

# Revitalizing Communities Through Redevelopment

County Brownfields Primer

## About the National Association of Counties

The National Association of Counties (NACo) strengthens America's counties, serving nearly 40,000 county elected officials and 3.6 million county employees. Founded in 1935, NACo unites county officials to:

- Advocate county priorities in federal policymaking
- Promote exemplary county policies and practices
- Nurture leadership skills and expand knowledge networks
- Optimize county and taxpayer resources and cost savings,
- Enrich the public understanding of county government.

### NACo's Mission

Strengthen America's Counties.

### NACo's Vision

Healthy, safe and vibrant counties across America.

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# Abandoned and Vacant Brownfield Properties Exist in Counties Across the Country

Nearly two out of every three counties (63 percent) have an identified brownfield property. Cook County, Ill. alone has more than 600 properties, the most of any county with a brownfield site, with the median number of sites for brownfield counties reaching five properties. These sites are concentrated in rust-belt and other former industrial-heavy regions of the country. With more than 35,000 total estimated sites, brownfields impact every county to varying degrees.

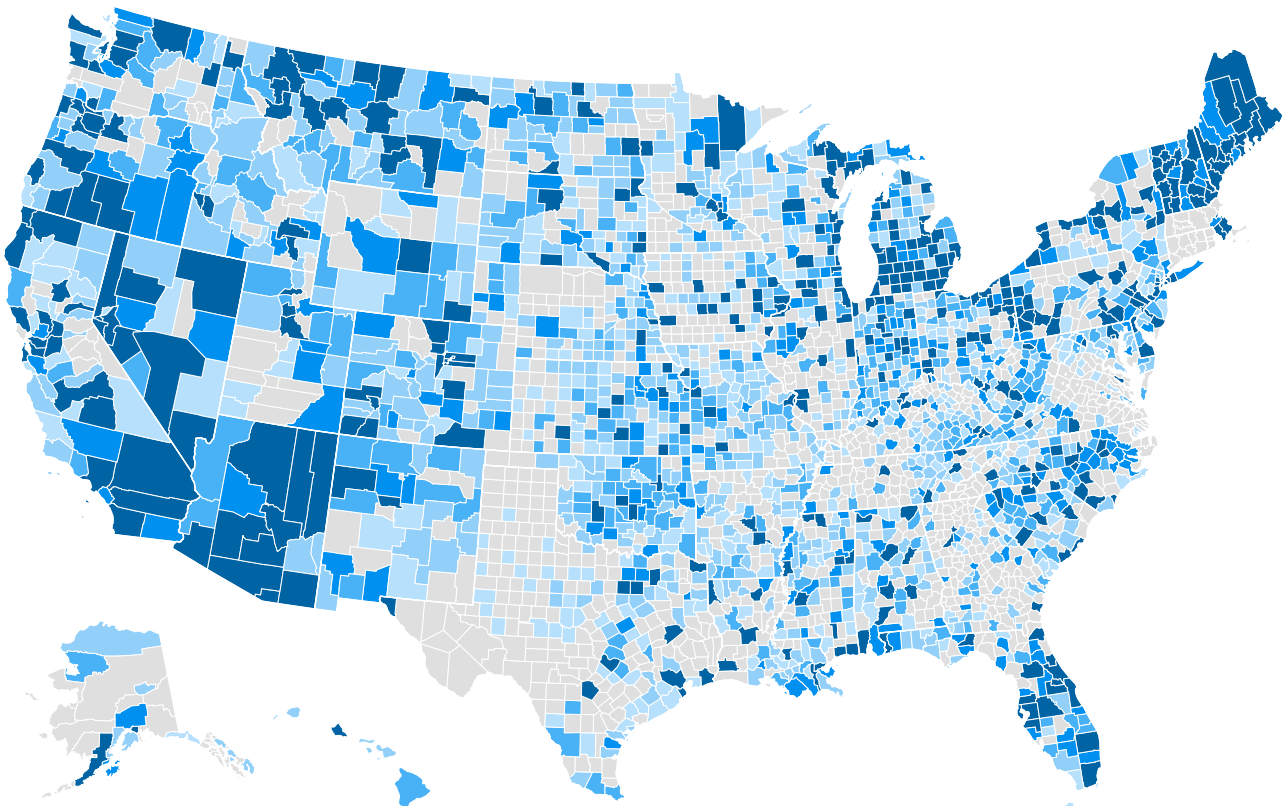
Brownfield properties can come in many shapes and sizes. Often, they are thought of as large abandoned industrial complexes, but it is more common for brownfield sites to be smaller properties like former gas stations, dry cleaners or automotive repair garages. Brownfield sites can also be agricultural, residential, railroad sites, chemical manufacturing plants or public buildings.

