

A Brighter Shade of Green

Opportunities for Newspapers in the New Era of Consumer Environmentalism

Executive Summary

ACTING TO ADDRESS THE ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS of the public they serve is not without precedent in the newspaper industry. When recovered newspaper supplies exceeded market demand in the early 1990s, and communities were faced with incinerating or land filling what they had collected, the industry responded. And it responded well. Driven by publisher commitments to increase the recycled fiber content of their newsprint, and producer investments in paper de-inking infrastructure, the US industry average more than tripled from just 10 percent in 1989 to 35 percent today. With this strong foundation to build upon, and the accelerating public concern around climate change, the newspaper industry is poised to demonstrate its environmental leadership once again.

At a time of turbulence within the industry, adopting deeper socially and environmentally responsible business practices also offers companies a tremendous market opportunity. Recently, companies in all industries – even those facing challenges – have discovered the competitive advantage of instituting strong corporate responsibility policies, and environmental policies in particular. As the trend in consumer awareness regarding climate change grows, coupled with increased government interest in regulating industrial carbon emissions, not instituting such policies is increasingly a risk to every company’s long-term viability. As players in an industry that is the fourth highest emitter of greenhouse gas emissions in the US – the paper industry – newspaper publishers and producers have a unique opportunity to build on a tradition of environmental leadership to reduce these emissions and at the same time, the industry’s impacts on Endangered and High Conservation Value Forests across North America.



Industry Impacts

The most effective way to reduce industry impacts on climate change is to focus on reducing impacts to forests. Despite continuing declines in print circulation, US newspapers still consumed 9.6 million tons of newsprint in 2006. Although 35 percent of this paper contained recycled wood fiber, the remaining 65 percent (6.2 million tons) is sourced from ecologically important forests in the US and Canada.



Aerial view of Oscar Lake and Boreal Forest in Northwest Territories.
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Impacts on Forests

The primary sourcing region in Canada is the Canadian Boreal – one of the world’s last and largest intact forests – where it is estimated that 2.5 million acres of forest are cut *each* year. Further, two-thirds of trees cut in the Boreal are harvested specifically to make paper, and newsprint comprises 30 percent of all paper produced in this region. This has contributed to an extensive loss of habitat, which is threatening many key species, as well as certain indigenous communities that depend on them.



Pisgah National Forest. ©Shannon Binns

The primary geographic region for newsprint production in the US is the Southeast, home to the most biologically diverse forests in North America. To achieve its status as the world’s leading producer of paper, it is estimated that over five million acres are logged in this region by the paper industry *each* year, and over seventy-five percent of the harvest is from natural forests. The practice of clear-cutting the forest and replacing it with single-species pine plantations is widespread and has significant ecological consequences. The Southeast now has the highest number of endangered ecosystems of any region in the country and yet by 2040 one in every four acres is expected to be a pine plantation – if the current rate of conversion from forests to plantations continues.

Impacts on People

People living in these regions have been impacted as well. In Canada, indigenous communities such as the Grassy Narrows First Nation have seen their livelihoods jeopardized due to industrial logging on their lands by newsprint producers. In the US, residents living near plantations have been exposed to harmful chemicals from aerial sprays of toxic fertilizers and herbicides needed to maintain them. While progress is being made, these issues remain and must be given greater consideration across the industry.



English River blockade, Ontario. July 2006. Courtesy of FreeGrassy.org

Opportunities for Leadership

Climate change, forests, people – with these impacts in mind, we turn to the solutions. While a number of steps can be taken to reduce these impacts, three deserve special attention.

Recycled Fiber

First, increasing the use of recycled fiber will do more to reduce the negative impacts associated with newsprint than perhaps any other decision. If the current recycled fiber use average of 35 percent was increased to just 50 percent, the annual savings would be tremendous: 24 million mature trees, 16.2 billion pounds of greenhouse gases, enough energy to power 212,000 homes, and enough solid waste to fill 68,000 garbage trucks.

FSC Certified Fiber

Beyond increasing recycled fiber use, the industry also has a unique opportunity to significantly reduce impacts on Endangered and High Conservation Value Forests in North America. Supporting paper producers that source fiber from forests managed to the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) standard is the most effective strategy for reducing these impacts. FSC certification not only ensures that natural forests are not converted to biologically sterile plantations, and that the concerns of indigenous communities have been addressed, but also results in less soil disturbance and more trees left standing – all critical factors for reducing carbon emissions.



Agricultural Fiber

Expanding the use of agricultural fibers as an alternative to wood fiber is a third critical way in which impacts can be lessened. Although agricultural fibers are not widely used in North America to produce paper, they comprise fifty percent of the pulp used for paper in China and India, and the advantages are many. In addition to relieving pressure on forests, processing agricultural fibers into pulp is less energy intensive and requires less water than converting wood fiber into pulp. Technical advances in non-wood pulping and the generally lower cost for the raw material is also making pulp made with agricultural fibers cost competitive with wood.

Ultimately, implementing policies that support these three solutions will go far in reducing not only the greenhouse gas emissions of the newspaper industry, but also the impacts to forests and people. At the same time, doing so will attract new customers, and provide clarity for an industry struggling to redefine itself in an increasingly digital, and environmentally conscious marketplace. Encouragingly, as SP Newsprint, Atlantic Newsprint, Transcontinental, and other companies highlighted in this report have demonstrated, meeting this challenge need not be perceived as yet another financial burden – but rather – embraced as a unique opportunity for innovation.

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