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Paper can be clean and green, industry claims

Steven Scott

Next time you read a plea at the end of an email to consider the environment before printing, you should just press the print button anyway.

That's the advice of the paper industry lobby, which is fighting back against what it says are unfair claims that electronic communications are environmentally superior to old-fashioned paper.

The Australasian Paper Industry Association (APIA) says its members' product has an unwarranted reputation for environmental damage and claims electronic communication has a greater carbon footprint than paper from sustainable forests.

The association has lodged a complaint with the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission

claiming that many large companies make "false and misleading statements... about the sustainability of paper communications."

The association's president and managing director of paper company CPI Group, Bernard Cassell, said banks and telecommunications companies often used environmental considerations as a cover for cutting costs by scrapping paper statements or invoices.

The complaint singles out companies including Westpac, Mercer and Allied Express for claiming to help the environment by cutting their use of paper.

But Mr Cassell said these were just examples of "companies who claim or imply in their public communications that they are assisting the environment by switching from paper-

based statements or invoices to electronic statements or invoices."

In recent years many big companies have switched to electronic communications with shareholders. This, and the economic downturn, has helped push down the volume of letters sent.

But the paper industry thinks it's time for a public awareness campaign to highlight the "energy and the greenhouse gas emissions used in the electronic creation, storage, distribution and use of electronic statements".

"Everyone seems to talk about the environmental impact of paper, but they don't talk about the environmental impact of electronic communication," Mr Cassell said.

He said it was more environmentally damaging for bank customers

to print out statements on energy-intensive home printers than for companies to print en masse using commercial presses.

The paper lobby has sent material extolling the green virtues of sustainable forestry, including as carbon

The best way to deal with email is just to hit the print button and read it on paper, you can then recycle it.

Bernard Cassell, APIA

sinks, to every federal MP and senator. It advises the politicians to "print long documents and read them on paper - avoid reading too much material on screen - it just uses too much energy."

APIA argues consumers are duped by the now common practice of companies charging for paper invoices.

"Without being glib, there is no evidence that charging clients for a paper-based statement provides any environmental benefits."

As for requests not to print your emails for the benefit of the environment, Mr Cassell said they were not worth the paper that they could be printed on.

"The best way to deal with your email is not to open it and read it on the screen, it's just to hit the print button and read it on paper," he said.

"You can then recycle that and you can read it a dozen times."

"Every time you read something on the screen there is an environmental cost," he said.