**63%**

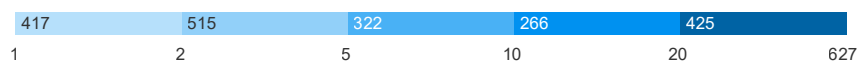
**Nearly 2 out of 3 counties**  
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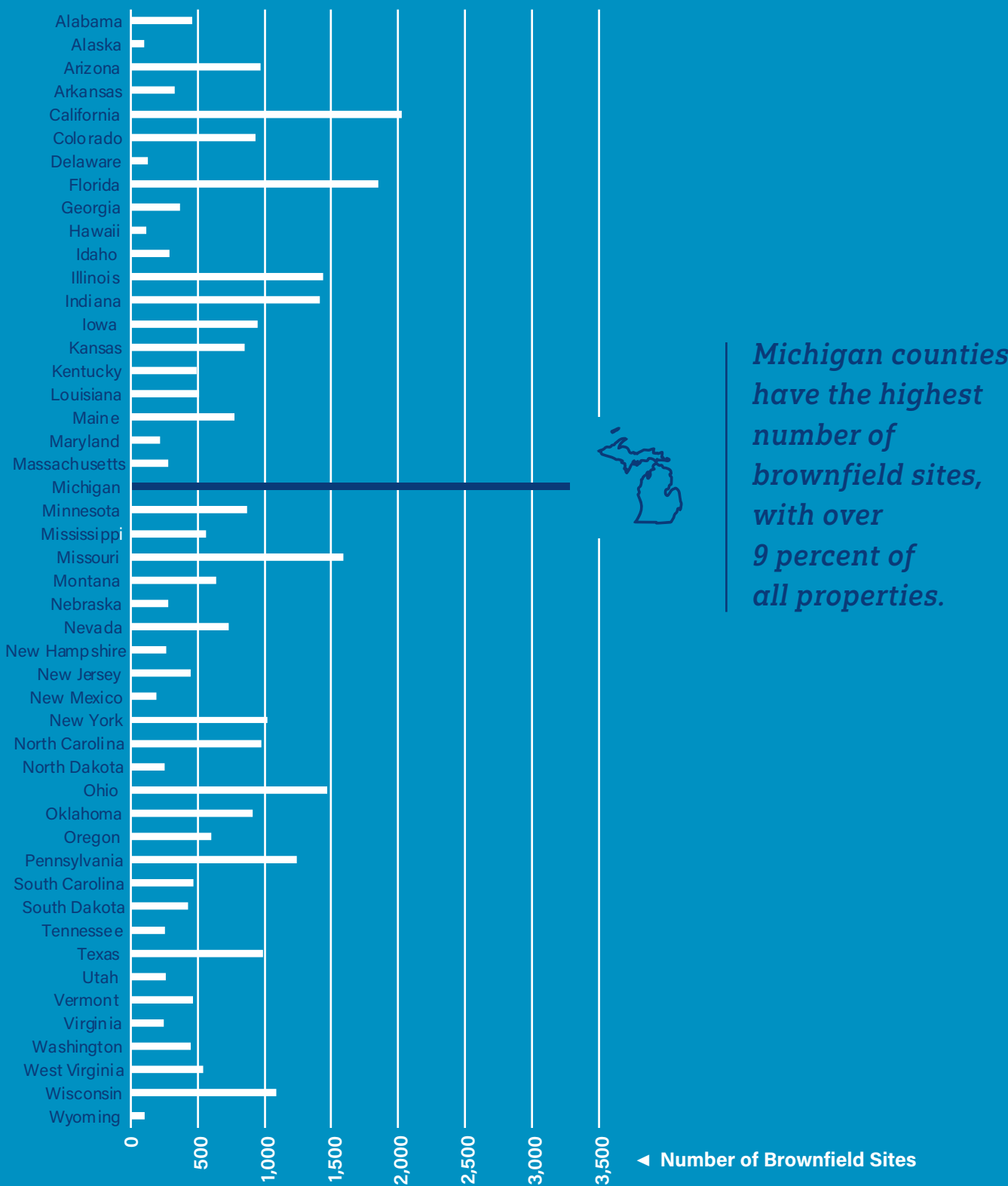
*There are over 35,000  
identified brownfield  
properties within county  
jurisdictions.*



**Source:** NACo Analysis of U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Facility Registry Services (FRS) data as of November 11, 2024



# Brownfield Sites Occupy Abandoned or Underutilized Polluted Lands Within County Jurisdictions



Source: NACo Analysis of U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Facility Registry Services (FRS) data as of November 11, 2024.





