Recycling is a vital part of European paper production. In fact, it’s no exaggeration to say that the European paper industry is a champion in recycling. The paper industry has been recycling used paper and board for over 700 years, turning used paper products into new ones. The used papers are collected from households, industry and commerce and their fibres are recycled by the paper industry several times to produce new high-quality goods, fit for purpose, and not necessarily the same as before.

This is the perfect example of a circular economy, with the sector reaching a 70% recycling rate and aspiring to close the loop for the remaining potential, which today is not collected or exported outside Europe. And because full recycling potential is actually around 78% rather than 100%, since some products cannot be collected or recycled, it makes that 70% quite an achievement. The industry also thrives on adding further value to the residues from the recycling process. And when recycled fibres can’t be reused any more without an input of fresh fibres to give them strength, those new fibres are sourced from sustainably-managed forests, which are to a large extent certified in Europe.

In the last 20 years, Europe’s recycling rate has grown from 40% to over 70%, close to the maximum which is around 78%.

Source: ERPC, 2013

Together with the organisations in the supply chain of paper for recycling, CEPI has proposed to revise the European standard for grades of paper for recycling – EN 643. The new EN 643 now includes maximum tolerance levels for non-paper components such as metal cans and plastic bottles in deliveries of paper for recycling. This way, non-paper material is sorted out earlier in the supply chain and not only at the paper mill. The resource efficiency benefits are more paper for recycling, less transport and less waste management for the paper mill, which saves resources and costs. At the same time, the sorted out non-paper material can be made available to other value chains using waste.
A new lease of life for a beverage carton

Lucart spa, an Italian papermaker, has developed a process to recover the fibres in used beverage cartons and give them a new lease of life as high-quality tissue products. In so doing, it reduced its own wood consumption and embraced the principles of resource efficiency while turning waste into raw material. In the process, Lucart also recovers the aluminium and polyethylene present in beverage cartons and puts those to good use too. Creating a product patented under the name of ‘ALPE’, these other components of the carton gain a second life with manufacturing companies that use them as a raw material for the production of pallets and articles for the building sector, for example.

And when not busy recycling itself, Lucart is raising awareness among local communities to help improve and increase their separate collections of beverage cartons, reducing the energy and processing it takes to separate the cartons at the mill.

Examples in action:

Closed-loop partnerships

The provincial authority for Friesland in the Netherlands is an example of an organisation that has entered into a closed-loop recycling agreement with a paper mill, in this case, Van Houtum. Customers who buy the mill’s Satino Black hygienic paper enter into a contract with their paper collection company to ensure that their paper for recycling is delivered back to them as a raw material, so the process can start all over again.

More traceability means better quality = resource efficiency

The European paper industry aims to establish a system for identifying all paper for recycling that is recovered, purchased, received, stored and consumed in European paper mills. To this end, Smurfit Kappa is a leader in this area and has set high targets in ensuring bales are clearly identified, including using adhesive labels on every paper bale (see picture below). The system is working well so far and means that Smurfit Kappa can trace paper for recycling from consumption back to the point of delivery. If quality is found wanting, Smurfit Kappa can identify the supplier and ensure the material is sorted to a higher standard next time.

CEPI initiated this Recovered Paper Identification System. Suppliers can register at www.recoveredpaper-ID.eu

More information at www.cepi.org/resourceefficiency