

State's recycled paper trail not so green for climate

Tom Knudson, Sacramento Bee, 11-9-09

Near Mark Oldfield's desk at the California Department of Conservation sits a ream of copy paper that is more than a routine office commodity.

Made in part from recycled fiber, it is a symbol of the state's green spirit, one ream among thousands backing the department's claim that it is a champion of the environment – and complies with state law requiring it to buy recycled paper.

There is a dark side to those sheets of bright, white paper: the part that isn't recycled comes from trees logged in the biologically rich but endangered forests of Indonesia.

Oldfield, a public affairs officer, was not aware of the connection until contacted by The Bee. Now that he knows, Oldfield said his office will not buy anymore and may try to return the unused reams.

"We're required to buy this type of paper," he said. "And that's what we did."

California has a worldwide reputation as a leader in global warming, more so than any other state. But an ongoing Bee investigation has found some of the state's choices – such as failing to evaluate environmental costs of printer ink cartridge recycling and allowing its employees to travel on the dime of energy companies – raise questions about the effectiveness of its efforts.

The state law requiring agencies to buy large quantities of paper with a minimum of 30 percent recycled content is another seemingly green choice that may be backfiring on the climate.

Over the past two decades, that mandate has helped achieve one of the bedrock missions of the environmental movement: keeping as much scrap paper from piling up in landfills as possible. But the state makes no effort to track the carbon footprint of its policies.

In fact, records obtained by The Bee through the California Public Records Act indicate the state – which purchases about 6 million pages of office copy paper a day and recycles much of it – actually knows little about the full impact of recycled paper.

"There is on-going controversy regarding ... post-consumer recycled content in paper products," says a June 24 Department of General Services memo. "We do not understand the process ... or its environmental impact."

Wisdom of mandate argued

Like offices everywhere, the state consumes a blizzard of copy paper. About 3.2 million reams, each containing 500 sheets – 1.6 billion in all – were bought last year, state officials estimate. Lay those pages end-to-end and they would reach around the world 11 times.

One of the largest worries is that relying on recycled paper without reducing consumption will hasten climate change because the paper is shipped in from distant locations, increasing greenhouse gas pollution. Nearly all of the paper the state recycles, in turn, is shipped back out again, generating still more greenhouse gas.

"The world is going to fry because we want to buy recycled fiber from the wrong sources around the world and ignore the transportation impacts," said Stan Rhodes, president of Scientific Certification Systems, a Bay Area company that verifies green standards for Starbucks, Home Depot and other companies.

Yalmaz Siddiqui, director of environmental strategy for Office Depot, a major supplier of recycled paper to California from sources in the southern United States and Wisconsin, has urged the state to be skeptical about Rhodes' concerns.

"It's very dangerous to open up the notion that 'recycled is not good' to the marketplace," Siddiqui wrote in an April 27 e-mail to the Department of General Services.

"Yes, Stan will be able to find specific examples where recycling loops cause additional carbon," Siddiqui added. "We need to be very careful that these examples do not confuse the marketplace and force people to simply give up buying green altogether because they don't know what the right 'green' thing to do is."

Currently, about \$7 out of every \$10 state agencies spend on paper buys paper with 30 percent or higher recycled content – exceeding the legal requirement that half of such spending be for recycled paper. Some agencies – including California Environmental Protection Agency, the state Integrated Waste Management Board and the Department of General Services – even buy 100 percent recycled-content paper.

Conservation focus shifting

California's State Agency Buy Recycled Campaign grew out of legislation passed in 1989, when times were simpler. Garbage was the enemy. Almost no one talked about global warming.

Now that the state is a leader in the war against climate change and seeking to shrink its carbon footprint, some say it's time to adapt and measure the effort's climate impact.

"You can't automatically assume recycled content is good," said Robert Tetz, former manager of the state's environmentally preferable purchasing program at a conference this spring.

"You have to be careful about the energy and environmental impacts we incur in the process of recycling," he continued. "When we talk about what's green, a lot of the 100 percent-recycled paper we're buying in California is not green."

Chris Peck, director of the office of public affairs at the California Integrated Waste Management Board, which oversees the Buy Recycled campaign, said agency staffers are interested but must remain focused on their legislative mission.

"Because of our statutory responsibility, which is to keep material out of the landfill, we have to filter what we see and learn through that lens," Peck said.

Tetz convened a June meeting on the subject with paper specialists.

"There is growing debate regarding the wisdom of our many choices," he said in an April e-mail invitation.

At the meeting, Rhodes – the green certification specialist – displayed slides and data suggesting the state's carbon footprint actually grows larger when it buys recycled paper from distant mills.

"Is the (recycled content) law counterproductive for global warming?" Rhodes asked in an interview. "Yes. It's insane. ... It has ignored the fact we're in a climate crisis. And stubbornly the state of California refuses to deal with it."

Others challenge his assertions. "Some of the information doesn't make sense," said Susan Kinsella, executive director of Conservatree, a nonprofit that promotes the purchase of recycled-content paper.

"When you produce recycled paper, you're reducing the amount of energy overall that's used; you reduce what goes into landfills," said Kinsella, who attended the June meeting. "If paper goes into landfills, it produces methane, which is 25 times the strength of carbon dioxide."

Minutes of the June session show that interest was high: "Scott Harvey, DGS chief deputy director ... commented on the importance of the topic of discussion and expressed strong support for our efforts from the Director all the way to the Governor's office."

