

Sprint, Staples, Kimberly-Clark: the litmus test for wheat-straw paper

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Wheat straw is often burned or landfilled to make room for new crops. Using it for paper could create a "second harvest" for farming communities.

Most people equate paper with cutting down trees, but an abundant eco-alternative covers literally tens of millions of acres across the North American prairies.

Wheat straw, typically burned or landfilled by farmers to make way for new crops, is slowly gaining credibility as a durable replacement for virgin and recycled fiber from trees. The latest evidence comes from Sprint, which will test wheat straw paper made by Prairie Paper -- the Canadian startup co-founded by actor Woody Harrelson (<http://stepforwardpaper.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/WH-Fortune-9-23-13.pdf>) -- in customer mailings. Office supplies company Staples and tissue manufacturer Kimberly-Clark likewise have committed to this "rapidly renewable" source of fiber.

"This is about creating business choices," said Keanon Swan, manager of strategy partner relationships and postal alliances for Sprint.

Over the next several months, Sprint will substitute wood-derived paper with a product called Step Forward Paper that is made of 80 percent wood straw waste and 20 percent Forest Stewardship Council certified fiber. Approximately 2.5 million customer letters and other correspondence will be printed. This is just a small portion of what Sprint will mail during that time period.

Still, Sprint has already reduced its dependence on paper (<http://www.greenbiz.com/blog/2012/06/13/sprint-pushes-envelope-paper-waste>) substantially, by reducing the overall weight of paper purchased for customer communications and other corporate functions by 83 percent since 2007. By the end of 2017, 100 percent of the paper it buys will come from sources certified by the Forest Stewardship Council. What's more, it's pushing for that supply to include at least 25 percent recycled content.

"Purchasing paper that contains post-consumer waste helps reduce demand for virgin resources and to provide market incentives that reduce the flow of paper waste to landfills," the company writes in its procurement policy ([//localhost/Users/MissHeather/Downloads/CRSprintPaperPrintProcurementPolicy05022014.pdf](http://localhost/Users/MissHeather/Downloads/CRSprintPaperPrintProcurementPolicy05022014.pdf)).

Sprint got the idea of trying wheat straw through connections with Staples and Canopy (<http://canopyplanet.org/>), an environmental non-profit dedicated to forest conservation that works with close to 750 of the biggest paper consumers worldwide. "Our role has been catalyzer, cheer squad and speed dater," said Canopy Founder and Executive Director Nichole Rycroft when I spoke with her about the Sprint initiative.

Why wheat straw?

The seeds for the wheat straw movement were sown about two decades ago, said Jeff Golfman, co-founder, president and chief marketing officer for Prairie Paper. The Canadian company, based in Winnipeg, Manitoba, was intrigued by the potential to turn what is commonly considered a source of farm waste into a revenue source for local communities. Environmental assessments have shown that Step Forward requires 65 percent less land to create one ton of paper than virgin paper.

Wheat straw is commonly to make paper in countries including China and India, but the North American market is more skeptical. "Advertisers and consumers might have different expectations," Rycroft said.

Sprint will evaluate a number of factors during its test -- starting with how well the wheat straw paper stands up during the printing process. It will need to withstand high temperatures and high-speed insertion equipment, Swan said.

From an expense standpoint, using Step Forward currently cost about as much as using paper that contains 30 percent post-consumer waste, Golfman said. That's in part because right now, Prairie Paper is manufacturing the product overseas and shipping it to North America.

The ultimate vision is to construct mills near farming communities where wheat straw waste is abundant, he said. Processing the fiber requires a completely different set of equipment: for pulping, processing and bleaching. "As soon as the pulp hits the head box of the machine, everything else is the same," Golfman said.

Taking a risk

Other big companies getting behind wheat straw paper including Staples, which began stocking approximately two years ago. The office retailer estimates that for every two boxes of Step Forward Paper consumed, one tree is saved.

Kimberly-Clark is using wheat straw, along with bamboo, for a series of products that use 20 percent plant fiber instead of tree fiber or recycled paper. The items include tissue paper and paper towels. The company is sourcing straw for the GreenHarvest line directly from farmers.

"By creating a new, beneficial use for wheat straw, Kimberly-Clark Professional is providing an economic boost for farmers, adding value to our state's largest crop, and helping us reduce agricultural waste," said Aaron Harries, vice president of research and operations for the Kansas Wheat Commission, in a statement.

Diversifying the fiber basket is an important step in slowing deforestation related to paper production (<http://www.greenbiz.com/article/forestry-change-domtar-international-paper-bring-sustainability-paper>), Rycroft said.

In North America alone, some estimates suggest that there is enough wheat straw waste generated annually to support 13 midsize mills. More companies are investigating the option, and Sprint's gesture represents "the kind of bold leadership that you need to get disruptive solutions to market, at scale," she said.

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