



THE GREEN GAZETTE

Environmental Management Systems at Work
USDA/ARS Tifton, GA

Volume 11, February 2012

Paper Towels and Napkins: Are Alternatives Really Greener?

Virgin Fiber vs Recycled Fiber

Virgin fiber is fiber that comes straight from a tree. If every household in the U.S. replaced one roll of virgin-fiber paper towels with 100 percent recycled paper towels, we could save 1.4 million trees.



Bright White Paper Towels and Napkins

There are several methods of bleaching paper, some far better than others. The one to avoid is Elemental Chlorine (chlorine gas). It is responsible for the release of chlorinated compounds like dioxins and furans, which are powerful carcinogens and mutagens.

Bleached Virgin Fiber vs Cotton Cloth

If you are hugely careless in your treatment of cloth napkins and dishtowels, like running a load of hot-water wash for a few barely soiled napkins, then paper can be the more eco-friendly option. But if you approach your cloth towels and napkins wisely, cloth is the greener option. When you factor in all of the components of making paper towels or napkins for a single use, you find that they are about twice as energy-intensive and create more greenhouse gases overall than cloth napkins.



Paper Towels vs Hand Air-Dryers

Hand dryers will be the greener choice in about 95 percent of circumstances. If the choice is between using a tiny sheet of recycled towel versus a 2,400-watt dryer, then the towel will win. But dryers get the nod in most other scenarios, particularly if the dryer is rated at less than 1,600 watts. (Check the specs plate on the side if you're really curious.)



Green tips for cloth napkins and dishtowels

- Only wash when soiled. Most adults don't really dirty a napkin after every meal.
- Designate a place to store "in-use" napkins and use the same one until it is dirty.
- Toss dirty napkins and dishtowels in with other laundry.
- Wash with cold water and line dry when weather permits.