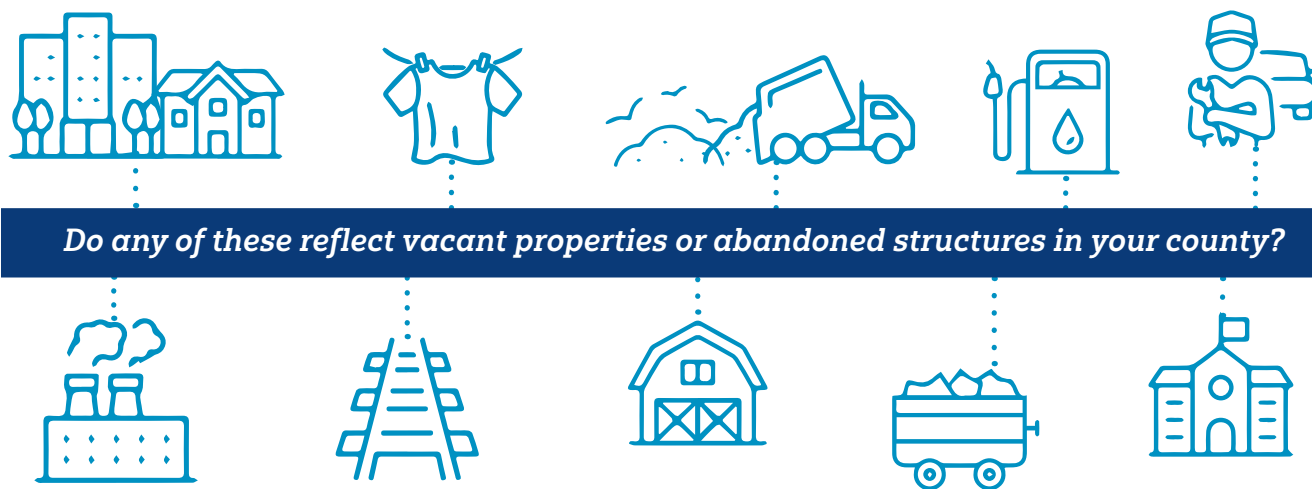
According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), brownfield sites consist of property that has been exposed to pollutants, hazardous substances or contaminants. Brownfield properties are typically abandoned or underutilized, often appearing in communities as vacant lots or blighted structures. Some of these properties occupy prime space within a city center or urban core, creating a blight on the landscape, fostering resident aversion and exacerbating challenges with land use. Others may be located within industrial, agricultural or other areas of the county that are less trafficked by most residents.

Regardless of the type, location or size of the brownfield property, each site can create both a challenge and opportunity to county leaders. The presence of these

properties can negatively impact property values, discourage investment and create significant legal liabilities. However, the redevelopment of brownfield sites can not only revitalize the environment around the site, but also be a boon to economic growth and development in the area.

Navigating the redevelopment of brownfield sites can be a complex, politically challenging and protracted process. There are several considerations including the cost and efficacy of safely remediating these lands. To help overcome these barriers, county leaders can take advantage of key resources and financing from the EPA and other federal agencies. Working in partnership with other local jurisdictions, private industry and residents, brownfield sites can transform from burdens into community assets.

# The Challenge of Redeveloping a Brownfield Site for Productive Economic Activity



*Do any of these reflect vacant properties or abandoned structures in your county?*

**Source:** U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

Each brownfield site has a unique history that complicates the redevelopment of the land. These sites have hazardous contaminants or pollutants that require special – and expensive – remediation procedures to make them safe to redevelop.

A few common contaminants of brownfield sites include asbestos, petroleum, pesticides and polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs). When not contained or remediated properly, exposure to contaminants such as these can have serious adverse health effects. Some contaminants, such as per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, or PFAS, are nearly impossible to remediate, further complicating the redevelopment of a brownfield property.

