



Liz: Hi everyone, welcome to Waste360's NothingWasted! Podcast on every episode we invite the most interesting people in waste recycling and organics to sit down with us and chat candidly about their thoughts their work this unique industry and so much more so thanks for listening and enjoy this episode.

[INTRO MUSIC]

Liz: Hi everyone, this is Liz Bothwell from Waste360 with Susan Robinson, Federal Public Affairs Director at Waste Management. Welcome Susan and thank you for being on the show.

Susan: Great.

Liz: So, you've had a pretty story career. Could you please tell us about your background and how you got into this fabulous industry?

Susan: Certainly, wasn't something I anticipated when I went to college, but I started out working for an environmental organization and I thought that I would do more water quality sort of issues and I spent some time on the water and really enjoyed that. And then though as part of that work with the Washington Environmental Council, it was during the time when the city of Seattle was looking at what they were going to do with their waste in the long run. And I participated on a couple of committees and was smitten by it, really found that very interesting and ultimately ended up working for the city of Seattle for several years.

From there my career really moved towards a nice rounding of different topics from recycling by marketed recyclables and did some market studies for recycling and did some compost work for a consulting company as well and ultimately landed in waste management working with municipal customers for the most part for the first decade of my career.

And then over the last several years have been doing public affairs which more recently actually has evolved to a new position at Waste Management where I'm leading our sustainability team. So, we're actually now I am Senior Director of Sustainability and Policy for Waste Management which has just been a really fun transition and kind of, I think, pulling together those 30 years in my career to be able to now really shape the sustainability culture and effort our asses at Waste Management. So, it's pretty exciting.

Liz: Oh, that is exciting. Congratulations.

Susan: Thank you.

Liz: So, you seem to have a gift for mentoring. Your name is mentioned by so many young professionals and others who have learned from you over the years. Do you make a conscious effort to be an engaged mentor?

Susan: I will say I don't I won't say and make a conscious effort to engage but I will say I do make a conscious effort to respond if that makes sense. I am just so thrilled at some of the young professionals who are so passionate about the environment and about making a difference and finding ways to connect what they see we as a company or as an industry are doing. And so, I just have been so grateful for the opportunity to think about what the future holds and help if I can you know anything I can do to mentor and offer thoughts for folks. You know, I always say they are way smarter than I am so if I can listen to them and if there's anything just in my years of experience and I can offer that great and if they can be helpful I'm so happy to be able to do that.

Liz: That's fantastic and I think whether you realize it or not it's going to be a big part of your legacy.

Susan: Oh, that's nice. Thank you.

Liz: Now do you think the industry is becoming more diverse? I mean anecdotally it looks that way like you mentioned with all the smart young professionals coming in and thankfully people women like you have who have really spearheaded women in waste what are your thoughts on the diversity and what the industry looks like now as opposed to when you first began.

Susan: Yeah, it's a really great question. So, when I started I think about when I first started at Waste Management. Boy, did it look different than it does today. And I will also say I feel like there's always been a conscious effort to be inclusive at the company and I have been so grateful for that I've never taken that for granted that inclusivity has really been, I think conscious, very conscious. I've had some wonderful mentors at Waste Management quite frankly and both between women and men. We had a senior vice president for several years who made a point to really help woman grow with the company. He was just a wonderful mentor to many of us tonight. I always look for the opportunity to thank him for what he's done as well as women who have come before me.

So, I would say especially as our industry has become more diverse in what we do. We also are seeing more diversity in who is participating. If that makes sense now we no longer are in the waste industry. We are in materials management industry. And if you think about all the different places that gives us the ability to engage in different interests and different skill sets from energy, I mean that's a really interesting one in and of itself. Organics technology a huge investment in technology and things that we're doing and the and the concepts of sustainability and really the. One of those concepts of sustainability as they include more of the social aspects of what we do that naturally then I think lends itself to being more inclusive of a broader skillset, a broader interest, a broader type of folks at the company and in the industry right.

Liz: That's true. Now it seems you're working on that transformation from the disposal to materials management within Waste Management. So how are you doing that from your perspective and where do you see that headed?

Susan: You know, we actually started down this path while over a decade ago. We looked at what was happening with the tons going to landfills. And we looked and we

paid attention and listened to our customers and we heard loud and clear and sort of started to see in some parts of the country that there was a change taking place. And so, we've been very conscious and very deliberate about investing in technologies and programs and research to be able to anticipate that change as to what's coming. So I've been fortunate to be able to be part of that dialogue now for over a decade and what I've learned over that decade is we are a reflection of our customers and our customers across the country are very very different from different pockets of the country in different areas even within states. There's a lot of variability. And so, one of the things that we always are balancing is what are our customers ready for and what are they looking for, what are the services that are technically available to our customers and how can we help really meet the needs of our customers and meet them where they are looking to the future?

