Do You Know the Facts About Paper and Sustainability?

Paper is one of the few products on earth that already has an environmentally sustainable, circular life cycle. It is made from an infinitely renewable natural resource – trees that are purpose-grown, harvested and regrown in sustainably managed forests. It is manufactured using mostly renewable, carbon-neutral bioenergy in a process that uses a lot of water but consumes very little. And paper products are recycled more than any other material.

- **The Myth:** The production and use of paper is destroying Canadian forests.
- **The Fact:** Canadian forests are a renewable natural resource that is continuously replenished through sustainable forest management and natural regeneration.

The State of Canadian Forests

Canadians are deeply committed to sustainably managing their forests for the multiple important values they provide. Sustainable forest management (SFM) ensures that these benefits are maintained for both present and future generations.[1]

There are 369 million hectares (ha) or 912 million acres of forest covering Canada. Across the country, Canadians have deep connections to their forests— valuing, managing and using them in different ways. Therefore, maintaining Canada's forest is vital. **Since 1990, less than 0.5% has been deforested**. According to laws, regulations and policies in place across Canada, all areas harvested on public land must be reforested, either by replanting or through natural regeneration, so virtually all harvested lands will continue to be regenerated. **About 94% of Canada's forests are on public land**.[2]

Canada is home to 9% of the world's forests, making it the third most forested country in the world after Russia and Brazil. Canada's total forest area has been stable between 1990 and 2023. A relatively stable forest area is an important indicator that forests are being managed sustainably and, therefore, remain a stable provider of resources, biodiversity, and diverse environmental services. Forests dominate many Canadian landscapes, but cover only 40% of Canada's land base.[3]

75% of Canada's forests and woodlands are in the boreal zone. Canada's boreal forest is often portrayed as a vast tract of ancient, pristine wilderness, but that's not the case. Although the boreal region itself is ancient, the boreal forest is made up mostly of trees that are relatively young compared with many that grow in more temperate climates, it is regularly affected by forest fire, insects and other natural disturbances, and continually renews itself through these natural disturbances.[4]

In the long term, a sustainable forest management strategy aimed at maintaining or increasing forest carbon stocks, while producing an annual sustained yield of timber, fibre or energy from the forest, will generate the largest sustained mitigation benefit.[5]

Canada manages its forests according to the principles of Sustainable Forest Management; in 2023, approximately 670,000 hectares of Canadian forests were harvested, which represents roughly 0.2% of forested land. By law, all forests harvested on public lands must be regenerated. Successful regeneration, either through natural or artificial means, contributes to maintaining or restoring ecosystem services.[6]

In 2023, 563 million seedlings were planted on 400,000 hectares of provincial forest lands in Canada.[6]

Deforestation

Deforestation is the permanent conversion of forest to other land uses, including urban development, agriculture, pastures, water reservoirs and mining. The term deforestation specifically excludes areas where the trees have been harvested or logged, and where the forest will regenerate naturally or with the aid of sustainable forestry measures. The main drivers of deforestation in Canada continue to be agricultural, mining, as well as oil and gas expansion.[6]

In 2023, only 0.01% of Canada's forestland was deforested – this encompasses all deforestation, including agriculture, mining, development, hydroelectric development and forestry. Forestry makes up only 2% of that 0.01%. This compares to 3.6% that was affected by insects and 4.7% that was affected by fire. Agricultural expansion continues to be the main driver of deforestation in Canada.[6]

Forest Certification

Third-party forest management certification complements Canada's comprehensive and rigorous forest management laws and regulations. It provides added assurance that a forest products company is operating legally, sustainably and in compliance with world-recognized standards for sustainable forest management.[7]

The three independent certification programs used in Canada – Canadian Standards Association (CSA), the Forest Stewardship Council® (FSC®) and the Sustainable Forestry Initiative® (SFI®) all set high thresholds above and beyond Canada's tough regulatory requirements.[7]

Canada leads the world in third-party sustainable forest certification. As of 2023 end of year, 177 million hectares were certified to the three sustainable forest management certification programs in use in Canada.[7]

Just 9.5% of the world's forests are independently certified, and 41% of these certified lands are in Canada. Canada's certified lands would cover an area the size of Germany, Spain and Sweden combined.[7]

About 70% of Canada's certified lands are in the boreal region – it has two times more boreal forest certified than any other country.[7] Canada is the only country in the world whose national trade association (FPAC) makes third-party verified sustainable forest certification a condition of membership. FPAC member companies are responsible for about half of forestry operations in Canada.[7]

Carbon Sequestration

The entire world is grappling with the urgent need to address climate change and cut carbon emissions. As Canada faces the challenge of reducing greenhouse gas emissions, healthy Canadian forests and forest products obtained from them will play a vital role in the transition to a greener, low-carbon economy.[8]

