



The Circularity of Paper: Recycling Closes Circle

Welcome to Three Minutes With Two Sides. I'm Kathi Rowzie.

Over the last three decades, the U.S. paper industry's deep-rooted commitment and voluntary investment of billions of dollars in recycling infrastructure have transformed the circularity of paper products from vision to reality – something no other industry has been able to achieve. At a time when there's growing alarm about the low recycled rates of other materials, paper recycling is a clear exception.

Recycling closes the loop in paper's circular life cycle, where an infinitely renewable natural resource – trees grown in sustainably managed forests – are made into products we use every day, in a manufacturing process that uses mostly renewable bioenergy and consumes very little water. The circle is complete when used paper and paper-based packaging are recovered and turned into new products.

And paper recycling isn't a one-and-done deal. Paper and paper-based packaging can be recycled over and over again – typically between 5 and 7 times. Recycling not only prevents waste, but also extends the life of a valuable natural resource – those trees we just mentioned -- and prevents greenhouse gas emissions that happen when paper ends up in a landfill.

You may hear some suggest that to be truly sustainable, all paper should be made with 100% recycled content. But if you think about this for just a minute, it's easy to understand why 100% recycled content in all paper products is a practical impossibility.

We said that paper can be recycled 5 to 7 times. Why not more? Repeated processing, this means collecting the used paper products, cleaning, de-inking, and sometimes bleaching them, eventually weakens the recycled fibers to the point they can't bond into new paper, so they have to be replaced with virgin wood fiber from responsibly managed forests. If fresh wood fiber isn't continuously added to the manufacturing stream, the supply of recycled fiber would quickly run out and paper production would cease altogether.



Our recent Two Sides Trend Tracker survey showed that most Americans have little idea how much paper actually gets recycled. But the data show that more than two-thirds of all paper and paper-based packaging in the U.S. gets recovered and recycled into new products, and that number jumps to a whopping 94% for corrugated cardboard. This compares to only 9% for plastics, 25% for glass and 34% for metals, according to the most recent data from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

A recent survey by the American Forest and Paper Association found that 94% of Americans have access to community paper recycling programs, and 79% have access to curbside recycling. The environmental commitment of citizens, businesses and communities combined with the paper industry's infrastructure investments, support of nationwide recycling programs and consumer education efforts, make paper the most recycled material in the U.S. municipal solid waste stream. That's real-world circularity in action.

For more information about the circular life cycle of paper and Two Sides, be sure to visit our website at twosidesna.org. And don't forget to catch us next time on Three Minutes with Two Sides.