Liz: That's a great perspective. Could you tell me a little bit more about Waste Management spectrum model? I know one of our 40 Under 40 winners was involved in that with you. So, I'd love to hear more about that.

Susan: Yes, Rob Hollenbeck is really a gem and he's just we always say he's the smartest guy at Waste Management. He's pretty dang smart. So, he's really devoted. We work together to kind of create the model.

Several years ago, our CEO came to us and he basically said you know I'm kind of curious there is a lot of stress on recycling right now. I'd love to know you know we can certainly recycle anything you know give us enough money and we can we can recycle anything. What's the spectrum of choices that we have and what's the cost for that spectrum of choices and how we manage material and what's the actual impact and really are we looking at it in the right perspective. So we basically took the whole U.S. waste stream that we looked at the services we provide from, you know, if we were to just collect everything and put it in the landfill, what's the cost then what's the environmental impact, all the way through residential collection of recyclables commercial collection, recyclables, yard waste, food waste, more processing. What if we then put in a lot of expensive technologies to gasify that material and see what kind of energy, we get out of it and then what's left over after that.

And we really found a couple of I think key points one that sweet spot which is if we recycle the right things which is your traditional paper, cans, bottles, cardboard. We get about 80 percent of the environmental impact and really at the lowest cost overall. From there we start to add more materials that add incremental environmental benefit, but sometimes that cost goes up really high. So, it was a really interesting kind of “ah-ha” moment for me that said. And it really I have to say it really did change a lot of how I do my job which is to think more about the environmental impacts of what we're doing and not just take for granted that what we've been doing for the last 30 years is the best way to do it for the next 30 years. But let's use that data and that science and let's make decisions that really will have the best overall environmental impact.

Liz: That's great. Do you feel like you've been able to do that? Use that data in that science to move forward?

Susan: I feel like we are but. But boy, is it slow. I know I have to say that human behavior is really hard it's hard to change. You know I believe people like me with gray hair we kind of need to retire so that we kind of allow for the new you know this new young folks that we've talked about and we talked about earlier to come in and think differently about how we manage material because I think we sometimes are so ingrained in 20 and 30 years versus doing it one way. It's very hard to shift our thinking.

So, I've been I've been surprised at that. I will say though I think with current market conditions the way they are we're almost being forced to step back and to think differently. It's not all bad. Sometimes as you know we always say a lot maybe overuse crisis creates opportunity. But you know as. We are in this really tough market conditions. I do think it is forcing us to look at everything a little bit differently and indeed more finding I don't know that it's consciously but we are find some finding some communities that are really having to reflect upon what is the right decision for us as we look forward.

Liz: Right. And speaking of that the current market conditions. Look I know we waste 360 of look to you for your insights. Amid the China and woes and I always loved how optimistic you've been and how you've kept it in perspective and you've always taken the long view and said things like you know the markets may look different in a few years but if we rethink recycling we can make them more resilient. So, you've always

been more solutions oriented. How do you feel now that we're living in this new reality? I mean from what you just said it seems like you're still optimistic and that some of that change is happening albeit slowly.

Susan: Yeah. You know, it's interesting we actually just had this conversation yesterday because markets have continued to fall. Cardboard in some parts of the country is 85% of the value of what it was a couple of years ago. The commodity pricing is the lowest it's been in a decade. And so, we you know we talk internally like what. "well OK well how do we feel about this?" And I guess I really revisit the emphasis on the long run then although this is a long a prolonged market downturn we're investing probably more than we've ever invested in our programs and our infrastructure and we are really looking to the long run and we've got one hundred and ten million dollars within the investment last year, probably that much this year and anticipated for next year. Markets, we can see where the mills are building and expanding, and we'll see we can see where demands can start pulling its weight through again for paper. So, we are maintaining that optimism more moving material even at a cost or moving materials market and by golly we're you know we're staying optimistic and we're going to just forge ahead with new facilities. We're building new office three new facilities this year and really looking to the future of a successful recycling program.

It does though you know make us I think much more pragmatic. about what we do and how we do it. And I think a little bit more firm about making sure that we're recycling the right things and that we're really focusing on that quality aspect of recycling.

Liz: That makes sense. So, do you think MURPHS changing to reflect today's waste stream.

