

## Brownfields National Partnership



### Action Agenda

## The Preamble to the Brownfields National Partnership Action Agenda

May 1997

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### Purpose

The Brownfields National Partnership Action Agenda is based on the principle that we can assess, clean up and reuse contaminated properties. By linking environmental protection with economic development and community revitalization, we look to put in place a sustainable development program that differs from programs of the past. A program meeting community needs by bringing public and private organizations together to solve the problems of environmental contamination. The Brownfields National Partnership seeks to protect public health and the environment by cleaning up contaminated properties, creating jobs, providing opportunities for private investment and expanding local economies.

### Background

Our nation and world have undergone tremendous economic changes over the past several decades. As recently as 1950, almost one-third of all city jobs were in manufacturing. Over the past forty years, things have changed profoundly. Jobs have moved, from cities to suburbs, from north to south, offshore or overseas. Whole industries have left, decimating cities and regional economies. While businesses could move easily, communities could not. The businesses could start over; the communities were left with decayed sites, dilapidated buildings, and toxic waste. Contributing to the downward spiral of our cities and communities has been the both real and perceived possible public health effects from contamination, concerns regarding the implications and application of liability under environmental statutes, infrastructure declines, and changing development priorities. The result was the brownfields challenge -- how to reverse these trends and bring properties back into use for the benefit of their communities.

Brownfields are abandoned, idled, or under used industrial and commercial properties where real or perceived contamination complicates expansion or redevelopment. While the full extent of the brownfields problem is unknown, the United States General Accounting Office estimates that up to 450,000 brownfields sites exist in this country, affecting virtually every community in the nation.

Not every property with contamination is a brownfield. We deal with the worst sites in the country under the Comprehensive Environmental Response Compensation, and Liability Act (Superfund). These sites are placed on the National Priorities List, representing priority hazardous substance sites nationwide, and are not considered brownfields. Federal departments and agencies are also subject to the authority of Superfund, but their contaminated facilities are not considered brownfields, although they may share many of the same considerations. Although not brownfields, these Federal facilities can impact communities in similar ways and so we address them in this National Brownfields Partnership.

Our communities and their residents were hit hard by the nation's changing economic fortunes, but the good news is the revival beginning across the country. As the American economy rebuilds itself, the benefits of the new economy are spreading. Along with our general economic recovery, urban leaders have given new attention to addressing brownfields issues. Public and private solutions are now bubbling up all over the country.

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The United States Conference of Mayors has identified brownfields as the number one environmental issue in the nation today. They have urged the Federal government to invest in our cities' future by supporting the cleanup and redevelopment of brownfields. As an example of their commitment to these issues, the United States Conference of Mayors and the National Association of City/County Health Officials established a new Joint Center for Sustainable Communities to support sustainable development efforts such as brownfields redevelopment. Cities such as Pittsburgh, Cleveland and Chicago are making major investments in their own redevelopment.

States have had a longstanding role in dealing with the cleanup and reuse of contaminated properties. States developed voluntary cleanup programs to address the need for cleanup standards and oversight of brownfields cleanups, even before the term brownfields became widespread. More than thirty States now have such cleanup programs. They are trying new funding and oversight approaches in California, Ohio and Pennsylvania and other States.

Non-governmental responses have been emerging as well. Business groups have organized to find solutions. We see the creation of new companies to seek out brownfields properties as positive investment opportunities. Private foundations are beginning to support innovative projects to attack the problem. Brownfields stakeholders have held conferences, workshops and seminars across the country. The United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) joined with lenders, lawyers and religious leaders, to cosponsor a national conference on Brownfields in September 1996 that drew more than a thousand participants. Through all these efforts, a common thread has been the need to expand efforts at the local level, and perhaps more important, to link projects to maximize efficiency and reduce duplication.

Communities and local governments pushed EPA and the Federal government to help with the brownfields issue, an inherently local problem, but one repeated across the country. A series of public dialogues highlighted the need to address social and economic issues related to brownfields but beyond EPA's authority. Several principles emerged from the community-based discussions. Environmental cleanup should be a building block to economic redevelopment, not a stumbling block. Restoring contaminated property must go hand-in-hand with bringing economic vitality back to a community. Brownfields are not exclusively Federal, State or local concerns. Successful revitalization of brownfields property requires State, Federal, Tribal, and local governments working with private parties, nonprofit organizations and the local communities.

EPA responded to the public need with its Brownfields Economic Redevelopment Initiative. This Initiative empowers States, communities and a variety of other stakeholders in economic redevelopment to work together to assess, clean up and sustainably reuse brownfields. To carry out the Brownfields Initiative, EPA announced its initial Brownfields Action Agenda in 1995. The Action Agenda outlined four key activities for returning brownfields to productive reuse: awarding Brownfields Assessment Demonstration Pilots, clarifying liability and cleanup issues; building partnerships to all Brownfields stakeholders; and fostering local workforce development and job training initiatives.

