



P Products for a Better World

Alternative Papers

by [Chris Nelder](#)



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Other Issues

Wood, as a source of paper pulp, is starting to see some competition from young eco-friendly upstarts, as well as from even older pulp sources. Hemp paper, for example, has been around for a long time, even longer than wood-based paper. Various factors, including problems in production and cost effectiveness, have been a competitive disadvantage to alternative sources of paper pulp. But in the last few years, the search for other sources has intensified, due in part to both the demands of consumers and corporations for more environmentally-friendly paper products, and the pressure to produce ever-increasing amounts of paper from trees that are becoming more and more scarce.

One direction of the search has been toward changes in the production of regular wood-based paper, including reductions in the use of chlorinated bleaching agents and a noticeable increase in recycled content, particularly post-consumer content. Corporations are starting to consider these factors when choosing their corporate letterhead (we at [Better World Publishing](#), the publishers of *BWZ*, have chosen the [Sandpiper paper by Domtar](#) for our corporate standard). Even the US Government, by mandate of the Clinton Administration, ensures that 20% of the paper it buys is made from recycled stock.

But the demand for environmentally sound paper has gone beyond wood, driving entrepreneurs to find new ways to produce paper, from household trash, hemp, an African plant called kenaf, an Italian seaweed, and lawn clippings. Here are five stories about businesses that have found gold in "green" papers as consumer demand has increased.

Trash into paper

In Fort Lee, NJ, Prins Recycling Corp. went from a small, family-run recycling operation started on a \$250,000 loan in 1990, to a company with an estimated \$80 million in annual earnings this year, largely because of Clinton's executive order. The retrofitting of large paper mills to handle recycled stock, driven by that demand, opened up a huge market that Prins was uniquely positioned to

serve.

Kenaf paper

The tall African plant kenaf was the fiber source that inspired Tom Rymysza to start KP Products Inc. (now called [Vision Paper](#)) a few years ago. He experimented with growing kenaf in New Mexico, found some major companies that wanted to use tree-free papers, and started producing the paper commercially.

"Despite a premium price, due mostly to the comparatively small scale of production, the company's sales are growing at a steady pace", according to Rymysza. "When volumes grow to a significant level, we will initiate plans to build our own mill, which will be able to produce cost-competitive paper."

Hemp paper

Perhaps the oldest type of paper in existence, hemp paper has been used for thousands of years. Like kenaf, it makes possible the production and use of tree-free paper, from which there are several environmental advantages to be gained. One acre of annually grown hemp may spare up to four acres of forest from the current practice of clear-cutting. Compared to wood, fewer chemicals are required to convert low-lignin tree-free fibers to pulp. Using fewer chemicals reduces waste-water contamination. Because most plant fibers are naturally a whiter color than wood, they require less bleaching, and, in some cases, none. Less bleaching results in less dioxin and fewer chemical by-products being generated by the papermaking process. And hemp stalks can be processed into an acid-free paper pulp. For more about [hemp](#) and [hemp paper](#), you might want to read some [excerpts from *Industrial Hemp*](#), at the [American Hemp Mercantile](#) pages on Better World.

Seaweed and banana paper

Also in New Mexico, in perhaps the Southwest's best-known town for unique gifts and art, Santa Fe, John and Sherry Bishop started Bandelier Designs In 1990, they introduced a line of 100% recycled content, acid-free paper products with their designs, (acid-free papers deteriorate less over time). Now selling to accounts such as Waldenbooks and Barnes & Noble, they'll do between \$3-4 million in sales this year. In the works for Bandelier: paper made in Central America from banana sludge. And a new line of stationery, using paper made by ICG Papers of Hackensack, NJ from Venice seaweed, has just been

introduced.

Paper from grass clippings

Four Corners Paper Co., of Scottsdale, AZ, also started making paper out of the Venice seaweed last year. It's a win-win situation: he manufactures a high-quality paper--"an extremely smooth-surfaced sheet with tiny light-green specks covering the surface"--for a growing market, and Venice gets a solution to its ecological crisis of seaweed infestation around the Adriatic Sea. The paper isn't all seaweed, but includes various other recyclable materials. At \$12 for a box of 100 sheets, it's expensive stuff compared to regular copier paper from wood pulp, but still less than high-grade pre-printed papers. And recently, Four Corners began making paper from grass clippings collected at Phoenix golf courses--another win-win. Slightly more expensive, the grass clippings paper goes for \$15 a box. Recognizing that companies generally choose environmentally-friendly papers to project a "green" images, President David Gustafson says, "We're trying to give [our customers] the tools to dress up their communications, to give a unique element to their communications."

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