



# National Waste & Recycling Association<sup>SM</sup>

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*Women's Council*

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## Women Leaders in Waste: Tracie Onstad Bills of SCS Engineers

*SCS Engineers' northern California director of sustainable materials management turned her passion for teaching into a career in the waste and recycling industry.*

Mallory Szczepanski | May 31, 2019

Tracie Onstad Bills always dreamed of being a teacher, but she never thought she would be educating people on waste reduction and recycling. As the northern California director of sustainable materials management for SCS Engineers, Onstad Bills is tasked with growing SCS' sustainable materials management (SMM) practice as well as education and outreach efforts, business development, writing proposals, holding client meetings, visiting businesses, attending conferences and managing projects.

Onstad Bills has been in her role at SCS for more than four years, but she has been in the environmental and resource material management field for more than 20 years. She began her career at Recology and became an expert in areas such as

commercial recycling technical assistance, environmental purchasing, large venue and event zero waste programs, research and sustainability planning, garbage hauler franchise compliance and review, construction and demolition program/ordinance analysis and writing, climate inventory compilation and research and feasibility studies to help clients with comprehensive waste prevention and zero waste programs.

“I hear stories all the time about people falling into this industry, and that was literally the case for me,” says Onstad Bills. “In the '90s, I received my bachelor’s in environmental science from San Jose State University, and I was seeking an environmental job. But the only jobs that were really available were in environmental engineering, and I’m not an engineer. I ended up answering an ad in a newspaper for a customer service representative job, and that job happened to be at Norcal Waste Services (now Recology).”

In addition to working as a customer service representative, Onstad Bills worked as a recycling coordinator, helping businesses and municipalities adapt to new legislation in California . She also helped write a business plan for a new hauling service within the city of San Jose, building the new service area with clients, managing a customer service department staff of 12 and working with senior management to ensure customer service, reporting, invoicing, phone system, residential and customer services and employees’ success targets were met.



According to Onstad Bills, one of the most critical components of helping a municipality or business implement a waste prevention or zero waste program is understanding every aspect of the desired system, including their goals, what waste prevention or zero waste means to them, their current waste prevention and waste reduction systems, their current infrastructure , their funding for additional infrastructure , what support they have from their government, what they are purchasing and producing and if they are willing to switch over to a more sustainable product option, etc. Every municipality and business are going to have different plans and goals, but they should all be practical, realistic and, most importantly, achievable, she says.

“At Recology, I learned how important it is to be flexible and adaptable,” states Onstad Bills. “Things are always changing, especially in this industry, so you really need to be adaptable and flexible in any role. Problem solving and being able to think outside the box are equally important, as this industry deals with a number of problems and concerns raised by customers. Lastly, and certainly the biggest and most valuable best practice I learned at Recology, is customer service and making

sure the customer feels appreciated. I think Recology does a great job at customer service, and being able to resolve issues calmly and with ease is a win-win for both the customer and the company.”

Onstad Bills brought those best practices with her to SCS Engineers, where she works closely with SCS Engineers Vice President Michelle Leonard on SMM, or what they refer to as “everything but landfill.” Together, they have built up SCS’ business unit, which includes California, Arizona, New Mexico, Utah and Nevada.

When Onstad Bills first started, it was just her and Leonard working on SMM, but now SCS has about eight staff members working on SMM because there is a lot of work to be done in regard to helping municipalities and collection companies.



Some of the projects she’s currently working on include: researching markets for wood and box springs for the Mattress Recycling Council ; helping the city of Alameda, Calif., implement zero waste systems and encourage top generators to make better purchasing choices and to recycle and compost more; working with

ReThink Disposable , a program of Clean Water Action and Clean Water Fund, to get more businesses to make better purchasing decisions and to reduce the amount of disposable materials from entering waterways; and conducting waste characterization and contamination studies for various clients.

“My position has so many different elements to it, and I get to work on a number of different projects with different team members, so there is always something new and exciting to work on,” states Onstad Bills. “There are so many fun aspects of my job, but I have to say I really enjoy visiting facilities and doing tours. I try to do as many as I can, not always directly related to this industry, because I learn a lot more about a business or a customer by doing a tour. For example, I visited Japan last year and had the chance to visit a lot of facilities to learn about how other communities are managing their waste and recyclables. Japan is really a whole other world—it’s so clean and people follow the rules—and I wouldn’t even know how to begin to get the U.S. on their level because our culture is a little different.”

“I can’t imagine doing anything but this,” she adds. “In fact, I live in Silicon Valley, and my friends work for high-tech companies. They tell me to come work for them all the time, and to be honest, what I do is so important and it has such an impact on the community that I couldn’t even imagine doing anything else. I love what I do, and I feel very lucky for having the job that I do.”

*As we continue this series, we invite our readers to email Waste360 Editorial Director Mallory Szczepanski at [Mallory.Szczepanski@informa.com](mailto:Mallory.Szczepanski@informa.com) with suggestions of women to feature in the coming months.*

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