

Voices of Sustainability: Season 1, Episode #12

Phillip Schlies

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Intro

Hello and welcome, I'm Phillip Schlies and you are listening to the Voices of Sustainability Podcast. Join us as we delve into the various strategies and challenges faced by the government, businesses, and non-profits, all striving to balance economic growth with environmental and social responsibility.

This season from the University of South Carolina, our reporters are all business majors at the Darla Moore School of Business with a concentration in sustainability. They'll be talking with various organizations to highlight how they're working to improve the world we live in and conserve our natural resources.

To explore the topic of sustainability, the episodes will explore how each person being interviewed defines sustainability, how the success of sustainability initiatives are measured in their organization, the motivations to be sustainable, and how to have a positive impact in your career. The conversations also provide insights into topics such as, circular economy and recycling, innovation and technology in sustainability, as well as regulation and policy that are influencing this space.

On today's episode, our reporter Noah Morris will be speaking with the Recycling Business Development Coordinator at the South Carolina Department of Commerce, Allyson Barbier. Allyson, along with her team, focuses on promoting sustainable practices among South Carolina businesses. Tune in to hear about Allyson's journey in the field of sustainability and her impactful initiatives that are aimed at fostering a greener economy in South Carolina. Let's get into it.

Script

Noah Morris

Hi, my name is Noah Morris, and in this podcast on sustainability I am interviewing Allyson Barbier. So, the first question I have for you, can you introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about what you do?

Allyson Barbier

Ok. Yeah. So my name is Allie Barbier, I'm from Columbia, South Carolina and I currently work for the Department of Commerce, but I am a USC graduate. I graduated in 2021. I was a double major in Spanish and global studies with a focus on sustainability and development and a business minor, and I started working for an energy trade association doing economic development research with them. During my time at USC, I interned for them my last semester of my senior year and then they ended up hiring me full time. I worked on about two federal grants when I was there in the clean energy sector, and then I transitioned to the Department of Commerce about the South Carolina Department of Commerce about a year and a half ago. And I am on the recycling market development team here at commerce and yeah, it's been great. I've really enjoyed my time with them,

Noah Morris

It sounds like you've definitely got some experience in sustainability as well, just from your background and from your education, if you don't mind, can you define sustainability from your perspective?

Allyson Barbier

Yeah, so sustainability is such a it's such a broad term and there's so many different factors that play into it and it's used every day in different scenarios for different things. And it's like what is sustainability? So when I was at USC, I remember, and we always, if it was like an environmental class or even like an economics class. Or geography class we would the teacher would start off by just defining sustainability and you know, to me it really is just the ability to maintain a process at a certain level for forever or you know a specific period of time.. And there are lots of factors that play into it. I'm sure you're familiar if you've learned about sustainability in any of your business classes, but you know you have environmental, social and economic. And so if one of those is not working, then it's not sustainable. And it's a very interesting industry. It's difficult and it's very trendy right now, which is great for me. But yes it's all encompassing really.

Noah Morris

It really is it, it kind of covers a broad area of topics and has many implications in tons of areas of business. Pivoting kind of to your education a little more as well with the sustainability goals, I know you talked about, you know, the different social and economic effects of it. Is there any specific like topics of sustainability that you did cover while you were being educated at University of South Carolina or during your internship, anything like that? That was very specific early on in your education of sustainability, if that makes sense.

Allyson Barbier

Yeah. So a lot of my development, International Development classes, which is in the geography department, I believe, and then some of my economic classes. Weirdly, we'd always we do a lot of case studies, and I remember we talked about groundwater a lot and. Like groundwater depletion and how that affects communities and different entities fighting for that, the rights to that groundwater, I took a class called water as a resource. One time we talked about that the

entire time, which is it's super interesting because you learn how it affects, you know, the surrounding businesses, how it affects like their product and how it affects them economically. And then the surrounding community, how it affects them and then, of course you have environmental and then how it affects the terrain around that area and how it can lead to very horrible droughts. You know, I remember we talked about the global north and the global South. If you're not in any geography classes that USC, you might not know what that is, or you might, but we talked about how, like the how environmental intersects with development in foreign countries. So yeah, those are some of the topics that I covered at USC and then of course, when I was at the Energy Trade Association in Charlotte. I did a lot of economic development research in the clean energy sector.. And you know how we bring nuclear power or how advancing the grid will impact our society in the Southeast. You know, economically how it'll bring jobs and it'll bring different supply chains down to our region. So yeah, that's just some of the stuff I've learned and in my previous roles. And then, of course, recycling most recently.