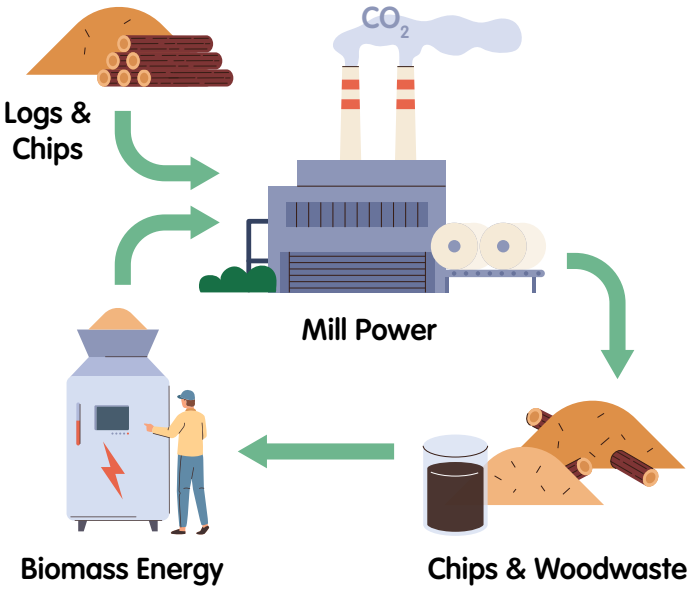
For the past century, Canada's managed forests have been a significant carbon sink, steadily absorbing and storing more carbon from the atmosphere than released. However, in recent decades the situation has reversed varying by year. Several factors have contributed to this shift from carbon sink to carbon source. The annual total area burned by wildland fires has increased substantially. Unprecedented insect outbreaks have occurred. And annual harvest rates have shifted dramatically in response to economic demand, increasing in the 1990s and decreasing sharply with the global economic recession. The combination of these events and activities has resulted in Canada's managed forests acting as a net carbon source in years when large areas are burned.[8]

The Myth: Paper manufacturing is major cause of greenhouse gas emissions that contribute to climate change.

The Fact: Most of the energy used at Canadian pulp and paper mills is generated using renewable, carbon-neutral biomass.

Sustainable Biomass and Emissions Reduction

Since the early 1990s, the Canadian forest products sector has reduced its greenhouse gas emissions by nearly 70%. Advancements in energy efficiency and the transition to bioenergy sources utilizing wood residue generated by sustainable forestry have made this possible. With regenerating biomass as an energy source, the biogenic emissions released from its combustion are offset by CO2 captured by forests.[9]



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The Myth: Paper is a wasteful product.

The Fact: Paper has a high recycling rate and is diverted from Canadian landfills more than any other material.

Paper Leads Canada's Recycling and Waste Diversion Efforts

Of the total amount of Canadian waste diverted from the landfills through recycling or composting (9.9 million tons) in 2022, the majority was paper (36%). Less than 4% was plastic.[10]

The average recycled content of Canada's three major packaging grades – containerboard (used to make corrugated boxes), boxboard (used to make boxboard cartons), and kraft paper (used to make paper bags) – was 80.2% in 2022, up from 73.5% in 2018. The average has steadily increased from 47% in 1990.[11]

96% of all Canadians now have access to the convenient recycling of corrugated boxes, paperboard or boxboard cartons, and kraft paper bags.[11]

The Myth: Only recycled paper should be used to make new paper products.

The Fact: The continuous input of wood fibre from sustainably managed forests is essential to the paper production cycle.

Why Fresh Fibre Is Essential in the Paper Recycling Cycle

Every time paper is recycled, the fibres get shorter and weaker. Depending on the origin of the fibre and the type of products, fibre typically starts to degrade after being recycled 5 - 7 times.[12]

Fresh fibre is constantly needed to compensate for the retirement of degraded fibre, archival storage of paper (books, records, etc.), and loss of fibre through normal use and disposal of certain non-recyclable paper products, such as personal hygiene and tissue products.[12]

The Myth: The Canadian paper and forest products industry has a poor environmental record.

The Fact: The Canadian paper and forest products industry has demonstrated solid and continuous environmental improvement.

Canada's Sustainable Forestry and Environmental Progress

In 2023, Canada harvested 114.9 million cubic meters of industrial roundwood, which was well below the estimated sustainable wood supply level of 209.5 million cubic meters (m3). Canada continues to harvest at levels that are below the level deemed to be sustainable.[1]

Canada has reduced its emissions from pulp and paper operations by 55% from 1990, primarily by decreasing fuel consumption and switching to alternative fuels such as biomass.[13]

Canada's pulp and paper effluent regulations govern the discharge of harmful substances from pulp and paper mills into water frequented by fish. Since 1985, the quality of pulp and paper effluent (wastewater) released directly to the environment, as set out in the regulations, has improved considerably. Effluent tests met regulatory standards 25% of the time in 1985 and 97.4% of the time in 2020. Tests for biochemical oxygen demand and total suspended solids.[14]

The Myth: Paper is a dying industry.

The Fact: The Canadian forest products industry supports hundreds of thousands of jobs and adds billions of dollars to the country's GDP.

Economic Impact and Employment in Canada's Forest Sector

In 2024, Canada's forest sector directly employed over 200,000 people, including an increase in representation of women, indigenous and immigrant employees.[15]

In 2024, Canada's forest sector accounted for $37 billion, or 5% of all Canadian exports. It is the fourth-largest Canadian export industry.[15]

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