The minutes also note that Tetz hoped that in-depth study – known as a life-cycle impact analysis – would grow from the meeting, to sort out competing claims and scrutinize all of the environmental impacts of recycled paper.

Instead, Tetz was transferred to another job in September after complaining that a state printer ink cartridge recycling program was less eco-friendly than refilling and re-using them. At the time, his boss said the transfer was not related to his criticism.

"I did not have the necessary support here at the Department of General Services," he wrote in an e-mail to meeting participants apologizing for the lack of action. "At least we tried."

Jeffrey Young, deputy director for public affairs at General Services, said officials would like to have an in-depth paper study done – and actually solicited bids for one earlier this year – but were unable to proceed because of the state's budget crisis.

Conserving and recycling

There is a far more certain way for state employees to help forests, landfills and climate, according to Rhodes: Don't hit the print button.

"Don't use paper," he said. "Only use paper when you want to archive."

Indeed, some e-mails sent by state employees now contain a green logo that says: "Please consider the environment before printing."

Nonetheless, thousands of tons of scrap paper find their way every month from state recycling bins and loading docks to a 3-acre industrial site in south Sacramento, where it is sorted and bundled for shipment to China on fossil fuel-powered ocean tankers.

What happens once it gets to China is not clear, but paper industry officials say little comes back to California as recycled office paper. Instead, they said, much of it is made into cardboard, tissue paper and paper plates, at paper mills powered by polluting coal-fired power plants.

Dave Kuhnen, general manager of the Sacramento facility, Recycling Industries, recently walked through gigantic mounds and bales of paper speckled with state trash, from a Department of Fish and Game manual on waterfowl and upland game hunting regulations to unused Department of Motor Vehicles change of address forms.

"Recycling is always better," said Kuhnen. "Anytime you can reduce the demand for the Earth's resources, and keep material out of the landfill, I think we are better off."

It is not a panacea, however. Some pulp from trees always will be a necessary part of the paper-making process because the microscopic fibers that bind it together eventually break down.

"One hundred percent post-consumer recycled content paper isn't sustainable," said Andrew Hurst, a waste management specialist at the California Integrated Waste Management Board. "If everybody did it ... we wouldn't have paper.

"A piece of fiber is only good for about seven turns," Hurst said. "And then it is so short, it comes out in the wash and is part of the sludge."

Paper's sources questioned

Dwelling on the recycled content of paper overlooks other critical issues, according to Jim Butler, director of procurement at the Department of General Services.

"There is nothing inherently wrong with 100 percent, or 30 percent," Butler said. "We have to get beyond what percent recycled it is (to) where the source is, and what are the feed stocks that are contributing to this."

Interviews and records obtained by The Bee show that the state buys recycled paper from at least two companies that environmentalists say are logging in destructive ways.

One is International Paper, which operates across the American South. Last year, dozens of state agencies, departments and other jurisdictions, from the California Conservation Corps to the Governor's Office, bought at least 20,000 reams of paper – or 10 million pages – made in IP mills.

"IP is known for some of the most egregious practices in the region, including large-scale clear-cutting and conversion of natural forests to plantations," said Scott Quaranda, campaign director for the Dogwood Alliance, a North Carolina environmental group.

Kathleen Bark, an IP spokeswoman, disputed that. "International Paper has a long history of responsible forest practices," she said in an e-mail. "When we owned forest lands, we continually balanced the growing and harvesting of trees with protecting biodiversity. ... Although we no longer own forest lands, we have continued our commitment to sustainable forestry."

The other company targeted by environmentalists is Asia Pulp and Paper, which has extensive operations in Indonesia and manufactures the 30 percent recycled content paper called Exceedo purchased in June by the Department of Conservation.

When those five boxes of paper – containing 50 reams – arrived in the state office wrapped in greenish paper with a leafy motif, they certainly looked eco-friendly.

But Lafcadio Cortesi, forest campaign director for the Rain Forest Action Network in San Francisco, said the company's logging practices are so harmful that his organization and others have persuaded major U.S. retailers to stop selling its paper.

"It's some of the worst forest destruction in the world," said Cortesi, who has visited Indonesia several times. Because carbon-rich peat lands are logged and converted to plantations – releasing greenhouse gases into the atmosphere in the process – it is bad for global warming, too, he said.

Asked about the state's purchase, Cortesi said: "They need to do their due diligence. If you do any homework at all, Indonesia pops up with a big red flag."

Oldfield, the Department of Conservation spokesman, said his office was focusing instead on recycled content.

"We were consuming a paper with certain guidelines – 30 percent recycled content – without knowing the background of the manufacturer," he said. "It's not something we would typically look into."

They also were focusing on price. Each case cost the department \$32.98 – the lowest of four bids solicited.

Now, Oldfield said, the office is debating what to do with the 30 or so reams of paper that remain.

"We are going to see if we can return it," he said.

That would mean contacting Burkett's Office Supplies on Younger Creek Drive in Sacramento where owner Randy Mael said he also sold some of the paper to the Department of Health Services.

Mael said he was not aware of any problem with it.

"We buy 50,000 different products," Mael said. "We are a company with 30 people. Unfortunately, we just don't have the time to research all the products that we buy."

But, he added, "I don't have any interest in harming the environment. ... If it was found that this was something that – according to reliable standards – was harming the environment, we wouldn't sell it."