

First of Two Parts: Luminary Interview: Heidi Sanborn

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A discussion with Heidi Sanborn, Executive Director of the National Stewardship Action Council.

By David Nightingale, CHMM, S.C.

This month we interview Heidi Sanborn (left). She is the founder and Executive Director of the National Stewardship Action Council (NSAC), a nonprofit 501(c)(4) organization, and the affiliated Stewardship Action Foundation, a 501(c)(3) organization, to conduct public education and outreach to support the work of NSAC. NSAC is a national network of committed proponents comprised of governments, non-government organizations, businesses and consumers who advocate that producers fairly share responsibility in a circular economy. She previously founded and led the California Product Stewardship Council and has been a driving force for product stewardship and extended producer responsibility (EPR) in the U.S. since 2001.



Images courtesy of NSAC.

HHW Corner: What was your first introduction to the waste management profession?

Heidi Sanborn: Looking back, I have been in waste management since I was little. When I was seven years old, I wanted to earn some money. I had a little red Flyer wagon. My dad said that I could earn money by collecting old newspapers from the neighbors in my wagon and then we would take them down to the local Weyerhaeuser paper mill in Wilmington, DE, weighing our Town & County station wagon in and out, and was paid by the pound. I have always hated litter and literally on my own would go pick it up in the local park starting when I was eight years old.

Later, my first job out of college was for a consulting firm that focused on energy and waste management. That is when I realized that waste management was something that I really was passionate about.

HHW Corner: Where did you first learn of the terms HHW and CESQG (Conditionally-Exempt Small Quantity Generators)?

Heidi Sanborn: I first learned about those terms working for a consulting firm and writing waste management plans for California counties that included HHW and CESQG wastes.

HHW Corner: I think that you were first introduced to the concept of product stewardship by Scott Cassel. If that is correct, when was that and in what context?

Heidi Sanborn: That is correct. After leaving the consulting firm, I worked for the CA Integrated Waste Management Board, now CalRecycle. I worked in the Office of Local Assistance, which helps local governments comply with state rules. Because I was successful in helping local jurisdictions comply with the law, the chair of the Board asked me to be her staff advisor. She asked me to pick three of the most important things that might be accomplished during her term. To answer that request, I attended various conferences to try to discern what those three things might be. Scott Cassel was speaking on product stewardship at the National Recycling Congress conference and what he was saying just absolutely rang true to me. Local governments could not fix everything at the back end of the process. We had to really address what was being made at the front end of the process. Raising garbage rates to manage the waste products at the end of their useful life was not working. And, there were no economic signals going back up to the manufacturers to quit producing toxic wastes, which was very expensive to handle at the back end.

HHW Corner: Why did the concept of product stewardship motivate or resonate with you?

Heidi Sanborn: What I saw was that local governments did not have the tools or resources to handle all of the toxic wastes that were increasingly ending up in the waste stream. They were never going to have enough money at the local level to manage the toxic and horrible hybrid wastes at the end of the product lifecycle.

The state was ramping up the recycling goals to 50 percent and 75 percent, but this was not feasible when the wastes were becoming less recyclable because of the hazardous chemicals and constituents in the products. You have to turn off the spigot at the top of the product lifecycle to have any chance of closing the loop and getting to high recycling goals. So my motivation was due to my total empathy for the local government and waste haulers that were being put in an impossible situation and realizing only the producers of products could change the situation as they make the design and marketing decisions.

HHW Corner: What do you mean by the term “horrible hybrid wastes”?

Heidi Sanborn: Horrible hybrid products are the shoes that light up with mercury switches combined with rubber and fabric, and plastic products and electronics with many different kinds of plastics, and heavy metals and fire retardants integrated into the product that cannot be removed. It is all these products that are impossible to recycle due to them being a

scrambled egg of materials that cannot be unscrambled. There is no practical way to deal with this at the back end, we must design products for recycling and that is why producer responsibility resonates with me.

HHW Corner: What did you do at the Integrated Waste Management Board and beyond regarding producer responsibility?

Heidi Sanborn: First, I was able to get product stewardship and the goal of zero waste into the updated CA strategic plan. However, I wanted to move things along beyond just having a state plan that included product stewardship. I left the Integrated Waste Management Board and went back to school for a master's degree in public administration from the University of Southern California. While I was in that program, I also started consulting with the Product Stewardship Institute on the national paint dialog initiative, where you and I met. That is when I got really excited about the conversations leading to solutions on the ground for product stewardship.

