

ENVIRONMENTAL FOOTPRINT COMPARISON TOOL

A tool for understanding environmental decisions related to the pulp and paper industry



SOLID WASTE

EFFECTS OF RECYCLED FIBER USE ON SOLID WASTE

Municipal Solid Waste Generation

The paper and paperboard that is recovered for recycling comes from a variety of sources. In some cases, it is difficult to know whether in the absence of recycling the recovered material would have been disposed – and if disposed, whether it would have been landfilled or handled some other way. Because about 80% of non-recovered municipal solid waste (MSW) in the U.S. is landfilled (USEPA n.d.), it is often assumed that new supplies of recovered fiber will be diverted from landfills. It is important, however, to understand that increased demand in one sector of the industry will not only help divert fiber from landfills, it will also increase competition for current supplies of recovered fiber, potentially causing reductions in recovered fiber use in other sectors of the industry (Metafore 2006).

From the standpoint of understanding the trade-offs and co-benefits of recycling, it is usually not necessary to become involved in the “pre-consumer” vs. “post-consumer” debate because essentially all pre-consumer material is already being recycled due to its relative cleanliness and ease of collection. Incremental increases will probably be derived from what are commonly considered “post-consumer” sources. On average, at the national level, increasing the use of recovered fiber by one ton is often assumed to reduce the amount of municipal solid waste being landfilled by 0.8 tons since about 80% of non-recovered MSW is landfilled. As implied above, this does not consider the potential for some sectors to shift from recovered fiber to virgin fiber, as they might do if competition for recovered fiber resulted in higher prices for this source of raw material. In addition, the benefits estimated for national average conditions do not represent the situation in specific regions because MSW management practices vary significantly from place to place. The implications of MSW management methods are discussed in more detail in the options for managing solid waste section.

References

Metafore. 2006. *The fiber cycle technical document. Metafore summary report.*
<http://postcom.org/eco/sls.docs/Metafore-Paper%20Fiber%20Life%20Cycle.pdf>

United States Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA). n.d.
<http://www.epa.gov/epawaste/nonhaz/municipal/msw99.htm>.