the river, which is otherwise often dry throughout the year.

Otto said the fact that city residents and city officials voluntarily passed a "living river" ordinance, without a mandate by the federal or state, "is huge."

"A living river is a benefit to a community emotionally, sociologically and economically," Otto said.

He said his role is to support and expand the work the Santa Fe Watershed Association has well underway. "I want to foster an atmosphere where people can create and own their own projects," he said. "I'm trying not to get in the way."

He hopes the association will expand its education program to more schools and grow an Adopt-An-Arroyo program. He's also excited about a new River Talks program, in which staff will make

presentations about the watershed at small dinner parties. “It’s very informal. They’re meant to be fun,” he said.

Otto said his most important goal is to promote the river as an integral part of Santa Fe life. “We don’t want to separate a river from its watershed or its aquifer. We don’t want to separate the river from us,” he said.

Otto invites everyone to show the river a little love Feb. 15 by helping clean it up during the Santa Fe Watershed Association Love Your River Day. He’ll be on hand to say hello. People can sign up and meet at Frenchy’s Field. The group will provide hot chocolate, coffee, donuts and plastic trash bags. Sign up in advance at [sfwastewards@santawatershed.org](mailto:sfwastewards@santawatershed.org) or just show up.

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