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The Facts on Recycled Paper

Many offices are attempting to reduce paper use to help lessen their environmental impact. It is now very common that companies have paperless meetings where the agenda and meeting materials are all on computer or overhead screen; and many e-mails that land in our inbox have a footnote that reads: “Think of the environment before printing this email”. But along with reducing paper use, the type of paper used is equally important.

When recycled paper first came to market fifteen to twenty years ago, it was grainy, off-white in color, and had a shorter life. Fortunately recycled paper has come a long way since then and is now equivalent to virgin paper in terms of finish, opacity, whiteness and grams per square meter (a measure of the weight of the paper).

And in terms of the production cycle, using recycled fibers (the individual strands of paper that make up the pulp) to make useable pulp consumes less energy and water, than using fibers directly from a tree when manufacturing virgin paper (about 60-70% less energy, and 55% less water!).

The fiber composition is what is taken into consideration when you read the percentage of recycled content on a package of paper. For example, “paper is 80% recycled” means that 80% of the fiber comes from recycled content, and 20% comes from virgin fibers.

Pre-consumer pulp is made up of production waste and generally does not require de-inking, which is the process where printing ink is removed from recycled paper in order for it to be reused in the production of new paper. But pre-consumer pulp is limited in supply. That is why the term ‘post-consumer’ is most often seen – this means that recycled pulp consists of paper from offices and homes after use. These post-consumer paper products that are recovered for recycling reduces the amount of virgin trees needed to produce paper and cardboard products. And purchasing products made from post-consumer recycled materials supports the markets for materials recovered by recycling services across the globe.

Higher-grade papers generally require some virgin pulp to achieve comparable quality levels as the quality of fiber degrades each time it passes through the recycling process.

Bleaching is the process of whitening recycled paper, which uses different chemicals including chlorine. When you are deciding what kind of recycled paper to purchase, try to buy paper that is chlorine-free and acid-free, which means it has a lower environmental impact in terms of toxins used in the manufacturing process.

The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) is an independent, non-government, non-profit organization established to promote the responsible management of the world's forests. FSC is the only forest certification system that is supported by all major environmental groups. So when you buy FSC certified paper that means that the paper company complies with the highest social and environmental standards in the market.

Make sure to keep in mind that when you are recycling your paper, but not purchasing recycled content paper, you are only doing half the job! Buying recycled paper is a small but important investment that both businesses and individuals can make to help reduce our environmental impact.

Along with using recycled paper, avoid printing when unnecessary, print double-sided when printing and copying, reuse single-sided paper as scratch pads, and be sure recycling bins are visible and near all printers and copiers.

Jessica Scott is an Environmental Policy Researcher with the City of Fredericton's Green Matters greenhouse gas reduction campaign. Send any comments or questions to greenmatters@fredericton.ca