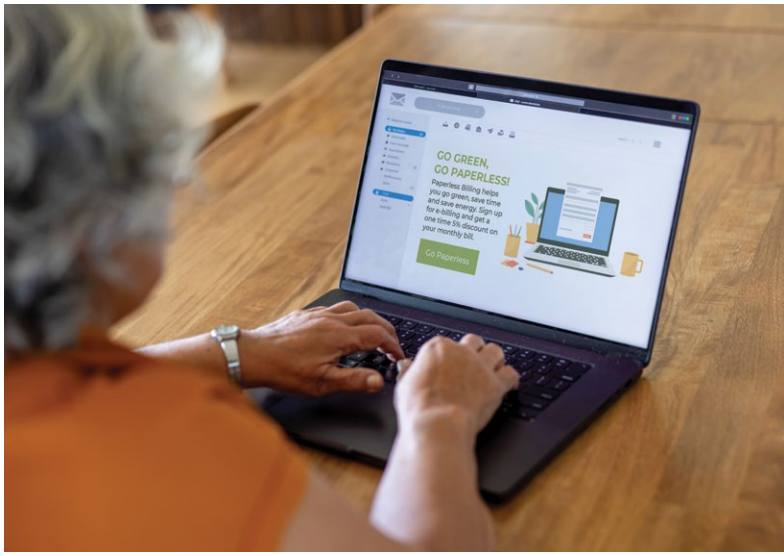
Do You Know the Facts About Greenwashing?

Consumers are paying more attention than ever to how their choices affect the environment—and they often look to trusted organizations for guidance. But not every environmental claim tells the full story. Greenwashing is when companies exaggerate or misrepresent their environmental efforts, making it seem like they're doing more for the planet than they really are. Let's break down what greenwashing really means and how to spot it.



Paperless Claims and the Problem of Greenwashing

Many leading companies are urging their customers to go paperless with broad, unsubstantiated claims that suggest paperless bills, statements and other electronic communications are better for the environment. These types of statements are **greenwashing** – they are not specific, not supported by reliable scientific evidence or life cycle assessment and are misleading because they imply that electronic communication always has less effect on the environment than printed materials.

Examples of greenwashing:

1. Go paperless, save trees!
2. Sign up for paperless billing and help the environment.
3. Help us lower our carbon footprint and yours - sign up for paperless billing.

Greenwashing Costs Family-Supporting Jobs

Companies that make these types of unsubstantiated environmental claims not only mislead consumers – they pose a serious threat to the economic security of more than 2 million people in the North American paper, printing and mailing sector whose livelihoods depend on paper.

A study by Two Sides North America and global research firm Censuswide found that **65% of American consumers who have seen anti-paper greenwashing messages from their service providers were influenced to switch from paper bills and statements to electronic communication**.

> **Greenwashing** is defined as "To mislead the public by falsely representing a person, company, product, etc., as being environmentally responsible." (Oxford Dictionary) or "behavior or activities that make people believe that a company is doing more to protect the environment than it really is" (Cambridge Dictionary).

The Myth: Going paperless saves trees and stops deforestation.

The Fact: Sustainable paper use supports responsible forest management.

Sustainable Paper Supports Healthy Forests

Contrary to the idea that using paper destroys forests, strong demand for sustainably sourced paper provides a powerful financial incentive for forest owners to manage their land responsibly and keep it forested instead of selling it or permanently converting it to non-forest uses, like agriculture or urban development.

In North America, we grow many more trees than we harvest. Net forest area in the United States increased by approximately 10 million acres between 2000 and 2025, an area equivalent to around 1,100 NFL football fields every day.[1] Canada's net forest area was quite stable at approximately 900 million acres from 1990 - 2024.[2] 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.