Noah Morris

Of course. No doubt, and I think it's very interesting to see how you've switched perspectives on sustainability. You've kind of gone from like, you know, a basic understanding to an economic perspective and now you're taking a look at it from more of, some people might say, a literal perspective. I guess in the recycling kind of aspect. So it's just, I think it's cool how you've taken on sustainability in different ways and I think it's very important for people to understand that sustainability has all these different lenses and different ways that we can approach stability. So I appreciate you sharing that with me and with our listeners.

Allyson Barbier

Yeah, of course. Yeah, you said it. You said it very well.

Noah Morris

So obviously you talked about recycling. So I would love for you to discuss what you do specifically as the Recycling Business Development Coordinator for the Department of Commerce in South Carolina.

Allyson Barbier

Yeah. So the Department of Commerce, it's the Economic Development Agency for the state. We recruit companies and then we also help companies grow existing industry grow within the state and then I work in the business services team. So we work with existing industry and we also help with recruitment, and then some areas we pulled in, and so my team, it's about three of us, we're called the A-Team because we all have a names, but we work with manufacturers in the state and help them divert waste from the landfill to either like a reuse option or a recycler. And then we also support a lot of different initiatives and programs throughout the state that have to do with like sustainability or recycling and so yeah. We're very busy.

Noah Morris

No doubt lots of businesses, to I'm sure interact with and especially with extra projects on top of that, it's got to be quite a lot of work.

Allyson Barbier

Yeah. Yeah, it's fun, though. We get to go to a lot of site visits, which is great. I love being able to. I didn't know anything about manufacturing before, and I've learned so much about it. It's a very interesting job.

Noah Morris

No doubt. I mean when you get to go out and actually see the effects as well of what you're doing, it's, it's got to be pretty interesting.

Allyson Barbier

Yeah. Yeah. No, it's great and it's cool not to sit at a desk all day.

Noah Morris

So through your role in that position as well, I know you talked about going out and seeing your work in the businesses as well as kind of working with already businesses that have already established themselves in South Carolina. So through this position and in your time there. Have you had any sustainability goals or initiatives that you've implemented?

Allyson Barbier

Yeah. So we have a lot of different programs and initiatives that we helped support or that we are in charge of in the state and earlier we had a sustainability business to business matchmaker. I think we brought in about 5 original equipment manufacturers, so large companies like Redwood Materials, which is coming to our state. It's an electric vehicle battery recycler and then a few others I think Milliken was in attendance and we then bring in about 60 suppliers and we set them up with the OEM. I think they give like a 10 to 15 minute pitch and it's a great way for them to make a connection and potentially have that OEM become a supplier of that OEM and those are usually very successful. But this one was sustainability based, so we partnered with our supplier outreach team for that and it was awesome. And so that's just, that's one of the things that we've implemented recently. We also have a scrap tire sustainability coalition. We bring together a bunch of stakeholders within the state from like the Department of Transportation to Continental Tire and Department of Health and Environmental Control, and we bring them all in a room and we talk about pathways forward in terms of scrap tire recycling and use. And I didn't know this before I started in recycling. But scrap tires are a big issue everywhere really and a big issue in our state, so that's been a very fun organization that we've helped facilitate. And then we also are part of the, it's called the Carolinas Plastic Recycling Coalition and it's us and the North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality and we host meetings around North Carolina and South Carolina at different companies, and we showcase the products that are made at these companies out of recycled plastics. So it's called your plastic means products and that's been very fun and we went to Atlantic Packaging a few weeks ago and we're going to Milliken in May. So

we've enjoyed that. And when it comes to, you know, working one on one with businesses, there is a fertilizer company down in Charleston and they had a lot of byproduct from their manufacturing process. They coat pellets with a plastic resin that are basically fertilizer and they're used for commercial agriculture applications, and we were trying to help them get rid of some of the byproduct from that process. And I found a Mycelium mushroom grower in the state who could potentially use that product and because they were sending it to the landfill originally, and they wanted to be better stewards as well as, cut their landfill costs. So we've hopefully been helpful. Now I know they're still talking to them, but we're hoping it'll work out, but yeah, that's just some of the stuff that we do on our team and some of the initiatives were part of.