To safely remediate these sites, EPA has developed a [risk-based cleanup](#) guide which considers the environmental conditions, assessment of potential adverse effects and impact of potential remediation measures to determine how to conduct cleanup efforts. As such, the cost to conduct cleanup can vary greatly depending on the risk level and other factors, from a few thousand dollars all the way up to millions of dollars.

While the cost and risk of remediation can be significant, another challenge of redeveloping a brownfield site is navigating potential legal liabilities. Responsibility for remediation falls on the property owner, which is why many brownfield sites remain blighted or vacant properties. However, local governments seeking to revitalize the land can acquire the property (by purchase, a land bank or another method), but doing so creates the possibility of liability under federal environmental laws.

These challenges aside, county leaders must often contend with complex political dynamics surrounding brownfield redevelopment. Remediation is often a long, resource-intensive and disruptive process which can create conflicts with residents, business owners and other stakeholders. Communication about the benefits and economic return can be important strategies for county officials seeking to overcome these challenges.

# Redevelopment of Brownfield Lands can Help Create Jobs, Public Amenities and Other Economic Benefits

Reclamation of brownfield lands can transform a community through job creation, community enhancement, environmental restoration, public health improvements and broader economic returns.



## Job creation and economic return

The redevelopment of brownfield properties can stimulate economic activity, create new jobs, increase property values and generate tax revenues that can be reinvested in the community. The EPA estimates for every \$100,000 of brownfield grant funds expended on assessment and cleanup, there are more than 14 jobs created and \$36.12 billion was leveraged. Additionally, an EPA study of 48 brownfield cleanup sites found \$29 to \$97 million in increased tax in the first year after cleanup.



## Improvement of resident health outcomes

Because brownfield sites are concentrations of harmful contaminants and pollutants, there are often impacts on the community's water systems, air quality and soil. Brownfield sites are linked to respiratory illness, cancers and several other negative health outcomes according to a National Institute for Health study. As such, remediation of these sites can mitigate existing impacts and create a safer environment for people to live, work and recreate.



## Environmental restoration and land conservation

In some instances, brownfield sites occupy valuable land as counties grapple with housing affordability, urban sprawl and environmental concerns. A [2020 EPA study](#) found that 11 – 13 percent of housing growth between 2013 and 2030 could be placed on brownfield sites, and redevelopment of the lands could reduce job-related driving miles by nine or ten percent and residential driving miles by 25 to 33 percent.



## Public amenity and quality of life improvements

Brownfield sites not only have tangible health, economic and environmental impacts, they also have repercussions on resident quality of life. By removing blight and returning previously unproductive land back into community uses, there is less blight and vacancy in the area. Furthermore, brownfield properties don't always need to be redeveloped into new commercial, residential or industrial purposes, they can also be repurposed into green spaces, parks and recreational areas which provide amenities and social opportunities for neighboring residents.



# Revitalizing Brownfield Land Requires a Multi-Faceted Approach in Partnership with Community Stakeholders

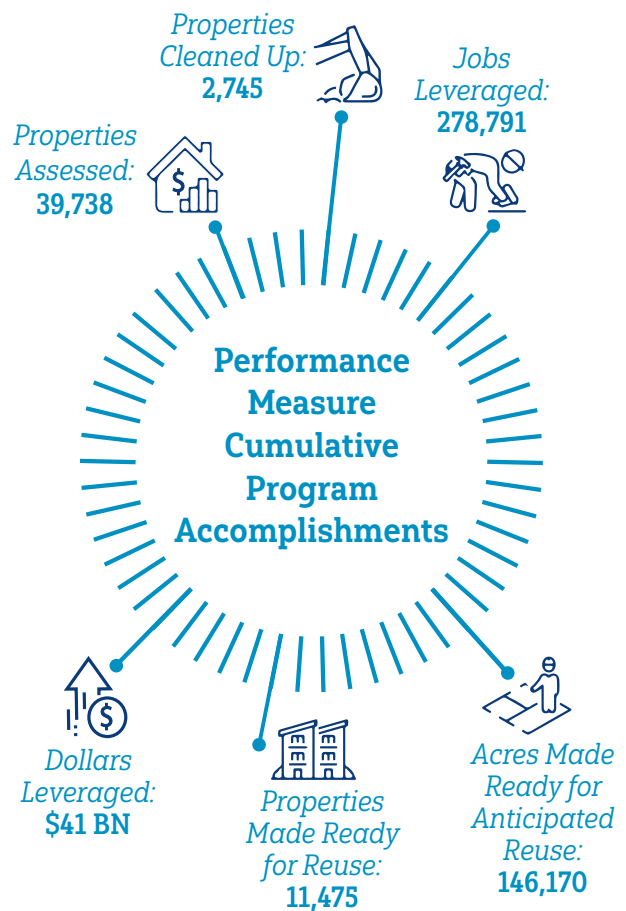
Regardless of the type, size or location of the brownfield property, redevelopment can have a plethora of benefits. However, navigating the complexities and accomplishing the redevelopment requires community engagement, partnerships and direct oversight. While the federal government oversees some brownfield remediation projects, most fall to the local level, spread between counties, cities, states and private and nonprofit organizations. At the county level, there are a range of best practices local leaders can use to conduct efficient and effective brownfield remediation.

