

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 is partnering 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 does the 2017 grant fund?

A: The 2017 US EPA Brownfields Coalition Assessment Grant provides 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. Assessment of sites will be focused on properties selected by the Gold Country Coalition for their redevelopment potential, with input from the community.

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 Geocon, Inc. (www.geoconinc.com), Holdrege & Kull, an NV5 Company (H&K/NV5) (www.handk.net), Sierra Streams Institute (www.sierrastreamsinstitute.org) and The Sierra Fund (www.sierrafund.org) to assist the City with work under the grants. Geocon and H&K/NV5 have teamed for this program because of Geocon's extensive Brownfields assessment and cleanup planning experience and H&K/NV5's local presence and site-specific knowledge of properties in the community.

Q: How can I find out if I'm eligible to participate in this program?

A: You may contact Tom Last, City of Grass Valley, (530-274-4711, toml@cityofgrassvalley.com), or Jason Muir, H&K/NV5 (530-478-1305, jason.muir@NV5.com) to inquire about the program and to provide information regarding your property that will help to determine if the property is eligible. Properties must be within the targeted assessment areas (city limits or areas planned for annexation) and meet the eligibility requirements established by the EPA. Eligibility is determined primarily through an evaluation of property ownership/tenancy and the history of hazardous substance and/or petroleum usage on the property.

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

A: The draft RAW for the South Auburn parcel has been reviewed by DTSC, who requires additional biological testing prior to approving the proposed cleanup plans. The consultant team intends to perform the additional testing as part of the current Assessment Grant. After the RAW is approved by DTSC, then 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 City's website at: <http://www.cityofgrassvalley.com/news-update/public-meeting-gold-country-coalition-brownfields-assessment-grant-june-27-2018-600-730> or 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: <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 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: It is understandable to be concerned if you suspect that a past use of your property may have involved hazardous substances or petroleum. The use, storage and even the disposal of hazardous substances and/or petroleum on your property may not have resulted in a release that threatens human health or the environment. Conducting a Phase I and II ESA can determine the presence and/or levels of contaminants on your property. Grass Valley has served as a commercial center since the Gold Rush of the 1850s. It was home to some of the highest-producing gold mines on the West Coast, as well as several lumber mill operations. There are approximately 2,660 mining sites in or near the City of Grass Valley, ranging in size from 50 to 100 acres. Although mining and lumber milling are no longer significant contributors to the area's economy, the effects of these operations still present environmental challenges.

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 their two year investigation are documented in the report "[Mining's Toxic Legacy](#)." Read more about TSF's research on the pathways of human exposure to mining contaminants in the [Recreational Trails and Abandonment Mine Assessment Report](#), and the [Gold Country Angler Survey Report](#). 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, 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. Their next conference will be held in 2019. Learn more at: <https://reclaimingthesierra.org/>