

SUMMARY
DIAPERS: ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS
AND LIFECYCLE ANALYSIS

by

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Report to

The National Association of Diaper Services (NADS)
2017 Walnut Street
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January, 1991

REVIEWERS

Successive drafts of this study have been submitted for review to the following independent reviewers. While we have benefitted from their counsel, their listing here does not constitute an endorsement of this report.

Jackie Prince, Environmental Defense Fund; Joy Misako St. Germain, Department of Ecology, State of Washington; Jim Chiles, William Dunn, John Gilkeson, Solid Waste Program Section, Minnesota Office of Waste Management; Gerry Lehrburger, M.D.; Robert Hennigan, Department of Environmental Studies, State University of New York; Steven J. Pokrzywka; Sara Ciborski; R.N. Block; Clifford Weller, Textile Rental Services Association of America; Morey Wolfson, Assistant to the Commissioners, Colorado Public Utility Commission; J.C. Sherrill; Jeffrey Tryens, Center for Policy Alternatives; Sandra E. Jerabek, Californians Against Waste; Gordon Hart, Sierra Club; Gerald Meral, Planning and Conservation League; Drew Liebert, Office of Senator Gary Hart, California.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to express their appreciation to the following:

- *The Garbage Project, University of Arizona, Tucson, and Dr. William Rathje, for pioneering work in solid waste characterization utilized in this report.*
- *The Franklin Associates, Ltd., Prairie Village, Kansas, for essential waste characterization studies and product profiles utilized in this report.*
- *Arthur D. Little, Inc., Cambridge, Massachusetts, for previous work completed in evaluating diaper product lifecycles utilized in this report.*
- *Energy Answers Corporation, Albany, New York for professional services and staff support.*

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A. Abstract

A product lifecycle analysis has been undertaken comparing single-use disposable diapers with reusable cotton diapers.¹

The analysis catalogs resource consumption for energy, water and raw materials, and environmental releases in the form of solid waste, and air and water emissions. Once the relative environmental burdens of each diapering mode are understood, recommendations for minimizing overall environmental burden can be developed, perhaps catalyzing or adding to the formation of public policy in the solid waste arena.

The central conclusion of this study is that single-use diapers have a greater overall environmental impact than reusable diapers when all aspects of diaper production and use are taken into account. Single-use diapers are shown to generate significantly more solid waste, to consume greater quantities of energy and raw materials, and to generate more potentially toxic pollutants on a per-diaper-change basis.

With respect to water use, the results are not as conclusive. Commercially laundered reusable diapers use 30 percent less water than single-use diapers when toilet disposal of soiled single-use diapers is included and 60 percent less water than home laundered reusables. However, when water usage for commercial and home reusables is averaged, reusable diapers are shown to require more water than single-use diapers. Reusables create a greater quantity of water pollution than single-use diapers, primarily from the laundry cycle. From a relative resource impact perspective the waste water burdens of reusable diapers are more readily treated and pose less of a threat to the environment and public health than do waste waters generated by the paper and plastics industries.

Although using single-use diapers generates notably more carbon monoxide and particulate air emissions, both single-use and reusable diapers produce nitrogen oxide, sulphur oxide and hydrocarbon emissions in similar ranges.

Considering the overall environmental burdens, and most notably the higher volumes of solid waste produced and energy and raw materials consumed by single-use diapers, reusable diapers are determined to be superior from an environmental perspective.

¹ Throughout this report, single-use is the term used to refer to disposable diapers, while reusable is used to refer to cotton or cloth diapers.

B. Background

The environmental impacts and costs of single-use (disposable) diapers and reusable (cotton) diapers have become a source of heated debate in recent years. This controversy, which has involved environmentalists as well as public policy makers, has recently entered the technical arena of product lifecycle analysis and environmental assessments.

Today, single-use diapers account for about 82 percent of baby diaper changes in the U.S.² Since their introduction in 1961, they have become so popular that the word diaper itself has nearly become synonymous with single-use disposables. To many, single-use diapers have come to symbolize the convenience of modern-day products.