Noah Morris

I think it's very cool as well. I like the fact that you're establishing actual change, so you're working with businesses and then kind of like, it seems like, you're following up as well. You know, you're kind of still reviewing the progress that they've made. Am I correct in saying that?

Allyson Barbier

Yeah, definitely. We wanna have those success stories, so it's important that we follow up with them and make sure that they're finding the right outlets for their waste. We're nonregulatory that's why we're so welcomed by businesses. They can be afraid of regulators, usually, so we're usually welcomed with open arms when we come in, because our agency, also through our recruitment process and if a company's interested in expansion, we offer incentive packages. So like tax credits and other types of business incentives to get them to come to our state. So we're very business friendly.

Noah Morris

I'd love to ask if you've ever run into any adversity or issues with businesses or just in any sort of manner while pursuing sustainable practices in your role?

Allyson Barbier

Yeah. Well, just in general, I mean recycling it is a market driven industry. And what I mean by that is that commodity prices like plastic, paper, metal, they change all the time, day to day, week to week, and sometimes it's not always economical to recycle, and it might be the best thing to do from an environmental standpoint you know, as environmental stewards, but it's hard to convince for profit organizations, especially if they're a small to medium sized company, that it's important that they recycle. And I'm sure they want to recycle, but they can't absorb that cost sometimes. And unless you're finding a reuse option, and that's something that if the company expresses that you know we have a hard to recycle product but we don't want to pay to recycle it then we're like OK well you know you should always try to reuse before you recycle anyways. So, let's try to find a another company maybe that can use this product and then also, it's getting better, but most products are not designed for recyclability which can make things very hard when there's like 5 different types of plastics in one product and it can be expensive for the company that wants to recycle it. So yeah, I mean coming from an economical perspective, you don't see that return on investment immediately, and it can be a longer process. Maybe, you

know, you'll see it in 10 years when your biggest client, who is also a supplier for Walmart cannot work with you anymore because, you know, they have to make sure that all their emissions upstream and downstream are carbon neutral and that can be very difficult. So you that's sometimes how we go around it. You know, it's not immediate, but you'll see it later on because this is what we're seeing in the industry.

Noah Morris

No doubt and down the road a little later on that kind of disconnect there between the immediate effect, they don't see the immediate effect so it doesn't affect them as much. I can definitely see how that would be pretty difficult as well as the economical standpoint you mentioned is pretty relevant. I would say amongst most of the US probably just with these smaller companies, definitely probably don't want to invest as much as they can't and it's very true.

Allyson Barbier

Yeah, some of them do, but some of them, just can't. They can't afford it, which is understandable. You know they can't pay \$2000 a month or something like that to, you know, have a hauler come in and pick up their stuff and sometimes counties can offer that service, you know, I guess, not necessarily for free because you're paying for it in your taxes, but they can work with the manufacturer, but if you have a manufacturer in a rural area, you're gonna have to pay money.

Noah Morris

I know you talked about this as well, you work with a lot of businesses. Have you ever had any like interlinkages? So you talked about how sometimes you try to find a company and you try to take some of their products so that it could be reused in a different company. Do you have any examples of that that you could share?

Allyson Barbier

Yeah, it can be difficult sometimes to make that connection, but there was a company that had scrap fiberglass and they were wanting to get rid of it and we made a connection with another company in the low country and they were able to reuse it in their manufacturing process. So stuff like that. And sometimes we have a supplier outreach team as well, so they're familiar with if a company has a need for a specific product and they don't maybe wanna pay, you know, like large prices for it then maybe we can find like a scrap version of it and make that connection. So we work with them sometimes as well.

Noah Morris

So I know we've talked about the current kind of goals and what you're doing right now. I'd love to pivot a little bit to the future. Do you have any future goals or initiatives that you could share that you're planning on implementing in the coming months or the coming years, whatever time frame?

