

Case Study: Copy Paper

Prepared by the City of McCall Environmental Advisory Committee

Introduction:

The City of McCall's Environmental Advisory Committee has conducted a case study, in which one product purchased by the city is examined to determine its environmental impact, and how such impact might be decreased by purchasing an environmentally preferable alternative. The product we have chosen for this case study is office paper.

Consider the following facts¹:

Buying 40 cases of copy paper made from 30 percent post-consumer paper instead of paper made from virgin pulp saves:

- more than seven trees
- 2,100 gallons of water
- 1,230 kilowatt-hours of electricity
- 18 pounds of air pollution

Buying 40 cases of copy paper made from 100 percent post-consumer paper saves:

- 24 trees
- 7,000 gallons of water
- 4,100 kilowatt hours of electricity
- 60 pounds of air pollution

Given the statistics above, switching to 30% or 100% recycled paper (while reducing use to maintain current expenditures) would decrease the annual environmental footprint of paper use as illustrated in the following table:

	Current Paper	30% Recycled Paper	100% Recycled Paper
Current / Projected Use (in cases)	54	45	37
Tree Use	32.4	19.125 (40% reduction)	0 (100% reduction)
Water Use (gallons)	707,400	521,900 (26% reduction)	478,225 (32% reduction)

¹ Natural Resources Defense Council. <http://www.nrdc.org/cities/living/paper/why.asp>

	Current Paper	30% Recycled Paper	100% Recycled Paper
Shipping Weight (lbs)	2700	2250 (17% reduction)	1850 (32% reduction)

(Note: figures for electricity and air pollution could not be determined, since no baseline amount was available for regular paper).

The data in this table demonstrates that making a few small changes to paper consumption habits can have a great effect in reducing its environmental impact. Essentially, the switch to recycled paper acts as the fulcrum in a lever. Efforts to reduce paper consumption to avoid an increase in expenditures is the energy input. The result achieved by this lever is the conservation of thousands of gallons of water, several trees, and all the fossil fuel required to extract, move, and transport these raw materials. The benefits of conservation, like the costs of industry, are often externalized. We may never see the difference we make by our efforts to purchase environmentally preferable products and use less. However, it will make a small, but important difference to the planet's biosphere: a little more water will be available, a few more trees will stand, fewer fossil fuels burned, more carbon sequestered. The question we must ask is, "Is this worth the extra effort to use nine fewer cartons of paper each year?" Think of this proposed action, switching paper, as one small step in developing a culture of sustainability and environmental awareness in McCall. It may be helpful to make employees aware of the environmental impact of products purchased, and to see in black and white the difference that conservation efforts can actually make.