However, with growing public awareness of environmental problems such as burgeoning solid waste issues, air and water pollution and the greenhouse effect, consumers are now paying greater attention to the environmental impacts of products they use. In this context, single-use diapers are increasingly viewed as conspicuous waste in a wasteful society.

The following charts contrast reusable and single-use diapers by the number of units sold and by the percentage of diaper changes made in the U.S. among infants.

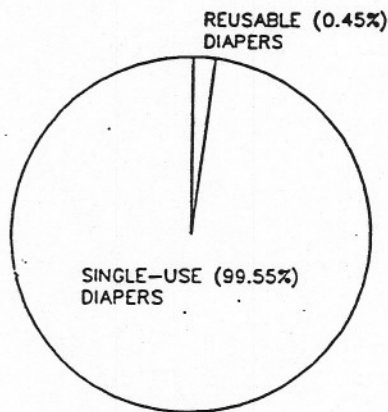


Figure 1.
Diaper market in units sold:
single-use/reusables

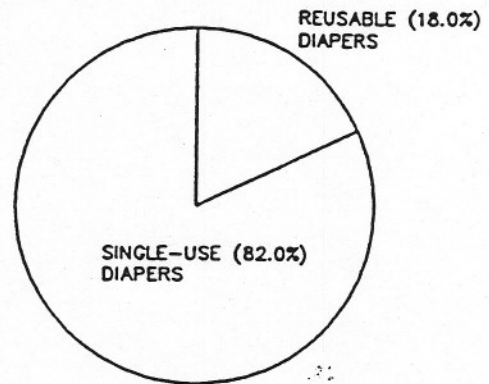


Figure 2.
Number of diaper changes:
single-use/reusables

² Dr. Paul M. Smith and Keith D. Sheeran, "Summary: A Profile of Consumer Preference for Baby Diapers," University of Washington, Division of Forest Products and Engineering, (Seattle: University of Washington, July 1990).

C. This Study's Approach

The present product lifecycle analysis comparing single-use to reusable diapers was commissioned by the National Association of Diaper Services. Three fundamental questions arose at the outset:

1. What are the environmental impacts of each diaper system and which diaper is least damaging to the environment?
2. Which waste treatment system is more appropriate for processing diaper waste: waste water or solid waste?
3. Which diapering system is more economical from the perspective of out-of-pocket expenses to consumers?

The primary goal of the investigation was to answer the first question, that is, to determine which diapering mode is less burdensome to the environment based on the impacts of the following categories:

- solid waste generation
- energy production and consumption
- water quantity
- water quality
- air quality
- resource consumption.

This study tracks the resource requirements and environmental burdens of each process involved in the manufacturing, use and disposal/reuse of super absorbent single-use diapers and conventional cotton reusable diapers. A lifecycle or cradle-to-grave analysis identifies the systems or processes to be studied, then catalogs materials and energy flows in and out of the defined system. Processes studied in the diaper lifecycle include raw materials acquisition, fuels refining, intermediate processing, such as fertilizer and propylene, diaper manufacturing, use practices, disposal or reuse systems including laundering, and incidental packaging. The systems under study are shown in figures 3 and 4 on page 15 and 16.

Values for resource requirements and environmental releases in each category in the defined system were then combined and summarized to create the tables in this study.

Recognizing that the two diapering modes have different associated use patterns, basic assumptions regarding use parameters were developed, based on user surveys, marketing and sales data and published literature. These assumptions are fully described in section

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IID. Data was collected for each process and converted to a 1,000 equivalent use basis for comparison. The equivalent use measurement incorporates the use of multiple reusable diapers per change.

Since single-use and reusable diapers differ dramatically in their manufacturing and use patterns in each of the six categories evaluated, precise comparisons are difficult. For example, while one single-use diaper is used per diaper change, a parent may use one or more reusable diapers for each diaper change. Once used, a single-use diaper is disposed of, but a reusable diaper will be reused many times, potentially over many years, depending on type of diaper and whether it is laundered at home or by a diaper service.

The analysis shows that when the effects of manufacturing and use on the above resource categories are compared, reusable diapers have notably lower environmental impacts than single-use diapers. These impacts are summarized in sections ID and IIE, and given full treatment in sections VI and VII of the complete study.