Allyson Barbier

Yeah. As I mentioned before, we have our Carolinas Plastic recycling coalition and once we've finished the road show, you know, going to different companies and showing off their products made with recycled content. We plan on developing a white paper for the plastics industry potentially and we also want to showcase some of these visits with a marketing campaign in the form of a video or two that we can release it on our website. That's a goal of ours and then electric vehicle batteries are very popular right now. That's a very popular topic and our goal is to bring together all the stakeholders from that value chain and make sure that we have, you know, we have a lot of electric vehicle battery recyclers coming to the state as well as we have, you know, original equipment manufacturers like Volvo, BMW and then Scout motors is coming. And so we're making sure that our state has the infrastructure and needs to support these businesses and that you know, the safety in transportation of these electric vehicle batteries and when they are being disposed of is taken into account, so it's important that you bring together all the stakeholders from that value chain and make sure that they're all talking, you know, bring in the dismantlers the battery pack manufacturers and the car manufacturers and make sure that they're all sitting at the table and that everyone's voice is heard so that they can figure that out together as we have like, you know, this new market coming to our state so.

Noah Morris

And a very new market as well, I will say and I think it's very, very nice how you included the entire value chain in that perspective. It's important, especially with I think the batteries, a lot of people have some issues with the sourcing of those and especially the disposal. So I think it's really cool hearing that everything's being taken to account from a business perspective.

Allyson Barbier

Yeah, yeah that's a goal of, you know, of our team. So yeah, we're excited about it, it's great, lots of changes coming, but it's exciting.

Noah Morris

Just looking towards the future and maybe even some of the past, I'd love to ask if you've noticed like any major trends right now just in sustainable practices as your level, so maybe from like a recycling point of view or like what you've seen through businesses or any sustainable practices that you've seen that are just kind of like trending right now or becoming popular, any new processes?

Allyson Barbier

Well, of course the electrification of everything. I feel like that's very popular. I don't work in this space anymore, but hydrogen fuel cells. That's something that's coming and that people are very excited about. And then also I see people in the industry being more open to sharing best practices, especially with their competitors. That's something that's a really great thing that's come out of all of this. I believe it, you know, sustainability, it can be very confusing and I think it's great that companies are willing to get together and share how they're handling it and what

they're doing, because I think that's important. That's the only way we're gonna be able to move forward.

Noah Morris

Yeah, that transparency really is fantastic because that's something we talk about even now in classes is the transparency of companies. Some companies might not be as transparent as others, so it's really, really cool to hear that that's occurring actually in the marketplace now, it's definitely a step forward and a step in the right direction.

Allyson Barbier

Mm-hmm. Yeah, for sure.

Noah Morris

If you were going to give one piece of advice to students looking to have a sustainable impact in their career, what would that be?

Allyson Barbier

First I would say, you know, it can be hard to find an entry level job in the world of sustainability, especially corporate sustainability. A lot of the jobs are, I feel like there they require like, I remember when I was applying to jobs it was like you need three to five years of experience or something like that and that could be very frustrating and that's with all jobs really. But I would say just apply to them, even if you don't think you're qualified, just apply and it's really important in the sustainability industry that you network. So I would definitely go to as many career day events and different opportunities that your school offers just to try to make connections face to face. Those are so important. And then also reach out to your professors. That is how I got my first job, I reached out to my marketing professor at USC, Professor Worsham, she introduced me to someone who then introduced me to someone else and then they introduced me to Bonnie Loomis, who gave me my internship with E4, which then turned into a job. And I think you have people in your life, people that are older than you and that really wanna help. And I think it's important that you take advantage of that and put yourself out there. So that would be my advice also. I think sustainability can be, it can be confusing and frustrating at times. But you just gotta keep moving forward and remind yourself at the end of the day of, you know, the ultimate goal, right, to make the Earth a better place.

Outro

Thanks for tuning in. I hope you've enjoyed getting to know Allyson and learning more about the South Carolina Department of Commerce. Their initiatives, from recycling coalitions to business matchmaking for sustainability, highlight the state's commitment to environmental stewardship and economic growth. However, that's all the time we have today. Tune in to our next and last

episode to hear our second guest from Sustain SC discuss reaching sustainability goals with local solutions in South Carolina. Thank you for listening and we will see you next time.

Tag

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