

Eco-Consciousness Growing, One Package at a Time

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September 18, 2013



Packaging giant Tetra Pak released the increasing of consumer demand for products in biodegradable and other low impact packaging.

Russian consumers have more interest and demand for environmentally friendly packaging than their counterparts in some developed countries, but still are ranked at the bottom among 11 large consumer markets in terms of actual recycling activity, according to a study that global packaging giant Tetra Pak released this week.

But while Russians are still acquiring eco-friendly habits, ecologists said Western consumers could influence packaging producers to make sure that the Russian natural resources they use are exploited in more sustainable ways.

The link between the green mentality of consumers abroad and environmentally sound resource practices in Russia is particularly strong in the forestry sector where the majority of products are exported.

To identify attitudes to recycling and eco-friendly packaging which has high paper content and is manufactured in a way that maximizes its ability to be recycled, Tetra Pak conducted online surveys and in-depth interviews of 7,000 consumers in 11 countries this spring.

The study showed increased consumer demand for products in biodegradable and other low impact packaging, especially in developing markets where environmental degradation tends to be more glaring to local residents. However, people in these countries often could not match their enthusiasm for green containers with actual recycling activity due to a lack of infrastructure, said Libby Costin, Tetra Pak's global marketing director.

More than three-quarters of Russian consumers questioned said they had purchased a product in eco-friendly packaging and 70 percent said they bought this product even though it cost more. These numbers were higher than those in Japan, Britain and the U.S.

But when it came down to recycling activity, Russia placed second to last among the 11 countries, surpassing only South Africa. Just more than 50 percent of Russians said they sort and set aside items for recycling. The rates in Brazil, China and India were 84, 97 and 93 percent, respectively.

"The consumers [in the BRICS] are very open and actually understand the importance of environmentally friendly products. Those markets are our highest growth markets," Tetra-Pak's vice-president Charles Brand told The Moscow Times. "The difficulty doesn't come from the consumers. It's more about how to get the recycling going in the best possible way."

Andrei Ptichnikov, head of the Russian Forest Stewardship Council, or FSC, said one explanation for recycling being less developed in Russia than in other BRICS countries is that the country has a lower population density so there has always been lots of space to dispose of trash. Another key obstacle is that the Russian government does not have programs to promote the recycling industry.

"There is no will and no desire to work in this sphere," Ptichnikov said in an interview. "The recycling companies that work with trash in Russia are enthusiasts. They only make a 3 to 4 percent profit at the most."

Protecting Forests

Although Russia has ample natural resources, ecologists say that recycling and producing environmentally friendly packaging are important to making sure that these resources are around for future generations. In the case of timber and paper packaging, Russia supplies its domestic market and exports as well.

Roughly two-thirds of Russian timber is exported with the biggest share going to Europe. In addition to the raw material supply, Europeans also get ecological benefits from the Russian forests.

Ecologists said Russian forests have an important climate control function. The woodlands absorb more carbon dioxide than is locally released and so act as a "global accumulator" of the compound on behalf of other countries, Ptichnikov said.

Russian forests are also often more diverse than European ones and can be homes to rare species.

The main issues with Russian forestry are not about quantity since the total area is not shrinking, Ptichnikov said. The problems arise from the improper logging practices that can cause environmental damage. Deforestation, as has taken place in Arkhangelsk and Irkutsk regions, leaves soil unprotected and, therefore, less able to retain moisture, leading to aridification.

This is where Europeans can use their consumer power to influence how forests are managed in Russia, he said.

Brand Awareness

The Forest Stewardship Council is a nongovernmental organization that issues certificates to logging firms and their clients who demonstrate sustainable forest management practices. Consumer recognition of the FSC logo — a green tree symbol that appears on packaging from certified producers — is 19 percent globally, reaching a high of 54 percent in Britain. Only 9 percent of Russian consumers recognized the logo.

"We have a challenge to increase levels of consumer awareness," said Marcelle Peuckert, business development director at FSC's headquarters in Bonn. "We've never had an international perspective on what we need to be saying about ourselves. Forest management is incredibly complex. To get that across to the consumer is really challenging."

Despite this low level of FSC recognition in Russia, the number of certificates that the local office hands out to qualified forestry companies continues to grow by as much as 60 percent annually, in large part because the Western consumers demand the ecological certification and Russia-based suppliers have to meet this standard to stay competitive.

"[Europeans] are effectively influencing forestry practices in Russia," Ptichnikov said. "Companies are required to supply certified products and start working according to our criteria. That means that they have to start doing things they have not done before, such as protect biological diversity and refrain from mass clear-cutting."

European countries are traditionally the main importers of Russian wood, and these numbers increased after Russia's accession to the World Trade Organization, which resulted in imported timber being 2.5 times cheaper. But now less developed buyers, including Egypt, have also started to demand Russian timber be FSC-certified.

Demanding Generation

Tetra Pak absorbs the extra costs of buying raw materials from logging companies that work in FSC-certified forests, but company managers and their suppliers said these steps have become a necessity on a market where consumers are becoming increasingly eco-conscious.

"It is not a question of getting more money, but one about surviving on the current market," said Bengt Brunberg, sustainability manager at Billerudkorsnas, which supplies Tetra Pak with packaging materials from multiple locations in Sweden and Finland.

Erik Steijger, Tetra Pak's global product manager, said the company aimed to switch to 100 percent FSC-certified paperboard and see 40 percent of its packaging being recycled by 2020.

Tetra Pak sets individual targets for each of the 172 countries where it has operations. Russia is not developing slower than the other countries, Ptichnikov said, adding that it took 10 to 15 years for Dutch consumers to start demanding products in FSC-certified packaging, while the organization set up an office in Russia only three years ago.

Moscow's FSC office has tracked a growing demand among Russian consumers for ecologically friendly products, such as those with FSC symbols. A recent FSC study showed that 30 percent of Russians are willing to choose one type of packaging over another if it is greener.

Even for Tetra Pak vice president Brand, who now speaks of nature conservation as a lifestyle, eco-consciousness did not come quickly or naturally. It took regular brow beating by his 23-year-old daughter before he got in the habit of turning off lights and saving energy, but it gave him a sense of optimism about younger generations.

"They're in a different space than we were," Brand said. "Our generation is learning to be eco-friendly and is becoming aware. The new generation is acting on it."

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