In comparing the environmental impacts of diapers, the authors note the fundamental difference between the two diapering modes in disposal of diaper contents: single-use diapers rely on the solid waste system and reusable diapers rely on the waste water or sewage waste system. It has sometimes been overlooked that diaper wastes from single-use diapers are a primary exception to processing human sewage through the waste water treatment system. This study concludes that the waste water treatment system is more economical and performs more efficiently in collecting, transporting and processing diaper waste when compared with the solid waste stream.³

In addition to assessing environmental impacts, an economic comparison was completed. Single-use diapers, reusable diapers washed at home, and reusables laundered by diaper services were compared with respect to out-of-pocket expenses to consumers, including disposal and other environmental criteria. This comparison shows that single-use diapers are the most expensive diaper option, even when the cost of labor is included in home laundering of reusables.

This study uses available information and estimates to determine reusable diaper use patterns. Basic assumptions are summarized in section IID and are documented where possible.

³ Solid waste processing and waste water treatment co-exist and can be interrelated, however. This is the case with sewage sludge disposal from waste water treatment systems ending up in solid waste processing facilities, such as composting and landfilling. Similarly, waterborne wastes from solid waste processing operations sometimes receive treatment at waste water treatment facilities.

This study does not encompass a public health comparison between reusable and single-use diapers. Although some public health issues are addressed, a complete analysis would include a rigorous investigation of epidemiological, toxicological, sociological, and medical studies, which were beyond the scope of this study.

D. Conclusions

The central conclusions of this study are as follows:⁴

1. Single-use diapers create over 7 times more post-consumer solid waste and over 3 times more manufacturing or process solid waste than do reusable diapers. Unlike single-use diapers, reusable cotton diapers are used many times and incorporate both waste reduction and product reuse practices. Greater reliance on reusable diapers represents the obvious way to reduce solid waste created by disposable diapers.
 - Reusable diapers create less than 13 percent of the solid waste generated by single-use diapers, most of which is sludge generated at waste water treatment facilities.
 - Single-use diapers comprise approximately 2 percent of the U.S. municipal solid waste stream. Not only is the quantity of solid waste from reusable diapers 87 percent less, but the relative loads or resource impacts of reusable diaper wastes are lower than those associated with single-use diapers.
2. More energy is consumed in the lifecycle of single-use diapers than in the lifecycle of reusable diapers.
 - On a per-diaper-change basis, manufacturing of single-use diapers requires nearly 6 times the amount of energy used in manufacturing reusable diapers.
 - Commercially laundered reusables use half the energy of home reusables and one-third the energy of single-use diapers on a per-use basis.
 - On a per-use basis, the laundering cycle for reusable diapers consists of washing and drying the diaper, and treatment of the water involved. Even

⁴ Refer to section IID for basic assumptions used to derive these conclusions, and IIE for an elaboration of findings.

when laundering is taken into account along with manufacturing, energy consumption for the weighted average of home and commercially laundered reusable diapers is approximately 80 percent that of single-use diapers.⁵

3. From the standpoint of total water requirements (gross water use), single-use diapers use 37 percent more water than home laundered or diaper service laundered reusables. When in-plant water recycling is taken into account (net water use), reusables laundered by a diaper service use approximately 40 percent less water than single-use diapers when fecal disposal to the toilet is included. Reusable diapers laundered at home use approximately 77 percent more water than single-use diapers.
4. Diaper laundry services have lower resource and environmental impacts than home laundering due to economies of scale. Home laundered reusable diapers use over 2.5 times as much net water per diaper change and nearly 2 times as much energy as commercially laundered reusable diapers.
5. Waste water from growing cotton and manufacturing cloth is relatively high volume and low impact compared to waste water generated from single-use diaper components and product manufacturing. Waste water from the plastic and the pulp and paper industries contains priority pollutants and compounds which are considered hazardous, including dioxins, furans and chlorophenols. Significant environmental degradation has resulted from release of effluents from these industries leading to proposed regulatory actions.