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Papermaking is an Inherently Sustainable Process

Paper is one of the most recycled materials in North America. The paper industry sustainably grows and regrows its own raw material: wood fiber from trees. Most of the energy for the process is derived from renewable carbon neutral biofuel. Paper manufacturers clean and return about 90% of the water used in the process to the environment. The rest of the water evaporates or remains in the paper products.[3]

The miniaturization of electronic devices today, alongside the 'invisible' nature of digital infrastructure and cloud-based services cause people to vastly underestimate the environmental footprint of electronic communication. Production of electronic devices involves environmentally intensive mining of finite raw materials like iron, copper and rare earth minerals. It uses massive and growing amounts of predominately fossil fuel energy to manufacture and operate devices and the server farms that support them. Finally, the process generates an enormous and growing amount of e-waste, where very little can be reused or recycled.

The Myth: Paper is wasteful and bad for the environment.

The Fact: Paper is one of the most recycled materials in the U.S., supported by a renewable fiber system that reduces landfill waste and greenhouse gas emissions.

Paper Recycling: Maximizing Resources While Protecting the Environment

Contrary to the idea that paper products are wasteful, they are recycled more than any other material in the United States.[4] The U.S. recovers 60% - 64% of its paper products for recycling, and that number jumps to 69% - 74% for cardboard boxes.[5]

> 60% - 64% of paper is recycled in the United States.

> Recycling 1 ton of paper saves 3.3 cubic yards of landfill space.

The United States is close to the maximum achievable paper recovery rate because some paper products are permanently removed from the fiber cycle and cannot be recovered, including hygiene products, medical supplies and items that are stored for long periods of time such as books and archived records.

Some suggest that only recycled fiber should be used to manufacture paper products, but that's a practical impossibility. Every time paper is recycled, the fibers get shorter and weaker. After being recycled 5 to 7 times, the fibers often become too weak to bond into new paper. Fresh wood fiber must be continually introduced into the system to sustain paper production and retain the strength and quality of the overall fiber supply.[6]

> The pulp and paper sector is one of the lowest industrial emitters of greenhouse gasses, accounting for an estimated 0.6% of total emissions in the United States.[6]

The benefits of paper recycling include extending the supply of a valuable natural resources (wood fiber), saving landfill space and avoiding greenhouse gas emissions (methane) released when paper decomposes in landfills.

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The Myth: Electronic communication is better for the environment than paper-based communication.

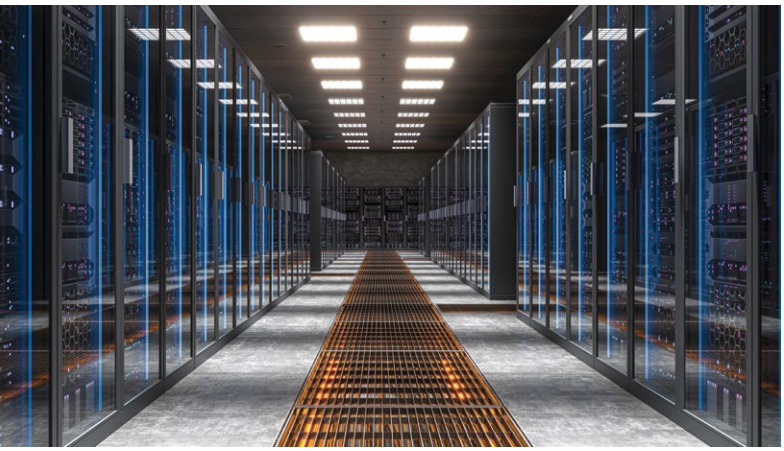
The Fact: Electronic communication has a growing environmental footprint due to energy use, emissions, and electronic waste.

