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### Looking in Our Backyards

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## Commentary

### Looking in Our Backyards\*

Georgia Briscoe\*\*

The 1989 AALL convention in Reno offered an excellent program entitled "Not in My Backyard, or Millions of Tons of Hazardous Waste and We're Talking about Your Backyard." Speakers gave clear summaries of legislation available to control this problem and the bibliographic tools needed to interpret them. The 1976 Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA) and Superfund Legislation were key topics; however, it was Bonnie Exner whose personal story captured the hearts and minds of the audience.

Exner's family experienced health problems and were angered when they found their new home in the country engulfed in sickening odors and clouds of toxic chemicals from a nearby dump. Bonnie Exner became an activist. The concern, persistent research, and excellent speaking skills of this courageous housewife earned her a position with the General Accounting Office. The bulk of her comments were addressed to us as researchers and information providers, but she also called on us to be personally responsible.

The closing remarks of this citizen, who moved legislators to put the Superfund toxic clean-up money to work near her home, are relevant to us as keepers of legal materials. She asserted that disposing of wastes properly is not enough; ultimately, we must produce materials in a less hazardous manner and recover what we do produce. Most librarians would quickly agree. But do librarians recognize their active role in adding waste to the local dump, and are we taking enough responsibility for reducing this flow?

We law librarians are paper eaters—consumers of immense amounts of wood pulp. Despite all the futuristic information-age scenarios, our profession still depends primarily on paper. Much of that paper becomes a permanent part of our library collections and a valuable addition to our

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\* © Georgia Briscoe, 1990. This commentary is based on Briscoe, *Recycling: What's in It for Libraries*, 18 AM. LIBR. 954 (1987).

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legal and cultural heritage, but a sizeable portion of the paper we consume is eventually withdrawn and discarded. The waste is significant in any library that weeds regularly, subscribes to newspapers, or uses computers, but there is even greater waste in law libraries, which rely on looseleaf services, slip opinions, advance sheets, and pocket parts to keep up-to-date.

In August 1987 I sent a survey entitled, "Paper Recycling in Law Libraries" to all large law libraries listed in the *AALL Directory of Law Libraries*. Of the 125 libraries that responded, 100 (80%) threw their withdrawn newspapers, supplements, and replacements into the trash.<sup>1</sup>

Ninety percent of the refuse in the United States is still buried in landfills, despite fears that these near-capacity dumps are contaminating ground water and soil. Every major American city has a landfill problem; according to researchers at the Institute for Local Self-Reliance (a Washington-based nonprofit consulting group), more than half the cities in the nation will exhaust their current landfills by 1990.<sup>2</sup>

The notorious New York garbage barge that took a newsworthy 5,000 mile, two-month voyage in 1987 in a fruitless search for a trash dump gave many of us pause. It was the impetus for my survey on recycling in law libraries. The 1989 AALL convention's workshop on wastes brought the problem once again into the limelight and provided us with the opportunity to consider what response we as librarians should make toward solving this problem.

Since it seems unlikely that law librarians will be able to cease their dependence on paper in the near future, the most appropriate response is to recover resources through recycling. Many states, counties, cities, and institutions already have mandatory recycling regulations, and more undoubtedly will be forthcoming. Librarians should take the initiative in establishing recycling programs before government agencies dictate terms to them. By setting up in-house recycling programs, librarians have the opportunity to make their own decisions and earn money by selling waste paper when the demand is high enough that recyclers will pay. Although earnings are modest, there is satisfaction in being responsible for discards. Most librarians are reluctant to add another responsibility to their busy schedules, but once started, recycling easily becomes routine. A long-term view of the benefits of recycling might help justify the time and effort.

My research confirms that recycling does much more than earn dollars for our libraries, save resources, and improve the environment. Recycling can help control the rising costs of new books by holding down paper

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1. G. Briscoe, *Paper Recycling in Law Libraries* (unpublished survey, 1987).

2. *Wall Street J.*, Apr. 15, 1986, at 34, col. 3.

prices. Book prices were below general consumer commodity levels until 1974, when "the price dam broke . . . under the pressure of drastic increases in the cost of paper."<sup>3</sup> As demand grows for recycled paper and more individuals and organizations recycle paper, the unit cost goes down, thus reducing paper prices to publishers and consumers. Paper and wood prices need not increase as long as increasing quantities of waste paper are recovered and recycled.

