

## **Voices of Sustainability Season 1, Episode #10**

**Phillip Schlies**

**TRT: 13:41**

### **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, we will be speaking with the Sustainability Manager at Millikan & Co., Emily Skaggs. Millikan is a pioneering force in textiles and chemical manufacturing and has set a high standard in environmental stewardship and sustainable practices. Join us as Emily shares insights into Millikan's innovative approaches to energy efficiency and their ongoing commitment to reducing environmental impact. However, before we get into things, this episode is going to be a little different. Due to some technical limitations, you will hear my voice performing the interview with Emily. This interview was originally done by our reporter Mason Gosset but has been adapted to audio by me. Without further a due, let's get into it.

# Script

## Phil

Hey Emily, thanks so much for being here. It's great to have you. To start, I want to ask you about Milliken's sustainability goals. I know that the company is aiming towards things like removing waste from landfills and reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 25%. And I know a lot of your goals involve working and collaborating with other companies. How have you and your team been able to work towards these goals with these other companies?

## Emily

I would say, we travel to different manufacturing plants every year. So, we were able to visit six last year, and we're hitting up our first next month. And we really just try to make that hands on connection with them. Talk to them, see how they feel about those goals. And sometimes the sentiment can be like, Oh, this is just another thing corporate wants us to do. You know, just another thing on my to do list to see how they're managing a lot. So we try to humanize them for them. But one of the biggest things we've accomplished is at our Blacksburg facility. So we have on that campus, we have a chemical manufacturing site right next to a textile finishing the plain air. And so they're on the same land. And so we were able to build a cogeneration facility. And I am not the expert on can explain to you what it does. Basically, we were powering that site with coal, which was not a clean energy source. And we were like, Okay, how do we get out of coal, we came up with cogeneration, we didn't come up with it, it was a process that already existed in the world, we said cogeneration won't work at this site, because of the steam that was being produced from the finishing of our fabrics was is actually now routed through cogeneration to power our plants that creates our clarifier, our chemical plant. And so what we're able to do is harbor that steam into power for another side, rather than it just like going off. There are some companies that are doing it, that's where we got the idea. And we've tried to see if there are other sites where we could do it, but it just happened to be that Blacksburg was the right place with, you know, the way the sites were right next to each other. And we created a lot of synergies. But we have explored trying to do in other spots, it was a \$25 million investment. So there's a lot of capital, all the projects like that, which our CEO is totally on board. And we were like we found another site for cogent and be like, um, but it is, there's a lot that goes into a project like that, and it and it didn't, you know, didn't immediately start working right, we had to spend a lot of time getting it all set up, and then making sure we set it up properly. And there was testing and everything. So it took some time. But I think we'll see a profitability around that when it comes to like, spin save on energy and things that there'll be an ROI on that investment.

## Phil

Wow, yeah. I mean that's awesome that your CEO is totally on board and willing to try things like cogeneration when there's not an immediate return on investment. I guess my next question is, what would you say are some of the biggest challenges or considerations whenever you start looking towards a sustainable, excuse me, business venture like this?

## **Emily**

I would say so my colleague, Josh, is global sustainability manager, and he's leading the charge on a lot of these, explorations. Things like kojim, what can we do and other sites, he's put a lot of work and effort into seeing how we could incorporate on site solar. And one of the biggest challenges is that on site solar, no matter how many times we run the numbers, there's no ROI. Like, it's just a money law. And so we're getting pressure from customers, we're getting pressure internally to like, you know, reduce energy consumption, and green the way we, you know, utilize our energy. And there's a lot at once you just put solar panels up, why don't you just put solar panels up, and it's not as easy as, as it down. They're very expensive. And so I'd say that's a big challenge right now is, you know, solar is not we're realizing solar is not really the answer for our organization, it may be for other organizations that for us to put like, isolated panels at specific sites that feed into those, it's just not the math is not mathing. We're really trying to trying hard to engage with energy companies to say like, how can we partner with you? How can you, you know, how can we work together to talk about solutions? Because there's no one right answer, when you're talking about decarbonization, it's got to, I think, it's got to be a combination of all energy solutions, there can be a little bit of solar, I think there needs to be hydrogen, you know, even possibly Small Modular nuclear reactors. So like, you put all that together, and you're, you know, and we need our utility companies to green their grids too. So much we can do on our own, but we're not going to be able to generate our own power for all of our sites, right. So like, we need to really partner with them, and get our government relations teams on board to get our local leaders on board, to maybe help push policy.

## **Phil**

So despite all of these obstacles and challenges that you have to go through just to try and be sustainable, what would you say motivates you personally, to continue being sustainable.

## **Emily**

I always say that sustainability, we always try to make it about the planet, right? Do this for the planet, but like at the core, I could do it for people. People live on the planet. And the planet will be here without us. It needs to be inhabitable for us. Yeah. And so it you know it will heal it has done it before. We may not come out on the other side of it. So it's really it's about Um, you know, it's human centric thinking. But also, I mean, just through this conversation, you can see that it's always changing, ever growing really fast pace. And I enjoy working in the unknown a little bit. Yeah, kind of being there as new technologies emerge being there as new opportunities emerge. It's, it's always different. It's always changing. And I find that really fun. I know, the subject matter is very serious. But my, my team and I, we work really well together. And we're all very different. I mean, we have an engineer, two lawyers, a CPA, a data scientists, we're all different, and a marketer. And we all think differently. But we all have a common goal. And I think that is like the perfect way to think about sustainability. Because everybody involved is different. We're all we all come from different backgrounds. But we all have the same, same goal, and it's just leave this world better than we found it. Yeah. That's where we want to be. So

whether we're an engineer, or a data scientist, or a lawyer or marketer, we're, you know, we all bring something different to the table. And I think that's really cool. And it was really fun.

### **Phil**

Yeah, I mean, I think your right, even though the actions of people can sometimes cause harm to this planet, when people come together to protect it, great things can happen. So as a final question, what's one piece of advice you would give students to help them make an impact in not only their career, but also a sustainability career?

### **Emily**

I would say, coming from a non-traditional environmental background like I did you have to be open minded to be in this field? And if an opportunity arises, don't let whatever you think your path should be keep you from trying something. Or taking an opportunity, don't be afraid to raise your hand and volunteer and do something that maybe you don't fully know how to do, or something that might be a little scary, because, you know, when I was put on the sustainability report project, I was there as a project manager. And I got the opportunity to be exposed to sustainability in different way. And when my boss came to me and said, I want someone like me on my team, I could have easily said, like, No, I'm a marketer, it's like, I don't want to be an environment, like I want to keep working my way up on a marketing tree, you know. And it's, it's okay, for your path to change.

## **Outro**

Thanks for tuning in. I hope you've enjoyed getting to know Emily and learning more about Milliken and CO.. From their innovative cogeneration facility to their pioneering role in sustainable textiles, Milliken continues to lead by example in environmental stewardship. However, that's all the time we have today. Tune in next episode to hear our guest from the non-profit organization "I am Beautiful" discuss the social impact of sustainability. Thank you for listening and we will see you next time.

## **Tag**

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