The Growing Environmental Footprint of Electronic Communication

Electronic communication has a vast and growing environmental footprint. By 2028, North America is estimated to have over 500 million internet users, up from 400 million in 2020.[7]

Total annual U.S. electricity consumption hit a record high in 2024, and that ceiling could rise if data centers continue expanding at their current pace. Some projections expect electricity consumption at U.S. data centers to more than double by 2030.[8]

Since data centers are often geographically concentrated, they can significantly strain the power grids. In 2023, data centers consumed about 26% of the total electricity supply in Virginia and significant shares of the supply in North Dakota (15%), Nebraska (12%), Iowa (11%) and Oregon (11%).[9] This level of growth can have a significant impact on data center carbon dioxide emissions as well as water resources and electricity costs for consumers.



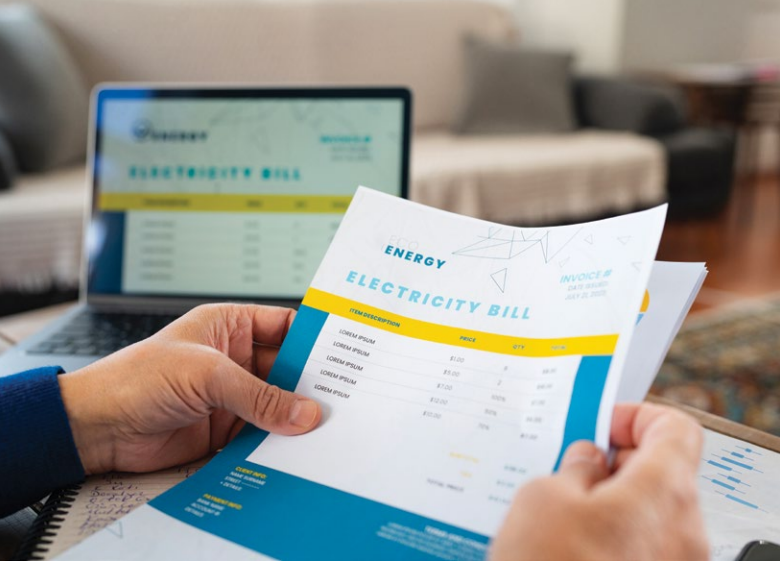
The U.S. and Canada annually generate 7.9 million metric tons (Mt) of electronic waste or 21 kilograms (kg) per capita. Of that 7.9 Mt, the U.S. generates 7.2 Mt and Canada generates 0.7 Mt. 52% of e-waste in North America is recycled, but globally it is closer to 22%.[10]

Most e-waste is managed outside formal collection and recycling schemes. This has a direct and severe impact on the environment and people's health.[11]

Misleading Environmental Claims Often Fall Short of Standards

Environmental claims about products and services are not just marketing—they're subject to strict rules. The U.S. Federal Trade Commission requires that claims be truthful, specific, and supported by competent, reliable scientific evidence. Broad, unqualified statements like "environmentally friendly" or "green" are considered deceptive because they can mislead consumers into thinking a product has far-reaching or complete environmental benefits. Similarly, ISO 14021 standards emphasize that self-declared environmental claims must be accurate, relevant to the specific product or service, verifiable, and clearly indicate whether the claim applies to the whole product, a component, or packaging. Using symbols like leaves, trees, or the globe is only acceptable if there's a direct, verifiable link to the environmental benefit claimed.

Learn how to spot credible environmental claims and avoid greenwashing at The FTC Green Guides and ISO14021 Environmental Labels & Declarations



The Right to Choose

Some companies are defaulting consumers to online communication, without a choice, to save costs. It's important that banks, utilities, telecom companies and other service providers understand that for many consumers, printed communication is not a choice – it's a necessity. A 2025 study by Broadband Now reported that more than 22% of Americans do not have broadband internet access. In addition, many who have access to internet service cannot afford it. Consumers in rural areas without broadband infrastructure and many among our most vulnerable populations – older Americans, those with disabilities and low-income individuals – depend on printed bills, statements and other important communications.

