

# Frequently Asked Questions

Updated for the  
2017 US EPA Brownfields Assessment Grant

## Gold Country Coalition

City of Grass Valley • City of Nevada City • County of Nevada



Funded by the  
United States Environmental Protection Agency



EPA Brownfields Grant #99T62701

### **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 US EPA's Brownfields Grant Program benefit my community?**

A: The EPA'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 and again in 2017, the City of Grass Valley successfully secured federal grant funds to begin a 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.

Under the 2017 Brownfields Assessment Grant, the City of Grass Valley took the lead and partnered with the City of Nevada City and Nevada County to form the Gold Country Coalition, in order to enhance local agency collaboration to achieve regional Brownfields redevelopment goals. The Coalition provides a forum in which the partners can align redevelopment strategies, leverage funding and develop a road map for land revitalization. In addition, the City of Nevada City has separately been awarded three US EPA Brownfields grants, and a fourth grant was secured by the Yuba River Charter School. The success of local agencies and organizations in competing for Brownfields funding demonstrates a regional commitment to sustainable redevelopment and protecting public health.

**Q: What exactly did the 2017 grant fund?**

A: The 2017 US EPA Brownfields Coalition Assessment Grant provided almost \$600,000 to the Gold Country Coalition (City of Grass Valley, City of Nevada City and County of Nevada) to assess and perform cleanup planning for key properties impacted by historic mining activities. Site assessment was focused on properties selected by the Gold Country Coalition for their redevelopment potential, with input from the community.

**Q: What was accomplished under the 2017 grant?**

A: The \$600,000 US EPA Brownfields Site-Specific Assessment Grant funded the assessment of eleven properties totaling 386 acres; all of these sites were close to population centers. Seven cleanup plans were prepared for 229 acres of property which characterized about 148,600 cubic yards of mining contamination. US EPA grant funds were also used to pay for California Department of Toxic Substance Control (DTSC) review and approval of the cleanup plans, and to conduct community outreach activities, which were led by The Sierra Fund.

**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 City prepared and submitted a new grant application to the EPA in December 2021. The City of Grass Valley has selected five additional key properties for assessment under the proposed FY22 grant. Four of the properties are slated for medium to high-density residential infill development, and one of the properties is proposed for sustainable agriculture uses and a community recreation facility. The US EPA 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. Funding was also requested to assist with planning efforts around abandoned mining complexes in Grass Valley's Sphere of Influence, and to evaluate the possibility of land reuse for renewable (solar) energy. If the grant is awarded, a public meeting will be held to discuss the proposed assessments and ask for community input.

**Q: What was accomplished under the 2013 grant?**

A: The City of Grass Valley applied for and received a US EPA Brownfields Assessment Grant to conduct a city-wide assessment of Brownfields properties over a period of 3 years. The grant provided \$200,000 to assess properties contaminated by hazardous substances, and \$200,000 to assess sites contaminated by petroleum products. Funds were used to inventory and prioritize Brownfields in four target areas consisting of commercial or industrial corridors within the City.

Accomplishments under the 2013 grant included conducting property assessments to owners at no cost. Consultants retained by the City (Geocon, Inc. and Holdrege & Kull) prepared a site inventory and conducted ten Phase I Environmental Site Assessments (ESAs - see below for explanation), seven Phase II ESAs, two Preliminary Endangerment Assessments (PEAs) and one Removal Action Workplan (RAW) to characterize key redevelopment properties impacted by hazardous substances and petroleum products. Grant funds were also used to support community outreach activities, led by The Sierra Fund.

**Q: What was accomplished under the 2012 grant?**

A: The \$200,000 US EPA Brownfields Site-Specific Assessment Grant funded the assessment and cleanup planning for seven properties located on South Auburn Street that were impacted by historic gold mining activity. Grant funding was used to perform a hazardous materials site investigation to characterize heavy metals including mercury in a proposed residential area and a wetland impacted by 16,000 cubic yards of mine tailings. In addition, historic aerial deposition of heavy metals from nearby historic gold milling processes was examined. US EPA funding was used to pay for sampling and laboratory analysis, human and ecological risk assessment, biota sampling for an ecological validation study, and preparation of a cleanup plan. US EPA grant funds were also used to pay for California Department of Toxic Substance Control (DTSC) fees, and to conduct community outreach activities, which were led by The Sierra Fund.

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

A: A Phase I ESA is primarily an effort 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 historical records, analyze local soil and groundwater conditions and review regulatory databases and agency files for information regarding the use, storage and known or possible releases of hazardous substances and/or petroleum on a property or on adjacent properties that could negatively impact the subject property.

A Phase II ESA consists of collecting and analyzing samples of soil, sediment, soil vapor, air, surface water and/or groundwater to evaluate if hazardous substances or petroleum products have been released onto a property and, if so, whether levels warrant further investigation. Phase II ESAs determine the full scope of the impacts and possible corrective actions to reduce resulting threats to human health and the environment.

**Q: Who is doing the assessments for the City?**

A: The City has retained NV5 (NV5.com; formerly Holdrege & Kull), who formed an assessment team including Geocon, Inc. ([www.geoconinc.com](http://www.geoconinc.com)), Sierra Streams Institute ([www.sierrastreamsinstitute.org](http://www.sierrastreamsinstitute.org)) and The Sierra Fund ([www.sierrafund.org](http://www.sierrafund.org)) to assist the City with work under the grants.

**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 current Assessment Grant, and prepared a new RAW including both the Village at South Auburn property and the

adjacent Empire Meadows property. After the RAW is approved by DTSC, it will be made available to the public for a 30-day review and comment period.

**Q: Where can I find more information or receive updates about the City's Brownfields projects?**

A: More information can be found on The Sierra Fund's website at:  
<http://www.sierrafund.org/projects/gvbrownfields/>

**Q: Where can I find out more about the US EPA Brownfields program?**

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

**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 database 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: Potentially, we should be concerned about pollution and contaminants that may be found on Brownfields properties and learn if the levels of contamination and potential exposure are a threat to human health and the environment. Lead, arsenic, mercury and 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 depending on the quantity and bio-availability on a property. This is why both cities and Nevada County have applied for and obtained EPA funds to assess properties and when appropriate take action to remove or reduce public health and environmental exposure. It's important to not assume the worst – and it's important to not ignore the potential threat. We must get the scientific information on the presence and extent of contamination to guide remediation actions when needed as soon as possible.

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

A: In 2006, The Sierra Fund 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 its two-year investigation are documented in the report "[Mining's Toxic Legacy](#)." In 2020, The Sierra Fund 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 TFS's publications are available to download for free at: <https://www.sierrafund.org/publications/>. TFS hosts a biennial conference to gather scientists, agency representatives, researchers, nonprofit 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.