By mid-1996, EPA completed all of its commitments on the Action Agenda. However, it became ever more clear that the problem required more interaction among all levels of government, communities, the private sector and non-governmental organizations. The President's Council on Sustainable Development supported this growing awareness, with recommendations emphasizing the need to expand the brownfields effort.

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Following the strong suggestions of a wide range of brownfields stakeholders, we established an Interagency Working Group on Brownfields in July 1996, including more than twenty Federal departments and agencies. The Working Group began drafting a national plan that would guide future work on brownfields. Agencies began to work both internally and jointly with other organizations to identify solutions to brownfields problems.

We held focus group meetings with a broad spectrum of stakeholders including States, local governments, business groups, financial organizations, environmentalists, foundations, public and private economic development practitioners, engineering groups, and community representatives. We consulted dozens of organizations and hundreds of people about the best course for brownfields. Our efforts resulted in the Brownfields National Partnership Action Agenda, a document that will lead into the next phase of brownfields redevelopment.

The Action Agenda described by the Brownfields National Partnership captures the essence of the evolving brownfields effort. It provides a framework for multi-level cooperation among governments, communities, businesses and non-governmental organizations. The Action Agenda recognizes that Federal brownfields efforts are reaching a point well beyond pilot and demonstration projects, requiring care to avoid redundancies and misunderstandings of respective roles. The Action Agenda builds on local efforts to address brownfields and the emergence of effective State voluntary cleanup programs to encourage and regulate brownfields cleanups. In addition, the Action Agenda provides a link between the cleanup and reuse of brownfields and other national trends including the growing understanding of sustainable development, the emerging importance of welfare-to-work initiatives, and the encouragement of community empowerment activities.

The Action Agenda itself can be described as an outline of the many tools available during the different phases of the brownfields redevelopment process. Each item in the agenda describes a specific action, who will take the action, and the benefit of the action. One can divide the various tools for dealing with brownfields into four broad categories: partnerships; streamlining; research; and community-based projects.

**Partnerships.** The successful cleanup and revitalization of brownfields require talking with and listening to other stakeholders. Partnership activities include conferences, workshops, agreements, technology transfer, and other ways of communicating and working together on brownfields.

**Streamlining.** Innovation is the keystone for brownfields cleanup and redevelopment. It includes reviewing and changing an organization or agency's internal policies to encourage brownfields activities and remove barriers to brownfields redevelopment. Streamlining tools include issuing guidance, revising policies and regulations, and even suggesting statutory improvements.

**Research.** A need exists to gather data and information, whether numerical or anecdotal, to inform decision-makers better. Research can include technical studies, data collection and analysis. It also includes public forums designed to gather information about needs and expectations regarding brownfields. We are developing innovative approaches through the experience from brownfields pilots and other community-based programs and this valuable information must be gathered and subsequently shared.

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Community-Based Projects. This is where the partnerships, streamlining and research described above come to fruition in real projects at the local level. The centerpiece of the Brownfields National Partnership will be the selection of 10 Showcase Communities. The Showcase Communities will show the effectiveness of collaborative approaches to brownfields. The Showcase Communities will serve as national models of sustainable solutions that communities throughout the nation can copy and learn from.

Community-based projects also include grants and loans to communities for inventorying, assessing, cleaning up, and redeveloping property, and for training and supporting workers in jobs related to brownfields projects. This support has proven to be a valuable aid to communities and organizations embarking on brownfields projects.

These tools -- partnerships, streamlining, research and community-based projects -- come into play during the interlinked phases of a brownfields project. While every site is unique, generally predevelopment work such as initial planning and community involvement activities must occur to build a solid foundation for the work to come. Typically, as part of environmental response activity, the property undergoes assessment and cleanup. Brownfields projects do not end with the cleanup, they occur in tandem with redevelopment activities undertaken by communities and developers who work together to ensure the presence of infrastructure and other improvements necessary to make a site attractive. Finally, they develop a new use for a property -- a use appropriate for the community and the environment. Reuses of brownfields properties range from heavy industrial to recreational, but most properties move toward light industrial or commercial uses. Sustaining that reuse means ensuring that workers have the employment, training, health, transportation, environmental protection and other social support necessary to maintain jobs over time. The Action Agenda addresses all these aspects of the brownfields process with specific promises for action by appropriate agencies and organizations.

## **Conclusion**

The Brownfields National Partnership is a comprehensive, community-based approach to the cleanup and redevelopment of contaminated property. Brownfields provide a focal point for integrating key aspects of modern life to achieve sustainable development: jobs, economic development, health, environmental protection, transportation, finance, training and education. We designed the Brownfields National Partnership around the principles of protecting health and the environment, enhancing public participation in local decision-making, building safe and sustainable communities through public-private partnerships, and recognizing that environmental protection can be an engine powering sustainable economic development. Through the Brownfields National Partnership, we will strengthen communities, bringing all levels of government together with business, non-governmental organizations, and local communities to develop local solutions to local problems.

## **Contact**

Linda Garczynski, U.S. EPA- OSPS  
Phone: 202-260-4039  
Facsimile: 202-260-6606

Or, visit the EPA Brownfields Website at: <http://www.epa.gov/brownfields>