

AFPA Paper Recycling
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Commentary: Paper recycling is the gift that keeps on giving

From cardboard boxes to paper padded mailers, there are many opportunities to recycle.



Heidi Brock, president and CEO of the AF&PA, says there are many opportunities to support the paper industry, with recycling at the forefront.

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A new year is upon us and that means there likely are leftover cardboard boxes from gift orders, as well as gifts wrapped in paper packaging, and greetings sent from friends and family in your house.

It is a time of year when we can make meaningful resolutions in support of the essential role the paper industry plays in the circular

AFPA Paper Recycling

economy. Why? Because there is a tremendous amount of good that can be generated from these sustainable products that are so easily recycled.

That includes cardboard boxes as well as other packaging like paper padded mailers. These packaging items are accepted for recycling in curbside bins or at drop-off facilities across the country. In fact, most Americans, 94 percent, have access to community paper recycling programs.

Thanks to the millions of Americans who recycle every day, the paper industry has consistently achieved high recycling rates. Last year, nearly 68 percent of all paper used in the U.S. was recycled, including more than 93 percent of all cardboard.

Especially with online shopping continuing to trend upwards, it is important Americans actively recycle paper packaging at home. Our U.S. paper mills want to recover that material and then turn things like your cardboard box into something new.

Recycling boxes is simple. Just remember to empty the box, break it down flat, and place the cardboard into the recycling bin to keep it dry and clean.

To ensure paper products and cardboard boxes are recycled into something new, the quality of items put in the recycling bin matters. An effective recycling system works best when “wishcycling” is avoided. Wishcycling is mistakenly putting something into the bin hoping or assuming that it can be recycled. This can disrupt the recycling stream and add additional costs to the system. For specific questions, be sure to check with your local municipality for guidance.

Recycling properly by ensuring that only the right materials go into the bin is part of what makes paper recycling such a success. After

AFPA Paper Recycling

your used paper and paper packaging products are placed into the recycling bin, paper mills turn that material into recycled fiber.

In fact, about 80 percent of U.S. paper mills currently use recycled fiber which then goes on to become a new product, like another cardboard box, a paper bag, or even tissue products.

The paper industry also has a goal to increase the use of secondary materials like recycled paper in new products to [50 percent by 2030](#). To help achieve this, our industry has already completed or announced nearly \$7 billion in manufacturing investments between 2019 and 2025. This will allow our industry to use more than 9 million additional tons of recycled fiber in our manufacturing processes.

Many online retailers are also working to use sustainable paper packaging and products. For instance, companies like [Walmart](#) and [Amazon](#) have recently made the switch to [paper padded mailers](#) to ship products in recyclable packaging. And for many e-commerce companies, cardboard is already the preferred sustainable packaging material because of its durability, convenience, and recyclability.

As we embark on a new year, it's important to remember that each of us plays a role in the circular economy. From paper shopping bags and wrapping paper to greeting cards and gift lists—these are things that have been created from a renewable resource and can and should go in the recycling bin. Paper is a sustainable material and widely recyclable. It is also a gift that will keep on giving for years to come.

Heidi Brock is president and CEO of the American Forest & Paper Association (AF&PA) in Washington.