

Paper's Water Footprint

The Facts



The European pulp and paper industry is aware of the importance of efficient and sustainable use of natural resources; including water. Most paper production takes place in locations with low water stress and, while large volumes of water are used, more than 90% of this is returned to the environment after extensive treatment.

Water is essential for society and the paper industry.

Water is essential for everyday life, yet 17 countries, home to one-quarter of the world's population, face "extremely high" levels of baseline water stress, where irrigated agriculture, industries and municipalities withdraw more than 80% of their available supply on average every year.¹

Water stress occurs when the demand for water exceeds the available amount during a certain period or when poor quality restricts its use. It occurs in areas with low rainfall and high population density or in areas where agricultural or industrial activities are intense.

Economic activities in Europe use on average around 243 000 cubic hectometres of water annually according to the EEA's water exploitation index. All economic sectors use water, but agriculture accounts for the largest use: around 40% of the total water used per year in Europe. Energy production also uses a lot of water, accounting for around 28% of annual water use. The water is predominantly used for cooling in nuclear and fossil fuel-based power plants.²

The pulp and paper industry depends on water in three crucial areas.

- Firstly, there is rainwater that is essential for trees to grow, and, through photosynthesis, transform carbon dioxide to oxygen and cellulose; the latter provides the industry's primary raw material - wood fibre.
- Secondly, there is water that is used to make pulp and paper.
- Finally, there is the suitably treated effluent.

In the terminology of water footprint assessments, these three uses are sometimes referred to as 'green water', 'blue water' and 'grey water' respectively.

Forests need water but are essential for providing it too.

Rainwater is essential for forests and tree plantations to grow. Water security depends on forests. Forests help regulate the water cycle, sustain water supply and maintain water quality. Forested watersheds supply approximately 75% of accessible freshwater and provide water to 90% of the world's 100 largest cities.³

“ Forests contribute to landscape resilience and can reduce the risks of natural disasters that can disrupt the source and supply of freshwater. ”

FAO, 2019

Of course, forests will interact with the water cycle whether or not any of the wood is used for paper making. But there are sometimes concerns about the water uptake of trees when they are grown specifically to provide a crop of wood.⁴

The area of forest designated primarily for soil and water protection is increasing. In Europe, an estimated 171 million ha of forest is designated primarily for the protection of soil and water, an increase of 95 million ha since 1990.⁵

Paper making is dependent on water yet relatively little is consumed.

Process water is essential for making pulp and paper because it allows the cellulose fibres to be refined, mixed, transported and ultimately bonded to form the sheet of paper. It is also vital in the form of steam for electricity generation and drying of the newly formed paper and cooling.

+44 (0)1327 262920

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www.twosides.info

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enquiries@twosides.info

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As water is a crucial resource for the industry, most pulp and paper mills are located near abundant supplies. In Europe, most mills utilise surface water, such as rivers and lakes (89% of intake), with some taken from own supplies of groundwater (10%) and the rest from public water supplies (4%). Since the 1990s, the average water intake per tonne has decreased by 47%.⁶

“ More than 90% of the water is returned to the source, in good condition, after being recycled several times within the paper and board mill. ”

CEPI, 2019.

It is also important to recognise that intake does not equal consumption because most of the water will be returned to the environment. 93% of the water used in the European paper industry is returned to the environment in good quality (having been reused within the mill before being suitably treated), with the remainder either being evaporated, staying within the product, or being bound-up in solid waste.⁷

Water leaving the mill is cleaner than ever.

Water is circulated within pulp and paper mills several times before it is returned. Before it is, it needs to be treated because it contains nutrients and organic matter. Various techniques are used, such as filtration, sedimentation, flotation and biological treatment.

Improvements in paper making techniques and water treatment have had a dramatic effect on the cleanliness of effluent leaving the mill. Since 1991, there has been a 95% reduction in AOX levels (a measure of the toxicity due to chlorine compounds) and a 77% reduction in COD (Chemical Oxygen Demand – how much oxygen is consumed by the decomposition of organic matter).⁶

Paper's water footprint is a lot lower than sometimes claimed.

There have been some claims that everyday paper products take excessive amounts of water to make. These assertions may not consider that 'green water' is needed for healthy forests, that mills are typically situated where there is abundant water and that much of it is returned.

Drawing upon one paper mill's extensive water footprint assessment, considering the whole supply chain, one A4 sheet of uncoated paper may take between 2 to 13 litres of water to produce. But more than 60% of this is green water (stored in forest soil and evaporated, transpired or incorporated by trees), 39% is grey water (required to assimilate pollutants to meet specific water quality standards) and only 1% is blue water (either evaporated during production or incorporated into the paper).⁸

The amount of water consumed by a mill will depend on the specifics of the production site, but an average figure for the European industry is 2,600 litres of blue water is used per tonne of paper and board produced.⁹

Sources

1. World Resources Institute, 2019.
2. European Environment Agency, Water use in Europe, 2018.
3. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Forests and Water, 2019.
4. CEPI, Resource Efficiency in the Pulp and Paper Industry
5. UN FAO, Global Forest Resources Assessment, 2020.
6. CEPI. Key Statistics, 2019.
7. CEPI. Sustainability Report, 2018.
8. UPM, From forest to paper, the story of our water footprint, 2011.
9. Based on CEPI Key Statistics 2019 – 3,481 million m3 water intake and 89.6 million paper and board production, with 93% of water being returned.

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