Americans are the largest paper consumers in the world, using more than seventy million tons a year. That is an average of six hundred pounds per person, and probably quadruple that for attorneys.<sup>4</sup> In the United States, only twenty-six percent of waste paper is recovered, whereas several countries recycle nearly double our percentage of paper. Japan, Mexico, Spain, the Netherlands, and South Korea provide examples that can stimulate us to improve our efforts.<sup>5</sup>

Recycling can help satisfy future needs for additional paper. Recycling half the paper used in the world today would meet almost seventy-five percent of new paper demand and preserve twenty million acres of forest.<sup>6</sup> According to the World Resources Institute in Washington, D.C., an acre of forest disappears every second.<sup>7</sup> As librarians, we have a vested interest in insuring adequate supplies of paper for storage of future information.

According to the American Paper Institute's recycling committee, there are six hundred pulp, paper, and paperboard mills in the United States. Nearly two hundred of these use recycled waste paper almost exclusively, while another three hundred use between fifteen and twenty-five percent recycled material.<sup>8</sup>

Because manufacturing new paper from waste paper requires twenty-three to seventy-four percent less energy than making it from virgin timber,<sup>9</sup> large amounts of energy will be saved when libraries begin making recycling part of their routines. Besides fuel, it also takes a lot of water—another dwindling resource—to produce paper. The milling of one ton of paper from virgin pulp creates 84 pounds of air pollutants, 36 pounds of water pollutants, and 176 pounds of solid waste; manufacturing paper from secondary materials reduces all these pollution figures by more than half.<sup>10</sup>

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3. J. DESSAUER, *BOOK PUBLISHING* 9 (2d ed. 1981).

4. D'Elgin, *The Garbage Gridlock*, *San Diego Mag.*, May 1989, at 213.

5. See W. CHANDLER, *MATERIALS RECYCLING* 13 (1983) (Worldwatch Paper, vol. 56).

6. *Id.* at 10.

7. D'Elgin, *supra* note 4, at 213.

8. Hertzberg, *The Business of Waste Paper Reuse*, *BIOCYCLE*, May/June 1987, at 50.

9. Pollack, *Realizing Recycling's Potential*, in 1987 *STATE OF THE WORLD* 101, 109.

10. D'Elgin, *supra* note 4, at 214.

Waste paper is an increasingly important export for America: used paper now accounts for one quarter of all United States outbound cargo.<sup>11</sup> Cardboard is New York City's number one export.<sup>12</sup> Most of the processing of used paper takes place in the Orient or Mexico. Last year, forty-three percent of this valuable cargo went to Taiwan and South Korea, easing our trade deficit with these fast-growing economies.<sup>13</sup>

Low prices offered for recycled paper seem to indicate a glutted market, but actually, the market is still strong. Prices fluctuate on a seasonal basis; professional recyclers attribute this to the slowdown of domestic mills from October through the December holidays. Inventories build up, and the stockpiling continues through January and February. Then the major Asian holidays are celebrated, causing a bottleneck at their mills. Despite fluctuations in demand and price, long-term projections for the waste paper market are favorable, especially since legislation mandating the use of recycled paper is popular.

Recycling paper is clearly big business, with important consequences for libraries. Although recycling has moved beyond an exercise in ecological concern and the love of trees, many librarians can still be motivated by these goals. Recycling a stack of newspapers six feet high saves the life of one tree thirty-five feet high. Recovering one full print-run of a Sunday *New York Times* will leave 75,000 trees standing.<sup>14</sup>

Concerned librarians also care that energy and water are conserved by recycling, thereby stemming the carbon dioxide buildup that is changing the earth's climate. Recyclers know that they are not contributing to a growing fleet of homeless garbage barges that will ply the world's waters in search of a landfill, and that our discarded paper is not in the city incinerator, endangering citizens with its hazardous emissions.

Recycling is more than an attitude and a commitment to the environment. Librarians who take the time and trouble to institute recycling programs in their libraries will help increase the supply of paper in the world, keep down the cost of paper on which libraries thrive, and help America's trade deficit by contributing to an international economy. Furthermore, recycling is a cost-effective disposal option, since it requires fewer government subsidies than landfills or incineration. Large-scale recycling has the potential to lower taxes; or better yet, to divert tax dollars from waste disposal to other social services—perhaps even to libraries.

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11. Pollack, *There's Gold in Garbage*, ACROSS THE BOARD, Mar. 1987, at 35.

12. D'Elgin, *supra* note 4, at 213.

13. Hertzberg, *supra* note 8, at 51.

14. Pollack, *supra* note 9, at 110.

I urge law librarians to take the lead in establishing library recycling programs. As users of the highest amount of paper materials of impermanent value, law librarians should initiate the recovery of the resource upon which our profession still thrives. We can set an example and establish the standard for libraries to follow.