Susan: I think they're changing a lot. In fact, I think a couple of things are happening. I think commercial and certainly a lot more careful about what they accept on the inbound stream and they're developing more protocols and procedures for ensuring that it's a cleaner stream coming in the door.

I think a lot of others are also investing in more technology to be able to become more efficient at. Our costs to skyrocket it as we've had to increase our quality at the back end. So, to do that we're investing in a lot more technologies to become more efficient

and do a better job of producing a higher quality material at the back end. And all of that happens as we continue to see a change in that waste stream. And it's funny you know we started talking about it a couple of years that changing waste stream and boy are we seeing really a lot of shifts. Even though we still see about 80% of the material that we manage is paper in our single stream is probably about 75% of the material that we manage is paper. So there's still a lot of paper in the stream and that's fundamentally the biggest, you know, the biggest commodity that we're handling but we have a lot more technology to be able to make sure that we're getting all the right materials in the right places and making sure that it's clean far and markets great.

Liz: Now do you think it's a dual stream is in our future?

Susan: So, we get asked that question a lot. And I keep revisiting it because I do know that there are some communities that have decided to either stay with the dual stream or even revert to a dual stream.

But I would say for a couple of reasons we do not anticipate much of a change in programs... One being a huge amount of investments in single stream programs between trucks and processing capacity. One of the reasons is because it's a lot less expensive over 60% of the cost of collection of the cost is in the collection of overall recycling programs. And so single stream keeps that costs down by making the trucks more efficient on the route and kind of part and parcel with that is they require less drivers and we have a driver shortage. So, that I actually that concept of more labored is something that really, I think at the end of the day will have play a huge role.

Finally, well there's kind of two more things. there's a lot of reasons here safety is dual single string collection is much more safe for our customers and for our drivers and that we can have automated collection. And then for the customer perspective, our customers like it. They love it. It's convenient. There were more people recycle and they were cycle more and I think as we focus more on education around quality, we'll start to see that we can overcome some of the challenges of the quality of material and single stream programs and take much more advantage of all those benefits that you see with single stream.

Liz: I think that's true too. So, do you think policy is keeping up with today's consumer behavior around recycling and waste?

Susan: I think we're trying to catch up, quite frankly. I wouldn't say keeping up I think we're working hard to use this opportunity to catch up. You know I think about it a lot and policy is everything in our business and whether it's you know creating the demand for recyclables, whether it's creating the economic drivers for recycling, what's ultimately then you can create the kind of socio economic investment in in our recycling programs.

I think we have a huge opportunity to catch up and in some parts of the country. I think that's driven a complete culture change around how we consider not just recycling but more around the environment. And then we have some places that I think we really have a lot of opportunity to do a lot more true.

Liz: True. And you spend a lot of time interfacing with local governments and implementing new municipal programs. What do you think is the biggest challenge that you find in bringing the public and private sector together, successfully?

Susan: I mean I when I want to think about local governments, I think there's a lot of issues that local politicians have to deal with. Recycling is one. Recycling waste management issues is one issue and sometimes I think we need to do a better job of recognizing kind of the suite of pressures that many local communities have.

So, I can have two thoughts on that. I think in some places perhaps state policy creating umbrella policies will help. I'll use the word "give cover" to those local elected officials to help them implement programs and perhaps, you know, kind of rise above some of the local pressure that competing local pressures that we have. At the same time, I'll say I just I think we need to recognize that there are a lot of things out there competing for folk's attention and we need to be very mindful of that and meet people where they are. Do the best help them to do the best that they can and be realistic about our expectations at the same time.

Liz: I'd like that to being realistic and also being sympathetic and empathetic about everyone else's time because like you said everyone's vying for some piece of their attention.



Susan: So yeah yeah. And then sometimes we can get pretty deep into the weeds on how to recycle right and what to recycle and if we can't keep it straight. How in the world can we expect folks who have a million other things on their mind to even try to keep it straight? So, it's a challenge I think that we will probably always struggle with. I don't think there's a simple easy answer to that.

Liz: True and same applies for education of residents and consumers, right? In terms of keeping it simple because it's the easiest way to change behavior and be consistent.

Susan: Yes and that's certainly an area of focus that we've had as you know we have our recycle often recycle right education program and have spent a lot of time and research making sure that we are understanding what those best ways are to communicate simply to our customers.

Liz: So, a little change of pace you said on “a circular economy is aspirational”. Could you tell me more about your thoughts on that?

Susan: Yeah, I am. I think about the circular economy in much the way I think about zero waste. And I also think about circular economy as a partner step or a complement to lifecycle thinking. So, I'm a big fan of lifecycle thinking the concept of doing using science using what we know the emissions analysis is for different activities materials and products and trying to use that to shape how we manage material.

