

The Times Left it Out: Making Toilet Tissue from Trees Means There Are More Trees, not fewer.

by Kurt Schaefer, VP Fiber, RISI

BOSTON, MA, March 5, 2009 (Viewpoint) - Late last month the New York Times carried an [article](#) on renewed efforts by a large environmental NGO to urge consumers of toilet paper in North America to switch away from products that it rates as environmentally unfriendly. According to the article, America's "national obsession" with soft TP has a number of negative environmental effects, with the use of virgin woodfiber being the most extensively discussed in the piece.

I read the article with special interest because I was interviewed by the reporter for the Times a couple of times in the week before the article was published. And as I told the reporter, I (and RISI) take no stand on the issue of use of recovered paper versus virgin woodfiber. I head up economic analysis for both pulp and recovered paper at RISI, and we have many customers on both sides of the aisle. But I did read the article with some concern, as I thought it painted a somewhat distorted picture of what is no doubt a very emotional issue for some people. In email messages with the reporter leading up to publication, I outlined some reasons why the issue should be painted in shades of gray rather than stark black and white. They were suggestions that were mostly put aside. Instead, the piece read a bit like an indictment and included the type of categorical imperative ("No forest of any kind should be used to make toilet paper," quoting another NGO) that often leads people in the wrong direction on policy issues. I have no claim over what does or does not appear in the Times, so I thought this forum might be a good place to make a couple of those points.

First, an alarm went off in my head when one of the first questions the reporter raised was whether South American pulp producers use wood from tropical rainforests to make pulp for tissue and other products. I am quite familiar with this question, because when I tell acquaintances outside the pulp and paper industry that I work with and visit Brazilian pulp producers and their operations, I am often met with a swift condemnation of the use of tropical rainforests to make paper products. So I was ready for the question, and followed up in an email to reaffirm my point:

"No wood pulp in Brazil that I know of (and certainly none that is exported) is made from wood from tropical rainforests. I would at this point almost put this into the category of an urban legend. And the facts are so easily checked, I wonder why people do not bother." *

As it turned out, there was no mention of the tropical rainforest "myth" in the article. On the one hand, it is gratifying that a false charge was not repeated. On the other hand, the article was an opportunity for a prominent newspaper to clear up a common misconception, but this did not happen, even as a passing comment.

Of greater concern is the disconnect that I find between the headline of the article ("Rough on Forests") and the fact that a very large amount of wood fiber (and a growing share worldwide) is grown on tree plantations, on land that would not otherwise be forested. I made this point I in my email follow ups:

"The plantations that I have seen in Brazil were established on degraded pastureland that was basically economically idle before the plantations were established. If people were not buying the products that are made with these trees, the trees would never have been planted. So the "save a tree" argument does not apply here, certainly to the extent that plantation-grown trees are concerned. And tree plantations are more common than you might think. They are very common in the US South, for example." *

To me, this is a fundamental question: Does consuming wood-based paper lead to more or fewer trees existing in the world? If they are planted on plantations as described above, then the answer is more. Plantations are mentioned in the article, but the dots are not connected. How can using plantation-grown woodfiber be "rough on forests" that would not exist if they had not been planted in order to make paper? The same logic holds for many managed natural forests: If there were not an economic return to maintaining them for lumber and/or paper production, more would be converted to agricultural use or golf courses or vacation home sites. Again, the record by now shows rather clearly that more paper means there are more trees, not fewer.

Now, there are many good things about using recovered paper to make paper products. But there are also limits to how many times paper can be recycled, and the recent sharp downturn in consumption of woodfree papers in North America raises some questions about longer-term availability of the type of recycled fiber that is used in products such as toilet tissue. Moreover, well-managed tree farms and managed natural forests are not an environmental danger and the commercial activities around them (lumber as well as pulp and paper) help to sustain many rural communities around the world. (In fact the "old growth" fiber used to produce the northern softwood kraft pulp comes largely from sawmill residuals.) And in terms of carbon sequestration, more trees are preferred to fewer.

All of which is very controversial in some camps but seems very reasonable to me. Yet at some level I hesitate to make the points above, because some day I am likely to be at a class reunion and see someone who has Googled me (and other former classmates) and found this article, and they will be quite sure that I have gone over to the dark side, because no amount of reason can get some people beyond the formulation that "using paper means fewer trees." The Times decided to turn up the level of emotion in that type of encounter, rather than tone it down. This industry would benefit from an accelerated effort to put forth all of the facts, in a balanced and credible way that would be appreciated by an educated and critical public, as this issue is certain to intensify.