A 2025 survey of American consumers commissioned by Two Sides and conducted by the international research firm Toluna showed that:

80% Believe they should have the right to choose how they receive communications (printed or electronically) from financial organizations and service providers

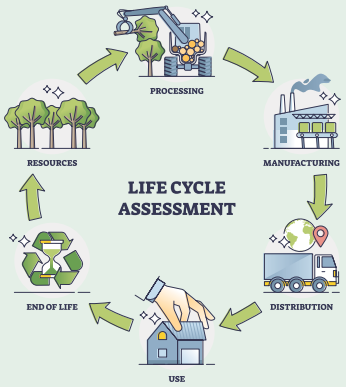
41% Don't pay attention to most online marketing advertisements

65% Are concerned with online security - that personal information held electronically is at risk of being hacked or stolen

Socially responsible companies should not deny the right of consumers to choose how they receive important communications – on paper or electronically – and should not implement surcharges or make it difficult for consumers to receive paper communications.

Which Is Better for the Environment – Print on Paper or Digital Communication?

The simple answer is that both have environmental impacts. A comprehensive, science-based life cycle assessment (LCA) that conforms to the internationally recognized ISO 14040 standard for LCA studies is the only way to determine what those impacts truly are.



ISO defines LCA as a compilation and evaluation of the inputs, outputs and the potential environmental impacts of a product throughout its life cycle. A study that conforms to ISO standards carefully defines the specific products that are bring compared, what they are designed to do, and sets specific study boundaries around those products. For example, the LCA for a paper billing statement would evaluate data from the specific mill that manufactured the paper, considering factors such as raw materials, chemicals, water and energy consumption, type of energy used, greenhouse gas emissions released and so on. With this level of specificity, what's true for one paper product is highly unlikely to be true for another.

ISO conformance also requires that an LCA undergoes an independent critical review by a third-party panel of three experts whose job it is to examine and comment on the integrity of the study at various stages in the process.

Because LCA evaluations can be costly and time-consuming, some companies resort to using generic online environmental calculators to try to validate their claims that electronic billing and other types of digital customer communications are better for the environment than print on paper. Such online calculators are typically free, user friendly and deliver immediate results. But unlike LCAs, which evaluate product-specific data, online calculators use generic data and overly broad assumptions that lead to questionable results and misleading environmental claims – greenwashing.

Why Avoid Greenwashing?

1. Greenwashing, the use of environmental claims that are vague and not backed by competent and reliable scientific evidence, violates environmental marketing standards established by the U.S. Federal Trade Commission, the Canadian Competition Bureau/Canadian Standards Association, the International Organization for Standardization (ISO 14021) and the United Nations Environment Program.
2. Greenwashing distracts from a company's legitimate environmental initiatives and can damage corporate reputation when misleading claims are exposed.
3. Respected companies that use unsubstantiated environmental claims have a damaging effect on consumer perceptions of paper and put at risk the livelihoods of more than 2 million people in the North American paper, printing and mail sector.

Two Sides welcomes the opportunity to speak with any organization that is interested in making well-informed decisions and assuring that its environmental marketing claims related to print on paper are supported by the facts.

How to Report a Greenwashing Claim

Two Sides is the only organization that directly challenges major corporations, government agencies and other organizations that mislead consumers by making unsubstantiated environmental claims about the production and use of paper. If you see misleading environmental claims about paper products, please fill out our Greenwashing form. To learn more or report greenwashing visit: https://twosidesna.org/anti-greenwash-campaign/

Sources

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About Two Sides North America

Two Sides North America is part of the non-profit Two Sides global network which includes more than 600 member companies across North America, South America, Europe, Australia and South Africa. Our member companies span the Graphic Communications and Paper-based Packaging value chain, including forestry, pulp, paper, paper-based packaging, chemicals and inks, pre-press, press, finishing, printing, publishing, envelopes and postal operations.

Our mission is to dispel common environmental misconceptions and to educate businesses and consumers with engaging factual information about the environmental sustainability and value of print, paper and paper-based packaging.

For more information visit **www.twosidesna.org**.

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