

Why Packaging

Southern Forests & the Packaging Problem

Packaging symbolizes the disposable society we have become. More and more, the piles of packaging we are forced to deal with no longer only serve the essential functions of protecting and transporting goods and products, but instead are about branding, marketing, and sales. As a result, in the U.S. we generate 300 pounds of packaging waste per person each year and 32% of the entire domestic waste stream consists of containers and packaging.

Learn about the negative environmental impacts on Southern forests caused by business as usual packaging and what Dogwood Alliance is going to do about it.

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Why Packaging?

Packaging and Southern Forests

The Southern United States remains the world's largest paper producing region. The mills that produce paper products in this 13-state region have a tremendous impact on our forests. Indeed, every year millions of acres of the South's forests are clearcut to feed the pulp and paper industry. To support these mills across the South, millions of acres of forests have been converted into sterile, row-crop-like pine plantations - a poor biological substitute for the rich diversity of our southern forests. The U.S. Forest Service states that nearly one out of every five acres of Southern forests are now pine plantations. The conversion of our native forests to plantations also brings the associated industrial forestry practices of increased use of toxic fertilizers and herbicides and the potential threat of release of genetically engineered trees which could wreak havoc on our natural forest ecosystems.

While these Southern mills produce a wide variety of paper for products ranging from cigarette paper and newsprint to paper cups and swabs, paper packaging accounts for approximately 25% of all of the wood fiber coming from Southern forests. Across the South, dozens of mills owned by large domestic and international companies produce a laundry list of packaging products: corrugated cardboard boxes, heavy bags for holding cement or dog food, ice cream boxes, milk and juice containers, boxes covering bottles of aspirin and perfume or hair gel, and even the paper boxes for music CDs, video game, and DVDs.

In 2004, more than half of all the paper produced in the United States was used in paper packaging. In other words, more than half of all of the trees, forests, and habitat cut down, chipped up, and pulped became not products, but packaging holding the products consumed in our modern American lifestyle.

Overall, paper is the most frequently used packaging material at 34% of the total packaging industry, with plastic packaging second at 30%. Because the Southern U.S. remains the largest paper producing region in the world, and more than half of all paper production goes to paper packaging, our society's decisions about packaging directly impact Southern forests.

Certainly there are useful functions of packaging—maintaining freshness, providing safety, and protecting products in transport. But far too often goods are egregiously over-packaged, resulting in the needless waste of resources. Who among us has not been frustrated by the sheer quantity of paper packaging left after coming home from the grocery store or the drug store? In many ways, packaging symbolizes the throw-away society that we have become. More and more, the piles of packaging we are forced to deal with no longer only serve the essential functions of protecting and transporting goods and products, but instead represent an extension of a company's branding, marketing and sales strategy. As a result, 300 pounds of packaging waste are generated each year for each person in the United States and 32% of the entire domestic waste stream consists of containers and packaging. The waste is problematic not only in its disposal, but all the way up the supply chain back to the resource extraction that causes, in the case of paper packaging, the clearcutting of forests and all of the associated problems with loss of biodiversity, loss of carbon sinks to combat global warming, and the degradation of water quality.

What is that? Paper Packaging types

The packaging sector can be broken into the following categories:

- * Containerboard: brown corrugated boxes and linerboard, the flat face inside of corrugated boxes
- * Paperboard: folding boxes, food containers, cosmetic boxes, etc.
- * Kraft packaging paper: used for sacks and bags
- * Specialty paper: this could be labels, molded pulp containers (for egg cartons or packaging products), food wrapping paper, etc.

Within the packaging sector, paperboard and more specifically, Solid Bleached Sulfite (SBS) board is of particular concern. SBS is widely used to package well-known consumer branded products such as cosmetics, music cds, and food. It is most likely the white paper packaging box surrounding your bottle of aspirin purchased at the drugstore. Though corrugated containers (brown cardboard boxes) account for the largest share of packaging produced, they also contain the most recycled content and have the highest rates of recovery from the waste stream. Kraft packaging and specialty papers together only account for about 5% of all packaging and its impact is minimal relative to other packaging sectors. On the other hand, SBS, which accounts for 35% of the paperboard market, is especially problematic from an environmental standpoint because it is made exclusively of virgin tree fiber and is generally not recovered from the waste stream.

According to the University of Georgia's Center for Paper Business and Industry Studies, in the 13 states that make up the US Forest Service's Southern Region, there are 96 mills producing paper packaging. As far as impact to the South, one big player rises to the top. International Paper with a focus on consumer packaging owns 5 container board mills and 4 additional consumer paper packaging mills across the South, including Riegelwood Mill near Wilmington, North Carolina which produces 876,000 tons of paperboard per year, Augusta Mill located in Augusta, Georgia, which creates 650,000 tons of paperboard per year, Texarkana Mill located in Texarkana, Texas, which produces 620,000 tons of paperboard per year and Pine Bluff Mill located in Pine Bluff, Arkansas which produces 400,000 tons per year.

Action in the Marketplace

Once this paper packaging leaves the mills in the South, it is transformed into packaged products and placed into the worldwide stream of commerce, emblazoned with corporate brand identities to ultimately reach the hands of a consumer. This is where the opportunity for Dogwood Alliance and concerned people everywhere exists. Because most paper packaging ultimately only serves as a tool for branding the product and not for safe and economical protection of the actual product within, industry can do better without having to redesign or remanufacture particular products.

Once educated about the negative environmental impacts on Southern forests caused by paper packaging in general and made aware about folks' concerns about their packaging, companies will have no reason or excuse for not working to reduce the environmental impact of their products' packaging. When we share the positive impacts of protecting Southern forests and providing for biodiversity, clean water, clean air, and carbon sinks, as well as the negative impacts of their current practices, they will be compelled to move towards better practices. Our voices will reach the large corporate consumers of packaging and they will reduce their impact on the forests. Together with these large packaging customers, we can influence the world's largest producers of packaging to improve the way they do business in the forests. "If the market demands it, they will make it."

Our Voices and Our Actions will Matter

If companies in just the medicine and cosmetics cartons sector switched to 35% post-consumer recycled content, the benefits for our environment and our forests are truly substantial. According to Environmental Defense's Paper Task Force, such a switch would mean saving the equivalent of 510,000 tons of trees per year equal to the amount of trees required to make the copy paper used by 11 million people in one year. In addition, the production of 156,000 tons of greenhouse gas emissions would be avoided, which is the equivalent of removing 27,000 cars driving 200 miles each week from the roads. Wastewater discharges would be reduced by 2.6 billion gallons, the equivalent of eliminating the wastewater from 27,000 households. And finally, 106,000 tons of solid waste would be avoided, the equivalent of the trash generated by 49,000 households in a year.

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