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Legal-Size Paper Running Into Trouble

BY THE END of this year legal-size paper may become illegal. A movement to discontinue use of the awkward 8½ by 14-inch sheets is gaining momentum, with no protest demonstrations in sight.

The Federal Register reports that effective Jan. 1, 1983, legal-size paper no longer will be accepted for use in federal courts. The Illinois Supreme Court outlawed it a year ago and probably it is being abandoned in other places not reported.

This may or may not be a part of the much discussed reduction in paperwork in government. If it is accomplished without increasing the number of smaller sheets used it could amount to about a 20 percent cutback, but this may be too much to hope for.

Millions of secretaries and other office workers in business would like to see the oversize sheets eliminated. Most filing cabinets are designed for 11-inch paper, but here comes something important, often a legal document, typed on legal-size paper. It must be filed but should it be folded in half, turned up at the

end or placed in another, less-handly place without folding?

Public relations people frequently create equally perplexing filing problems by printing annual reports, catalogs or other pamphlets that should be retained in formats too large or offsize to fit in any sort of standard files.

There is reason to doubt that use of 8½ by 11-inch sheets will reduce costs or produce more concise writing. Changing dimensions of paper is unlikely to break bureaucrats and lawyers of the habit of using a dozen words where one might suffice.

Nothing else has done so. The U.S. Commission on Paperwork issued a voluminous report on the subject in 1977, concluding that federal paperwork is excessive and recommending that it be reduced. The commission disbanded and paperwork has continued to grow.

It was estimated by the Office of Management and Budget that Americans would spend nearly 1.3 billion hours in 1981 filling out some 5,000 kinds of federal forms. About half of them were required by the

IRS. Total cost of this paper shuffling and form filling was estimated at \$100 billion, about \$500 for each citizen.

Consolidation of programs and reduction in number of laws and regulations could be more effective in reducing paperwork than reducing the size of paper on which they are written.

Last spring when President Reagan proposed that 84 health, education and social service programs be consolidated into six block grants it was found that these programs encompassed 616 pages of law and 1,400 pages of rules.

The paradox of the situation is that the intended improvement may be a little late, as computer memory banks now can store more data in a small space than a warehouse of filing cabinets holds.

Paperwork could be minimized while countless words, facts and figures accumulate in computers, where they might never be referred to again. If found, they might not be used or usable.