So, my kind of philosophy I've been evolving towards is, if we cannot all of sudden always think about the circular economy because I'm not sure that's going to drive us to make the right. If all you're thinking about is circularity you may not make decisions that actually drive the best environmental results. But if we use lifecycle thinking to create programs and processes that have had have the best environmental results pretty soon, we start to evolve towards a circular economy.

So, I see much more of an incremental evolutionary effort to get us where we're going as opposed to trying to look at the end run and not contemplate really what those steps are along the way. So, it may be just terminology, I'm not sure. But I think I do worry that circularity sounds so good. It's such a great soundbite and it's such a great visual. You

know, life is more complicated than that. And I think we need to be much I think if we've learned nothing over the last 30 years is that we need to be more thoughtful about the details of what we're doing in order to drive us towards that. Best environmental solution because in some cases we may not have made decisions that really ultimately were you know the best in the short run, but we can actually use our knowledge now to kind of work our way towards those better environmental solutions.

Liz: That make sense. So how has technology changed waste and recycling from your season vantage point and the last 30 years of your career?

Susan: I think there are some places where we can look towards a broader scale say the first thing technology for our fleet. You think about historically one of our biggest impacts is our fleet right. We're on the trucks, roads in neighborhoods and communities every single day across the country. And we now have changed to a natural gas fleet about by the end of this year 60% of all of our route trucks will be running on compressed natural gas and we're also using renewable natural gas in those trucks. So those are getting close to being near being a near zero emissions fleet for us as we move towards renewable natural gas and trucks. So, while that's one piece of the story that's a pretty exciting evolution of a big part of the services that we provide.

So, there's an example in 10 years' time, really 10 years' time which we started that process in the early 90s but really about 10 years ago made that commitment to that fleet and then as we move towards renewable natural gas, that's pretty exciting. Then what we're doing is we're doing more with the fleet and we're using more cameras on trucks both for safety reasons and for customer communication. And one of the things I get excited about is how do we use technology. Let's say on a truck to be able to change behavior with our customers for recycling. Now, there's where I you know I've always said for the time I've worked for Waste Management as we have really tried to find equipment to solve human behavior problems or issues, challenges and sometimes it just takes more change of behavior you can't do it all with equipment or technology.

But here we are with an opportunity to change behavior using technology. We use cameras on trucks to help identify where we have contamination and we can communicate with customers to help them have immediate feedback to be able to improve the quality of their material. That's a win all the way around. We can be more

efficient in how we have that communication and we can help drive that behavior change. So, I think that's one simple place that I'm seeing an enormous opportunity to use that evolution of technology to really drive a lot of positive change in our industry.

Liz: Oh, definitely and I didn't even realize those numbers. That's outstanding, 60%. Wow.

Susan: Yeah. And then we've certainly you know at the recycling facilities themselves you see a lot of technology on evolution. So, when I first started, I was so excited about an edit current that separated aluminum. I mean that was a pretty good deal. And then over time we put in optical sorters and so we've got now you know many, many optical sorters used for many different kinds of materials there. That probably one of the staple What is now one of the staple technologies at our facilities and now as we use robots. With robotics, we have I think several that we're trying to see which one we've got I think four that are in use right now. So that's exciting and then we're actually using AI at one of our landfills, we have a pilot, we're actually using a I for the equipment on the face of the landfill so it's a really great pilot. That is one that we think has some great opportunities so a lot of different places for us to really find ways to optimize the services that we provide.

Liz: Well this is an exciting time to be in the industry. And you've really seen it evolve. That's awesome.

Susan: Yeah it is exciting you're right and it is and actually again, you know, it's while it's challenging it's really force. And sometimes you know when things are challenging or when things are going really well you can be complacent. And I think that for us this is an opportunity to really go to the next step. Go to the next step to take advantage of that the attention and the focus and really drive towards better solutions down the road.

Liz: Definitely. You've previously said that extended producer responsibility discussions in the US tend to include really broad sweeping statements. Do you still feel that way or do you think there's now a deeper understanding of what EPR is and what it isn't?

