

Closing the Paper Loop

The last time you had a cold, did you blow your nose on an ancient forest? Or recently print a memo on an old-growth tree? Maybe cut down a 90 year old tree to wipe up Junior's spill? Ridiculous as these may sound, they might just be the root of actions you're taking in your daily life.

According to New Leaf Paper (2001), one-third of all trees logged are used for paper production. But if we buy recycled paper instead, we help "close the recycling loop" by putting the materials we collect through our recycling program back to good use as products in the marketplace. In addition to saving trees, making paper from paper uses less water and energy and produces far less pollution than making paper from trees.

Recycled paper products are easy to incorporate into your life – at work or at home. Take a quick inventory of the products around you. Are your paper plates, office paper and envelopes made from recycled material? How can you tell?

The next time you're at the store, instead of just tossing paper products into your shopping cart, take a look to see if they contain recycled content. Consider a box of tissues for example. At first glance, you notice the box says the tissues are made from recycled paper. Great! That paper has already been paper once before. Look a little further. Does the tissue box label give you the specific percentage of recycled content used? The greater the percentage of recycled material, the better.

Look a little bit deeper. Does the label mention "post-consumer recycled content?" Recycled products can include both pre-consumer and post-consumer wastes. Pre-consumer materials are generally scraps or trimmings from the manufacturing process and were never used in the consumer market. Post-consumer content, on the other hand, means it's gone through the complete recycling loop -- someone used it, recycled it, and now you can purchase the new material. Purchasing products labeled "made from post-consumer recycled paper" is the best way to fully support recycling and to protect the destruction of our natural resources.

Buying recycled-content paper products ensures that the materials collected in recycling programs will be used again in the manufacturing of new products. According to Seventh Generation, if every household in the U.S. replaced just one roll of 500 sheet virgin fiber bathroom tissue with a roll of 100% post-consumer recycled tissue, we could save: 1 million cubic feet of landfill space, equal to 1,600 full garbage trucks, 153 million gallons of water, and prevent 423,900 trees from being flushed down the toilet.

As demand for recycled products has increased, prices have lowered and are competitive with those products made from virgin materials, and in some cases even cheaper! According to Waste Age (May 1, 2006), companies selling recyclable paper are experiencing strong and steady prices for their paper. If we all continue to purchase products made with recycled materials, consumer prices will continue to decrease.

Purchasing products made from post-consumer materials also enforces the Zero Waste principle of designing products and packaging with reuse and recycling in mind. Broomfield's very own Corporate Express now offers more than 3,000 environmentally friendly office products and facility supplies, including recycled paper, recycled plastic desk accessories, remanufactured toner cartridges and more. Even their shipping boxes are made from 35-100% recycled materials (www.corporateexpress.com). Another local environmentally-focused business where you can find office and home products (and more) made from post-consumer content is Eco-Products (www.ecoproducts.com). Or the next time you're at your local grocer, read the fine print and load your cart with those paper products with the highest post-consumer content to close the recycling loop. Let's leave forests standing for better purposes than wiping our noses.

Genevieve George is Eco-Cycle's Broomfield Community Outreach Coordinator. To learn more about recycling or the Eco-Cycle/Broomfield Recycling Center, call (303) 404-2839 or e-mail genevieve@ecocycle.org