Strategies counties can employ include conducting a comprehensive brownfield inventory. The inventory can include site assessments and soil and groundwater testing to identify and evaluate contamination risks. An inventory can help local leaders allocate resources, prioritize cleanup efforts and attract private investment to revitalize these brownfield sites.

Another strategy is to explore or pilot innovative approaches to remediation that are more cost-effective and efficient. Traditional methods consist of removal or containing site contaminants, but approaches such as bioremediation, phytoremediation and permeable reactive barriers can also be effective strategies depending on the site.

Because brownfield remediation is resource intensive, counties can also pursue funding opportunities and partnerships to support brownfield remediation efforts. There are several federal and state grants, loans and tax incentives available to counties for assessment, remediation and technical assistance. Counties can also seek out private developers and nonprofit organizations to leverage resources and expertise.

Finally, brownfield remediation cannot be successful without community engagement. Developing a community and regional vision, providing clear and consistent communication, garnering resident and stakeholder feedback through public meetings or outreach and providing examples of successful remediation projects can all be fruitful strategies to advance engagement.



**Source:** U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Brownfields Program Accomplishments and Benefits Summary data as of October 1, 2024..



A low-angle, close-up shot of a person riding a bicycle on a paved path. The person is wearing blue shorts and white sneakers. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a strong lens flare and casting long shadows. The path is made of light-colored bricks, and there is green grass in the foreground. The background shows trees and a clear sky.

*Revitalization of  
Brownfields properties  
can yield significant  
community benefits*



# There Are Several Federal Funding Opportunities For County Brownfield Reclamation

## The EPA Brownfields Program

The EPA Brownfields Program provides grants and technical assistance to local governments, states, tribes and others to assess, cleanup and redevelop brownfield sites across the country. The EPA Brownfields Program offers several different competitive funding opportunities to address brownfields, as well as technical assistance opportunities. Grants that counties are directly eligible to apply for are outlined below.

### Assessment Grants

*Scan here to learn more about Assessment Grants.*



Assessment Grants provide funding to compile brownfield inventories, carry out environmental assessments and conduct community engagement, among other activities. They are useful for counties seeking to determine which sites in their communities are appropriate for redevelopment.

### Cleanup Grants

*Scan here to learn more about Cleanup Grants.*

Cleanup Grants provide funding to conduct cleanup activities at one or more brownfield sites. To apply for a Cleanup Grant, a county must be the sole owner of the property and a Phase II environmental assessment<sup>1</sup> of the site must be in process or completed prior to submitting the application.



Notably, in addition to costs associated with the cleanup of a brownfield site, counties can also use 10 percent of the grant funding to monitor the health of individuals exposed to hazardous substances from the site and monitor and enforce institutional controls to prevent future exposure from the site.

### Multipurpose Grants

*Scan here to learn more about Multipurpose Grants.*



Multipurpose Grants provide funding to carry out a range of activities within a specific target area, such as a neighborhood, census tract or corridor, that has one or more brownfield sites. eligible activities include those allowed under the Assessment and Cleanup Grants and funds must be used to conduct at least:

- One Phase II environmental assessment;
- One brownfield site cleanup; and
- A comprehensive revitalization plan

<sup>1</sup> The purpose of a Phase II Environmental Site Assessment Report is to evaluate the presence or absence of, petroleum products or hazardous substances in the site's subsurface.



## Revolving Loan Fund (RLF) Grants

*Scan here to learn more about Revolving Loan Fund (RLF) Grants.*



Revolving Loan Fund (RLF) Grants provide funding to counties and other eligible entities to capitalize a revolving loan fund as well as to provide loans and subgrants to carry out cleanup activities at brownfield sites.

