

Frequently Asked Questions

2022–2025 Grass Valley USEPA Brownfields Assessment Grant

Managed by the
City of Grass Valley



Funded by the
United States Environmental Protection Agency



USEPA Brownfields Grant #98T42301

Q: What is a Brownfields site?

A: A Brownfields site is real property which may have the presence, potential presence, or perception of impacts to the property by a hazardous substance, pollutant, or contaminant. These factors can complicate the development or reuse of properties.

Q: How does the USEPA's Brownfields Grant Program benefit my community?

A: The USEPA's Brownfields Program empowers states, communities, and other stakeholders to work together to assess, safely clean up and sustainably reuse Brownfields. Cleaning and reusing contaminated properties is the catalyst to improving the lives of nearby residents by reducing threats to human health and the environment, creating green jobs, promoting community involvement, and attracting investment in local neighborhoods. In 2009, 2012, 2013, 2017, and again in 2022, the City of Grass Valley successfully secured federal grant funds to continue the process of revitalizing former industrial and commercial sites by turning them from “problem” properties to ones with productive business and community uses. The program has allowed the City to proactively address contaminated properties that provide important economic development opportunities for the community.

Q: What does the 2022 USEPA Community-Wide Assessment Grant fund?

A: The 2022 USEPA Community-Wide Assessment Grant provides almost \$500,000 to assess and perform cleanup planning for key properties impacted by historical mining activities and other historical industrial operations. Site assessment is focused on properties within the City of Grass Valley's sphere of influence (the City limits and the surrounding community). Properties are selected by the City of Grass Valley for their redevelopment potential, with input from the community and property owner consent.

Q: What was accomplished under the previous 2017 USEPA Brownfields Grant?

A: The previous USEPA grant-funded assessment, cleanup planning (if necessary), and regulatory review for eleven properties totaling 386 acres. Some of the properties were cleared for redevelopment. Cleanup plans were prepared for seven properties comprising 229 acres of land. The cleanup plans address 148,600 cubic yards of mining contamination. That's enough mine waste and contaminated soil to fill 70 football fields to a depth of one foot.

Q: What happens next?

A: More work is needed. The California Department of Conservation estimates 2,660 abandoned mine sites are present in the Nevada County area. The City of Grass Valley has selected additional key properties for assessment under the 2022 grant. Four of the properties are slated for medium to high-density residential infill development, one of the properties is being assessed for renewable energy (solar) development, and one of the properties is proposed for sustainable agriculture and a community recreation center. The USEPA funding will result in approved cleanup plans, which will leverage public funding for infrastructure improvements and private dollars for construction of much-needed housing, and will also eliminate exposure risks to neighboring residential properties.

Q: What's the difference between a Phase I and Phase II Environmental Site Assessment (ESA)?

A: A Phase I ESA is intended to research current and past uses of a property with respect to chemical usage and storage. It includes an inspection of the property to observe current uses and conditions, research of historical records, interviews, and review of regulatory databases and agency files for information regarding the use, storage, and known or possible releases of hazardous substances and/or petroleum on the property and adjoining properties that could negatively impact the subject property.

A Phase II ESA is intended to characterize the conditions identified as part of the Phase I ESA, and includes the sampling and analysis of soil, sediment, soil vapor, air, surface water and/or groundwater to evaluate whether hazardous substances or petroleum products have been released onto a property and whether further investigation is needed. Additional investigation may be required after a Phase II ESA to determine the full scope of the impacts, assess the potential risks to human health and the environment, and design corrective actions.

Q: Who is performing the assessments for the City?

A: The City has retained Geocon Consultants, Inc. (www.geoconinc.com) to perform the assessments. Geocon has been part of the City's assessment team on several previous Brownfields projects.

Q: Is there a Remedial Action Workplan (RAW) available for public comment on the South Auburn parcel?

A: The consultant team performed additional ecological testing as part of the previous assessment grant and prepared a RAW (cleanup plan) that addresses both the Village at South Auburn property and the adjacent Empire Meadows property. The RAW was approved by the Department of Toxic Substances Control (DTSC) and is available for review from the City of Grass Valley. Before the cleanup is performed, the RAW will be subject to a 30-day public review and comment period.

Q: Where can I find out more about the USEPA Brownfields program?

A: More information is available online at: <http://www.epa.gov/brownfields/index.html>

Q: Where can I find out more about local and regional parcels that have been evaluated and/or cleaned up by the state?

A: DTSC's EnviroStor data management system is an online repository of information on properties being investigated for hazardous substances and/or petroleum products. You can access the EnviroStor database at: <http://www.envirostor.dtsc.ca.gov/public/>. The California State Water Resources Control Board (SWRCB) GeoTracker web portal is also available to search for specific cleanup sites and environmental data for regulated facilities in California: <http://geotracker.waterboards.ca.gov/>.

Q: Should I be concerned about hazardous substances or petroleum products on my property?

A: Yes, we should be concerned about pollution and contaminants that may be found on Brownfields properties and learn whether the levels of contamination and potential exposure are a threat to human health and the environment. Lead, arsenic, mercury, and other heavy metals that can be found on properties sometimes come from the Gold Rush and lumber mill operations of our past. These contaminants can pose a public health threat at higher concentrations and where they are subject to routine contact. It's important to not assume the worst – and it's important to not ignore the potential threat. Our goal is to assess the properties and select corrective actions to protect public health and the environment. Regulatory review and approval is required for the assessments and corrective action designs.

Q: Where can I learn more about historic mining impacts in our region?

A: In 2006, the local non-profit organization The Sierra Fund (TSF) launched an initiative to assess and address the ongoing human health, environmental and cultural impacts of legacy mining in the Sierra Nevada. The findings of their two-year investigation are documented in the report "[Mining's Toxic Legacy](#)." In 2020, TSF released a whitepaper entitled "[Revitalization of Mine-Impacted Lands: Due Diligence in the Sierra Nevada Gold Country](#)" which outlines a strategy to finally remediate California's dangerous legacy mines so that headwater and downstream communities' water, soil, and air support healthy places to live, work, and thrive. All of TSF's publications are available to download for free at: <https://www.sierrafund.org/publications/>. TSF hosts a biennial conference to gather scientists, agency representatives, researchers, non-profit leaders, and the public together in order to explore the pervasive impacts of the Gold Rush on the people, lands, and waters of the state.