HHW Corner: What led you to create the California Product Stewardship Council?

Heidi Sanborn: As a consultant, I wrote a report for California regarding what policies we should use for managing HHW. After looking at 80 different policies around the world, I came to the conclusion that for a product that has no end-of-life market and is dangerous to people or the environment, the first policy to consider is a producer responsibility approach. From that report, local governments said that they agreed with my findings and encouraged me to start a non-profit to advocate for product stewardship and educate people and government officials. That is why I was a founding Director of the California Product Stewardship Council in 2006.

HHW Corner: What is the fundamental issue that Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) can help solve?

Heidi Sanborn: The fundamental issue comes down to product design. If a product is designed correctly and labeled properly, it is going to be 1) non-toxic, 2) have labeling to clearly tell the customer how to manage it when they are done with it, and 3) there will exist a convenient system in place to manage that product. If the design is right to begin with, then the costs to businesses, government and customers are reduced and that is a form of waste and toxicity reduction through good design.

Profits can still be made at every point along the product lifecycle, but good design practices eliminate management problems and excessive costs associated with toxic end-of-life products because the product retains its recycling material value and, therefore, can be readily and fully recycled back into the economy. This is how a circular economy works and benefits everyone. Without a circular economy, the cost of managing these toxic products are externalized to people and the planet, which is unsustainable and unethical. End users and

local governments end up bearing much of these externalized costs because of poor design. EPR is a policy mechanism that provides an economic signal to the producers of products to move to eco-design, which allows for circular economy to be achieved.

HHW Corner: What about the responsibility of corporations to their stockholders to prioritize profits?

Heidi Sanborn: I have a fundamental ethical issue with our economic system that too often prioritizes profits over everything else at the expense of people and the planet. Many lawsuits, such as the current raft of opioid cases across the U.S. and the Truth in Labeling lawsuit against Keurig over K-cup recyclability have resulted from the profits over people decisions by traditional C-corporation companies. C-corporate boards have a fiduciary responsibility to prioritize profits, often at the expense of everything else, and it is dangerous to the sustainability and health of our planet and people, even our democracy, as the civil unrest over this injustice rises.

However, companies can become what is called a B-corporation, instead of the more traditional C-corp form of business. B-corps. are required to look broader than just at profits but to all of the three Ps—People and Planet as well as Profit. B-corp. business boards have a legal responsibility to consider societal needs and the broader impacts of their business decisions. This requires the B-corp. board to be or become aware of the broader context in which they consider decisions. If companies switch to becoming a certified B-corporation, the whole perspective of the organization changes in ways that are compatible with a circular economy. Passing EPR legislation may provide an incentive for a C-corp. company to consider becoming a B-corp.

HHW Corner: Most HHW collection programs in the U.S. rely primarily on solid waste tipping fees imposed by local governments. How does this help or restrict moving ahead with product stewardship initiatives?

Heidi Sanborn: It helps in that it can motivate local governments who are tired of the high costs of these programs and see no end in sight. It hurts because the environmental and health costs of managing these toxic wastes are buried and socialized broadly to the waste management system without a built-in feedback mechanism to the producers of products to do anything differently or to the consumers to buy a different product. Essentially, the price paid at the cash register does not reflect the full cost of the product through its lifecycle.

For example, when someone buys a fluorescent lamp for a dollar, they have no idea that it is costing an additional dollar to manage that lamp at its end of life. If instead, the fluorescent lamp cost \$2 to buy, reflecting its total lifecycle cost, they might be encouraged to buy an LED (light emitting diode) instead of a fluorescent lamp. By considering their lifecycle costs, LEDs are cheaper than fluorescent lamps because LEDs do not contain the mercury in fluorescent lamps, which is a potent neurotoxin and very expensive to handle and sequester.

In general, customers are seeing their garbage bill rise faster than the rate of inflation, but do not realize that many of the products they buy with the chasing arrows recycling symbol may not be recyclable. So their HHW product ends up contaminating truly recyclable materials that reduces the value of those recyclables or requiring the waste system to extract the HHW and other contaminants from the recycling stream, which also increases the system costs. Because of misleading product labeling, consumers are often doing what they believe is the right thing, but is actually making the system more expensive. This is frustrating for the public because they are getting mixed messages, thinking they are doing the right thing, but then costs continue to rise and they find out that not everything they were told was non-toxic really is or recyclables are really not. | WA

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*Full disclosure – Special Waste Associates is a NSAC member and also supports the Product Stewardship Institute.