RLF programs are intended to last for many years and, as such, EPA requires certain commitments from RLF Grant recipients including the ability to market the RLF program, a thorough understanding of real estate financing and compliance with reporting requirements.

*Note: EPA does not intend to fund RLF Grants in Fiscal Year (FY) 2024.*

## Job Training Grants

*Scan here to learn more about Job Training Grants.*

Job Training Grants provide funding to train unemployed and underemployed residents in communities that have been impacted by brownfields. This training should aim to help individuals find fulltime employment in hazardous and solid waste management, and the environmental field more broadly.



Funds can be used for training in a wide range of areas including green infrastructure and stormwater management, emergency planning, energy efficiency and climate change mitigation and adaptation.



## Additional Federal Funding Available to Address Brownfields

In addition to the EPA Brownfields Program, counties can leverage funding from other federal agencies to address brownfields in their communities. Both the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and the U.S. Economic Development Administration offer programs that can be used specifically to finance the cleanup and redevelopment of brownfield properties. These programs include, but are not limited to, the following:

### U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

- Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) Program
- Section 108 Loan Guarantees
- Brownfields Economic Development Initiative (BEDI) Grant Program
- Economic Development Initiative (EDI) Grant Program
- Renewal Communities and Empowerment Zones/Empowerment Community Funding

### U.S. Economic Development Administration

- Public Works and Economic Adjustment Assistance Programs
- Local Technical Assistance Program

## Reauthorization of the EPA Brownfields Program

The EPA Brownfields Program was last reauthorized in the Brownfields Utilization, Investment and Local Development (BUILD) Act of 2018. NACo successfully advocated for several changes to the program to better assist counties in addressing brownfields in their communities in this reauthorization, including establishing the Multipurpose Grant, raising the award ceiling for Cleanup Grants and expanding liability protection for state and local governments that acquire brownfield sites voluntarily. Notably, the BUILD Act did not increase the funding authorization level beyond the \$200 million per year was set in the original 2002 authorization of the EPA Brownfields Program.

However, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) provided an additional \$1.5 billion in funding for the EPA Brownfields Program over five years. The IIJA also raised the cost award ceiling for Assessment Grants, Cleanup Grants and Multipurpose Grants. Further, cost share requirements are waived for all EPA Brownfields Program grants funded under the IIJA. The cost share for EPA Brownfields Program grants is typically 20 percent.

The 2018 reauthorization of the EPA Brownfields Program expired on September 30, 2023. Throughout the 119th Congress, NACo will advocate for legislation that reauthorizes that not only Brownfields program but also increases the program funding levels and administrative cap.







# NACo Priorities for Reauthorization of the EPA Brownfields Program



## 1. Reauthorize the Brownfields Program

Congress should reauthorize the Brownfields Program to ensure that this critical source of funding remains available to counties to cleanup and redevelop brownfield properties in their communities.



## 2. Increase Authorized Funding Levels for the Brownfields Program

Congress should increase the overall authorization level for the Brownfields Program to allow more counties to address brownfields in their communities. There is a clear need for increased funding for the program. For example, the additional funding provided by the IIJA has allowed EPA to finance more brownfield programs across the country, awarding grants to 55 percent of applicants as opposed to 33 percent prior to the enactment of the IIJA.

Additionally, Congress should recognize the complexity of the cleanup process for larger or more complicated brownfield sites by increasing the maximum Cleanup Grant amount that can be awarded for a single site to \$1 million and, in special circumstances, up to \$2 million.



## 3. Increase the Administrative Cap on Brownfields Program Grants

Congress should allow recipients to use a small portion of their grant to cover reasonable administrative costs such as rent, utilities and other expenses necessary to carry out a brownfields project. Additionally, Congress should recognize the complexity of the cleanup process for larger or more complicated brownfield sites by increasing the maximum Cleanup Grant amount that can be awarded for a single site to \$1 million and, in special circumstances, up to \$2 million.







# County Strategies for Brownfields Redevelopment

## Cochise County, Ariz.



Across the county, there are several brownfield projects that the county is revitalizing through the use of EPA grants. To date, the county has received two assessment grants and one revolving loan fund grant, totaling \$2.1 million dollars.

These funds are supporting the remediation and redevelopment of eighteen projects across the county from former schools and community centers to juvenile detention facilities, abandoned retail stores and auto repair businesses.

