

Using more paper is good for resource efficiency, renewable energy and European competitiveness

European paper and board industries refute results of recent PlasticsEurope study on Resource Efficiency when applied to paper

Increased consumption of paper products and the substitution of paper in place of synthetic materials such as plastics would be beneficial to European targets for competitiveness and sustainability.

Why?

- European paper industries are a model for combining sustainability and competitiveness with proven environmental performance. The main indicator of the paper industry's success is the fact that paper and board production can show absolute decoupling with all essential indicators between economic growth and environmental impact.
- This is due not only to significant investments in better production processes, but also to the unique nature of paper as a natural and recyclable material produced from a fully renewable raw material. In fact, the European paper industry is the leading recycler in Europe.
- In many areas of energy efficiency, such as renewable energy sources and combined heat and power production, paper is a European model industry.
- Paper can be produced with domestic raw materials and energy, both vitally important factors in the economic and social pillars of sustainability.

LCA vulnerable to misinterpretation

In the recent PlasticsEurope study on Resource Efficiency, the choice of system boundaries may have had a large impact on the results published.

- PlasticsEurope has chosen a time perspective that is too short for emissions from land filled plastics to arise, but allows emissions from easily degradable materials such as wood and paper to be included to a large extent.
- The problem can be easily illustrated with one product, a carrier bag, considered in the PlasticsEurope study: If the time perspective chosen would be short enough for methane emissions to be negligible in all materials, then a paper bag would save 262 g CO₂ per each kilogramme of plastic avoided. The results would be equally favourable for paper bags if the time period chosen were long enough to allow for the emissions from plastics to occur.
- European paper industries call for harmonised EU calculation methods for Life-Cycle Assessment (LCA) to prevent this kind of possible misinterpretation of LCA.



Flawed by unrealistic assumptions and incomparable data

The European paper industries consider that the PlasticsEurope study is flawed by unrealistic assumptions, such as the amount of paper disposed on landfills.

- In reality paper is recycled in large volumes and increasingly diverted from landfills to paper production. Equally the assumption of no energy recovery of landfill gases is not realistic.
- More seriously, the data for different materials are not comparable. For example the energy demand and emissions data for paper packaging used were mainly ten years old whereas the data for plastics is more up to date.
- Statistics show that in paper packaging volume is growing faster than weight due to the success of paper producers and converters in reducing paper weight, while maintaining or even improving the good physical properties of paper. At the same time, energy efficiency has increased significantly. This also applies to other paper and board products.
- The study states that the equivalent of a huge number of oil tankers would be necessary to feed the extra energy allegedly needed for substituting plastics. In reality if paper were to be substituted for plastics, 60 per cent of the total energy described by the study would be domestic renewable energy. **Thus contributing to the EU-15 Kyoto target not jeopardising it.** In some applications such as packaging the share of renewable energy would be as high as 89 per cent.

And as the raw material for paper itself is renewable, the oil tankers mentioned would be more likely to lie empty if paper materials in Europe substituted plastics.

Background

In the report “the Contribution of Plastic Products to Resource Efficiency” GUA, Gesellschaft für umfassende Analysen GmbH, commissioned by PlasticsEurope, have estimated how energy use and emissions of greenhouse gases would be affected if the total market of plastic products in Western Europe would be substituted by products of other materials, with the same function.

If you are interested in learning more about the European paper and paper packaging industries and their contribution to sustainability and reducing climate change, log on to: www.cepi.org and www.citpa-europe.org