While water usage and consumption data, and therefore effluent quality data, are difficult to compare for the two diapering modes, the following generalizations can be made:

Waste water created by laundering reusable diapers is high in chemical oxygen demand (COD), biological oxygen demand (BOD) and total dissolved solids (TDS), and is similar to other domestic waste waters. Laundry waste water contains little or no hazardous constituents, but can contain high levels of nitrogen and phosphorous.

⁵ These calculations are based on a weighted average between commercially and home laundered reusables. Included in calculating energy consumption in the manufacturing process (for single-use and reusable diapers) is the energy value of the feedstock, e.g., hydrocarbons used as feedstock in plastic for single-use diapers and fertilizer used to grow cotton for reusables.

- Waste water created and recycled in industrial processes included in single-use diaper manufacturing is either discharged with minimal treatment, adding to environmental burdens, or treated on site, creating industrial sludge which requires careful management. Little data was found on the characteristics of industrial sludge.
 - Waste water created in reusable diaper manufacturing contains high amounts of suspended solids but relatively low COD. Plastics, pulp and paper waste waters are lower volume, but contain high COD and numerous potentially toxic organic and inorganic residues.
6. Air emissions are comparable for both single-use and reusable diapering modes. Because of lower energy use commercial diaper services produce fewer air emissions on an equivalent change basis than home laundered diapers.
 7. Reusable products conserve resources and energy through multiple use, resulting in less resource and energy consumption per use compared to the high energy and resource allocations for single-use products. Because disposable diapers are a single-use product, the material and energy inputs are higher, resulting in immediate and significant solid waste generation. Large quantities of natural resources are consumed in the production of both types of diaper. Obtaining those natural resources results in land degradation, process solid waste generation, air and water pollution, soil erosion, and habitat loss, as well as contributing to the greenhouse effect.
 8. Single-use diapers require more out-of-pocket expense per diaper change than reusable diapers. Costs of commercial diaper service laundering lie between home washed reusables and single-use disposables.
 - Out-of-pocket expenses for single-use diapers are approximately 50 percent higher than for reusable diapers laundered commercially, and 66 percent higher than for reusable diapers laundered at home.
 - Allowing for a value for household services of \$6.00 per hour for home laundering raises the cost of home laundered reusable diapers above the cost of commercially laundered reusable diapers. However, both are still well below the unit costs of single-use diapers, especially when solid waste collection costs are taken into account.

9. Recent pilot programs aimed at recycling single-use diapers have yet to demonstrate economic viability and are not likely to be feasible without continued subsidies from single-use diaper manufacturers. Recycling single-use diapers may not significantly improve their environmental impact compared to reusable diapers, and would likely increase the cost, energy, and water requirements.
10. The waste water treatment system, contrasted with the solid waste disposal system, is more appropriate for handling diaper waste, since it was specifically designed to handle all human sewage and septage. It also appears to provide a more efficient, sanitary disposal pathway with greater opportunity for beneficial reuse of concentrated and processed sludge.

If all diaper consumers relied on reusable diapers, the waste water load from diapers would be less than 0.5 percent of total municipal waste water, compared to 3 percent loading of the solid waste stream if all consumers relied on single-use diapers. From a relative resource impact perspective reusable diapers have a lower environmental impact than single-use disposables.

E. Recommendations

1. Reusable diapers are, and should be promoted as, a more environmentally sound approach to diapering in comparison to single-use diapers. The clear advantages of reusables in reducing solid waste, conserving natural resources, and reducing the generation and release of potentially toxic pollutants should be emphasized.
2. Diapers should be included as part of an integrated solid waste management program that emphasizes waste reduction as the preferred option. Use of reusable diapers instead of single-use diapers is an overlooked source reduction option, that should be encouraged as part of a broader waste reduction strategy to minimize landfilling of solid waste.
3. Although reusable diapers are gaining in popularity, single-use diapers remain the most frequently used diaper. Increased education on the environmental and economic benefits of reusables, particularly in institutional settings and day-care facilities, is necessary.
4. Discussions of which diapering mode is superior from an environmental perspective should include the question of the most appropriate waste path for diaper waste. The waste water treatment system is preferable to the solid waste disposal system because it provides for more efficient and less expensive transportation to processing facilities, and because of reduced risks of exposure to disease-causing organisms.