Susan: I think there are certainly a lot more dialogue around it. Probably a couple of years and I think I'm interested in that it's getting a little bit more granular. Miller I would

say so I would suggest. So, I look at producer responsibility, more broadly around producers taking responsibility and we see a lot of that happening in the United States. I mean, that's it's pretty impressive the amount of energy that producers and manufacturers and brands are putting into trying to really make their products in their packages a lot better as it comes to extended producer responsibility. There's a lot of activity and hard to handle materials and we're seeing certainly an elevated discussion around some sorts of packaging as well. So, you know one of the things we've talked about is you know what does it look like in the US? Does it need to look like it like it does in other countries and how can we have a broader dialogue around extended producer responsibility to make sure that folks really understand what it is. Because honestly when you look at extended producer responsibility, the results aren't in many ways, You know, there's a whole suite of policies that one can use to drive behaviors and for example I look at where I live in the Pacific Northwest, we've got the policies in place that really make many areas as good as any place in the world. It doesn't require extended producer responsibility it's just a set of policies that drive that behavior.

So, I think we are becoming more comprehensive in our discussions to make sure that we're evaluating really what do you give up, what do you gain, what are the pros and the cons and, you know, let's be a little let's be smart about having that dialogue.

Liz: Sure, that makes sense. So, what else do you think we should be paying attention to in the world of waste, recycling and organics?

Susan: I think we need to be, I guess, paying attention to a couple of things. One is demand. The demand for material and that applies to not only recyclables, but it applies to organics. And I worry that we don't think carefully enough about creating the sufficient demand to pull material through that creates that manufacturing of that feedstock for other materials, that we still we are still having a hard time adjusting from thinking of a supply side focus and a diversion focus.

So, you know one of the things I have been thinking about is 30 years ago when we started curbside programs. We had a lot of recycling before then right. Recycling is as old as time, but we recycle to create feedstocks to make other things. And it was done for a very deliberate reason and it only happened when you were going to use a material to make something. When we shifted to curbside recycling programs, we really,

to get people to participate, we changed the narrative to a diversion focus away from a feedstock for a product focus and we lost sight of why we're recycling. So, I think we have an opportunity now to, I hope, change that narrative back to recycling as a manufacturing feedstock and organics as a feedstock for something else. It's not about a diversion to get your numbers up. It's about the environmental benefits of offsetting the use of virgin resources.

And so, you know by doing that then we can focus more on reduction and we can focus on making sure that we're recycling the right things well so that we truly have a feedstock for new materials if we aren't making things into new products. We've wasted a lot of time and energy for something that really has no environmental value. And I don't think we've done a good enough job yet of recognizing how important that demand side pull is, and that manufacturing process really is.

Liz: Oh, what a great point. So true. That would be great to get back to that mindset because you're right that narrative certainly has changed.

Susan: Yes, it really has. It really has. Unfortunately it changed pretty deeply and so it's a big swing and it's a very tough one then to you know switch that pendulum back and be a little more thoughtful on how we really consider it, kind of the approach that we take to how we manage material right.

Liz: So, what advice would you give to professionals considering entering our industry?

Susan: Oh, it's an exciting one. Come in with open eyes and come in with a mind that's open to thinking about things really differently. Don't get too ingrained in those age-old paradigms that we've had come in and challenge us folks with gray hair, challenge us to just to do things differently and to think beyond recycling and think to the environment.

I think if I could say nothing else it's don't think of it as a myopic way but think about really why we're doing this. The many opportunities we have to think differently in the future and to do things differently the way we're managing materials today, sure as heck better look different in 30 years. It looks different than I did 30 years ago, and it needs to continue to evolve the materials that we're using and how we live is going to change dramatically which means we can't do things the same way. Looking to the future we need to really look ahead and recognize that we need to be open and willing to embrace

technology embrace education and outreach and different kinds of thinking to meet our customers where they are and to make that change for the environment in the future.

Liz: I'd love that. Great advice. So, Susan what keeps you busy outside of work? You're in beautiful Seattle.

Susan: I know, I am in beautiful Seattle. I'm a big hiker and I happen to have my family here this weekend and my grandson, my baby grandson from the east coast, so I get to play and be grandma for the weekend which is pretty exciting.

Liz: Oh, that's so enjoy every minute of that.

Susan: Thank you. I am!

Liz: I can tell! That's awesome. So how can our listeners hear more from you?

Susan: Well I you know hopefully opportunities like this will continue to arrive and I certainly am always happy to respond when people reach out to me. And I think there are just so many great opportunities across the country to do good things and to think differently and to look to the future and remember that this is a cycle. Stay it for the long run. We're going to come out. Be smart in how we do it. Let's be smart with our programs and we'll work through it and really keep the long run in mind the long term in mind.

Liz: Oh, that's great. Well this has been fantastic. Thank you so much for your time and your insights our listeners are going to love hearing this.

Susan: Great. Thank you so much.