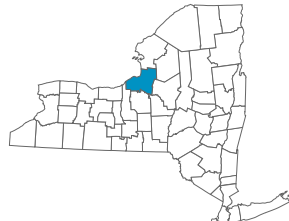
Cochise County is working with community partners, residents and business owners to nominate projects for redevelopment. Working with environmental consulting teams, the county is helping land owners conduct either a Phase I Environmental Site Assessment (ESA), Phase II ESA, Regulated Building Material (RBM) survey or create a site cleanup and reuse plan. Sites are selected and prioritized based on a coalition of county and community partners, and projects must have been potentially impacted by petroleum or hazardous substances.

The county received the first grant in 2019, and in 2022 was awarded additional funding to expand the program into 2026.

**Scan to learn more about the brownfield remediation project in Cochise County.**



## Oswego County, N.Y.



In 2022, Oswego County was awarded an EPA grant from funding authorized under the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) to conduct a community-wide assessment.

The grant provides \$500,000 to fund Phase I and Phase II ESA's throughout the county. Oswego County has already identified sixteen properties to undergo site assessments, and community members are encouraged to nominate additional sites for approval to the county's brownfields committee.

Sites were selected to align with community plans like the brownfield opportunity area, downtown revitalization initiative and local waterfront redevelopment projects. The current sites include a former manufacturing plants, an industrial steel site, roads, commercial stores and other vacant properties. County staff are conducting public outreach and starting Phase I assessments to several properties, with plans to conduct additional Phase I assessments and community outreach, and start Phase II assessments in 2024.

**Scan to learn more about the brownfield remediation project in Oswego County.**





## Humboldt County, Calif.



In 2010, an industrial pulp mill closed slowing business development within the county and leaving hazardous materials on the site. The site had initial cleanup in 2014 to remove millions of gallons of toxic liquors and chemicals, but concerns with lead contamination and other materials persisted.

In 2020, Humboldt County, along with a local nonprofit organization, received funding from the EPA to conduct the remaining cleanup activities at the site. The \$300,000 in funding includes \$100,000 to the county as part of a revolving loan fund, which the county will replay over a ten year period.

These funds are dedicated towards the led abatement of the pain that existed on the homes and structures within and around the plant. As part of this phase of the cleanup project the nonprofit partnering with the county will take possession of the property, clean up the contamination and return the land to public use as a historical and cultural site.

**Scan to learn more about the brownfield remediation project in Humboldt County.**



## Pocahontas County, W.Va.



Pocahontas County was awarded a \$500,000 from the EPA in 2023 to cleanup the site of a former leather company. The 11.6-acre section of land within the East Fork Industrial Park was the home of a leather tanning facility that supplied shoe sole leather and other supplies.

The facility, which was purchased by the county in 1995, has asbestos and heavy metals including arsenic, vanadium and lead, among others. Due to the hazardous materials, there are traces of contaminants in the soil and groundwater on the site. Using this grant, the county will be able to conduct site remediation efforts to prepare the land for redevelopment into a manufacturing facility.

To complete this project, the county has partnered with the town, private entities, the Greenbrier Valley Economic Development corporation and the state of West Virginia. Throughout the project timeline, the Commissioners will set aside time during bi-monthly meetings to hear public input and provide status updates on the project. Cleanup and remediation for the project is expected to take 36 months. After completion the county is predicting new economic investment in the form of an expansion of the nearby hardwood manufacturing business, an increase in local property values and addition of new jobs to the community.

**Scan to learn more about the brownfield remediation project in Pocahontas County.**





## Sources

EPA Brownfields Data: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency; Facility Registry Services (FRS), Assessment Cleanup and Redevelopment Exchange System (ACRES), November 3, 2023. Available at [www.epa.gov](http://www.epa.gov).

EPA Brownfields Overview: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency; Brownfields Program, November 3, 2023. Available at [www.epa.gov](http://www.epa.gov).

## Notes

All analyses are based on 3,069 counties with active county governments. Thus, Connecticut, Rhode Island and portions of Alaska and Massachusetts are excluded since they do not have active county governments. Independent cities in Virginia are also excluded from the analysis.




New York City is a consolidation of the five boroughs of the city of New York:

- Mahattan (New York County)
- The Bronx (Bronx County)
- Brooklyn (Kings County)
- Queens (Queens County)
- Staten Island (Richmond County)





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