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A Carpet Manufacturer's Sustainability Story

Interface set a zero waste goal in the 1990s, when basically no one else was. Now, the company is ahead of its 2020 target and is onto its next sustainable mission.

[Arlene Karidis](#) | Sep 12, 2018

Flooring products manufacturer Interface set a zero waste goal back in the 1990s, when almost no one was doing it. Now, the company is ahead of its 2020 target and is onto a new, more aggressive mission.

And, in between, the global company that did almost \$997 million in net sales last year has made other disruptive moves, including cutting loose from the rest of the carpet industry in its sustainability direction.

When carpet manufacturers collectively fought a California law requiring that it recycle its wasted products, Interface left its trade association and hired a lobbyist to push to keep the law intact.

On a smaller-scale project, the company has worked with one of its suppliers and small villages in the Philippines and Africa to see that fishing nets are pulled from the ocean and get a second life as fabric in Interface's carpet tiles.

“One of our overarching goals for almost 25 years is what we call ‘Mission Zero:’ to have zero negative impact by 2020,” says Erin Meezan, chief sustainability

officer at Interface. “Since then, we’ve reduced waste to landfill by 91 percent. We decreased water usage by 88 percent. We have reduced greenhouse gas emissions by 96 percent. And we have shifted from fossil-derived energy to renewable sources, including landfill gas to provide process heat for manufacturing.”

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“In 2016, we looked at our zero emission metric and saw we were getting close to what we set out to do a little early. We thought maybe it was time to challenge ourselves more,” she adds.

The company’s next mission is called “Climate Takeback” and involves implementing business practices to go carbon neutral and ultimately carbon negative, storing more carbon dioxide (CO₂) than it releases.

It has begun this initiative through projects like installing green roofs on factories and launching a carbon-negative product made from bio-based materials.

Now, Interface has a multipronged sustainability strategy.



“We work toward good internal operations in order to be more efficient. We engage the supply chain to come up with recycled materials. And we try to engage customers, so they appreciate recycled content and are also part of closing that loop by returning products to us,” says Meezan.

The latter focus has been a challenge, she says, because, “Now, you can toss flooring in a lot of markets. We want those materials back, so we’ve been in favor of creating industrywide programs to put infrastructure in place to see that this can happen.”

This is why Interface got behind [California’s Carpet Stewardship bill](#), which passed in 2017, mandating that carpet manufacturers hit a target of 24 percent carpet recycling by 2020, and then CalRecycle would set higher goals beyond 2020.

“Almost all of the industry fought this bill except for Interface,” says Heidi Sanborn, executive director of the National Stewardship Action Council. “But Interface worked hand-in-hand with us on the bill language. What made them unique is they are putting money and energy into sustainability like no other company in the carpet industry. I think it was the deal breaker—we got this bill passed largely because Interface got fully engaged. It was the industry saying, ‘this is a problem,’” adds Sanborn.

In 2011, [Aquafil](#), which supplies yarn to Interface, established a chemical regeneration plant that can transform nylon waste into new products.

The carpet manufacturer has partnered with the company to use fishing nets Interface collects in the Philippines and Africa through its Net-Works project. All the recovered material is sent to Aquafil in Slovenia to be regenerated into brand new yarn.

The way it works is nylon waste is fed into a chemical plant where high temperature and a catalyst allow polymers to be broken down and transformed into their original building blocks. The polymers are extruded and spun into yarn.

“The interesting thing about this process is that it can be done an infinite number of times,” says Giulio Bonazzi, CEO and president of Aquafil. “So, nylon 6 waste [fishing nets, old carpet, industrial waste, etc.] always has the potential to be used as raw material and be turned into ECONYL regenerated nylon, with no compromise in quality.”

“This initiative is about a supply chain paradigm shift to a more circular and inclusive model. What would be waste is used to produce beautiful products instead of polluting the seas,” notes Bonazzi.

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NWRA Women's Council Accepting Scholarship Applications

The Women's Council will award \$35,000 in scholarships for the 2019-20 academic year.

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The National Waste & Recycling Association (NWRA) Women's Council will award \$35,000 in scholarships for 2019-20 academic year, as a result of donations from NWRA member companies in 2018. Since 2007, \$190,000 has been awarded to 43 students.

Women's Council scholarships are offered to NWRA member company employees and their dependents who wish to use their education for a career in the waste and recycling industry. Eligible candidates may be male or female, new or returning/continuing and may be attending a college/university, trade school or community college, full time or part time. Scholarship awards will be scaled in proportion to course load.

"At a time when we are trying to attract more workers to our industry including young men and women, the work of the Women's Council and its scholarships are important resources," said Darrell Smith, NWRA president and CEO, in a statement.

"The Women's Council Board and members continue their efforts to give back to NWRA and the industry," said Carmen Smothers, Environmental Solutions Group and 2018 Women's Council president, in a statement.

Selena McBride, a 2018 scholar, is employed by Republic Services as a billing processor in Antioch, Calif. She is pursuing a bachelor's degree in accounting with an associate's degree in business fundamentals at the University of Phoenix.

McBride is a dedicated employee and is working toward a staff accountant position, and she hopes the degree will help her achieve her goal. In addition, she is fostering four children while raising her own. Her colleagues have recognized her hard work and dedication to the industry and her family.

"I'm so excited. This is great! Thank you all and thank you, Scholarship Committee," said McBride.

The online application for eligible candidates is [available here](#).

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