



Status Report: Initiatives to Develop Web Sites Including Information about Brownfields Properties



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Including Information about
Brownfields Properties**

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
Office of Solid Waste and Emergency Response
Technology Innovation Office
Washington, DC 20460

STATUS REPORT:
INITIATIVES TO DEVELOP WEB SITES INCLUDING INFORMATION
ABOUT BROWNFIELDS PROPERTIES

NOTICE

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KEY FINDINGS

- There currently are numerous efforts at national, state, and local levels to develop web sites and data bases including information about brownfields properties.
- Developing web sites and databases is costly, but there are opportunities to leverage the experiences of others and combine efforts to save resources and time.
- A minimum number of data elements must be present to describe brownfields properties in order for web sites to be a useful tool.
- Many issues and concerns may inhibit the effectiveness of web sites as sources of public information about brownfields properties.

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1.0 BACKGROUND

In March 2000, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Office of Solid Waste and Emergency Response (OSWER) undertook a study to assess the feasibility of establishing a national brownfields site exchange web site (exchange). Such a web site might enhance the exchange of information nationally between owners of brownfields properties and potential purchasers thereof. Owners or purchasers of brownfields properties could include local, state, and federal agencies; tribal governments; local businesses; national corporations; developers; realtors; and investors. EPA believed the exchange could help companies that offer site characterization and remediation services, innovative approaches and technologies for cleaning up sites, and other services supporting the cleanup of brownfields properties. The study revealed a number of hurdles that make it difficult for EPA to proceed with the establishment of the exchange, and EPA has determined that other organizations may be better suited to proceed with that effort.

EPA believes that the result of the study is the most comprehensive analysis that has been conducted of web sites and databases (both referred to as web sites in this report) that include information about current and planned brownfields properties. EPA is providing this report about the study and its findings to assist other organizations developing and operating web sites that include information about such properties. Appendix A to this report describes the approach to the study.

A number of cities, states, associations, non-profit organizations, and others have developed or are planning web sites related to brownfields properties. Because many of the web sites appear to be similar, there may be opportunities to share information and combine efforts. The various web sites exhibit similarities in the configuration and information reported for given properties. Because the development and operation of comprehensive web sites can require extensive resources, individuals who are designing and operating them are encouraged to review other web sites and communicate with others who have undertaken similar initiatives to determine opportunities to leverage individual efforts and thus save time and money.

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In addition to including basic information about the properties listed, such as location, size, zoning, and ownership, many web sites include other information to assist potential buyers in making initial evaluations of properties. Such information includes: (1) tax and other incentives being offered, (2) the type(s) of contamination, (3) the extent to which contamination at the property has been characterized, and (4) links to other web sites that provide more detailed information about the properties listed.

Drawing on the findings of the study, EPA prepared an optional web site design that presents one possible approach to designing a web site and a sample functional requirements document. This report discusses both tools in more detail.

Once a web site has been constructed, the operator of the system may have neither the capability nor the resources to collect and routinely update data on large numbers of brownfields properties, particularly in the case of national efforts that could involve thousands of properties. This report identifies potential relationships with state and federal agencies, associations, and private companies that may be willing to promote the collection of information and support the operation of web sites developed by other entities.

2.0 FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The key findings of the research of other web sites and discussions with potential users of the exchange and staff of other federal agencies are discussed below.

- Most individuals with experience in developing web sites are willing to share lessons learned, and those considering the development of web sites would like to identify opportunities to work with others to save time and money.
- Most individuals and organizations that participated in the discussions supported the concept of a national web site and expressed the belief that local, state, and federal brownfields programs could benefit from such a web site; however, at the time the study was conducted, they were not able to make firm commitments to provide either information for the web site or operational resources.
- Currently, national web sites contain minimal information about individual brownfields properties; the operators are exploring methods of obtaining additional information about such properties and keeping that information current.

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- Some states currently operate web sites dedicated to listing brownfields properties. Other states have web sites of environmentally impaired sites, in which brownfields properties are included as a subset. Appendix B to this report is a list of states that were contacted to determine whether they have collected or plan to collect information about brownfield properties and make that information available to the public.
- The web site designs that several states have developed could serve as a basis for other entities developing similar web sites. Using those web sites could keep to a minimum the resources necessary to develop new web sites. It appears that the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania has the most comprehensive web site of brownfields properties in the nation. Second is the state of New Jersey, which has developed a comprehensive database to be used as the basis for a web site. Massachusetts also has a web site of brownfields information; however it includes only a limited number of sites. Appendix C to this report shows the items of information the three states are interested in collecting and the number of properties in their systems. Appendix C also includes a comparison of the items of information for each of the three states, to the items of information included in the optional web site design prepared by EPA (see Section 3.0).
- There is a national database for properties potentially available for redevelopment under the DoD Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) program; however, the information in it may not be complete because local redevelopment authorities (LRA) have primary responsibility for managing the transfer of DoD properties at their level, and thus maintain information about their assigned properties. EPA held discussions with several LRAs that were developing web sites. Representatives of those LRAs indicated a willingness to continue discussions about the development of a national web site.
- Emerging from the study were a number potential challenges to the development and operation of web sites providing information about brownfields. The challenges arise whether the effort is a local, regional, state, or national one. They are:
 - There is no regulatory mandate or other significant motivating factor that encourages the development of comprehensive lists of brownfields properties. The most significant motivation appears to be at the city and state level where inventories of brownfields properties are helpful to establish a clearer picture of where such properties are located, to determine the status of cleanup efforts, and to track grants and other funds awarded to support redevelopment.
 - Generally, government agencies do not appear to have the level of resources necessary to give priority to the development and operation of web sites that include information about brownfields properties. Similarly, it appears that private organizations and associations may not have the resources necessary for a major effort.
 - Because they consider the “brownfields” designation negative, many property owners are reluctant to include their properties in lists of brownfields properties that will be available to the general public and to regulatory agencies.

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- There may be legal ramifications associated with advertising or otherwise implying that a property is for sale merely because it appears on a list of brownfields properties. An agreement may be required between property owners and operators of web sites to verify the owners' desire to list the property and offer it for sale.
- Developers, realtors, and others who receive a fee for their role in property transactions could lose those fees if bypassed via public web sites; they may resist the use of such web sites.

3.0 OPTIONAL WEB SITE DESIGN

To assist others in developing their web sites, EPA prepared an optional web site design based upon the review of current web sites and web sites being planned. The structure and data elements of the optional design are built upon components found frequently in other web sites and appear to be widely accepted. The optional design includes approximately 60 data elements, selected on the basis of the review of the other web sites, as well as discussions with potential users. A key factor was an effort to strike a balance between the traditional items that purchasers of commercial properties request to support evaluation of properties and the information that describes the extent to which a purchaser must resolve potential cleanup and liability issues associated with brownfields properties. Although many potential buyers of properties suggested other items in addition to those included in the optional design, it encompasses the majority of the information items found in current web sites or those are being considered for web sites under design.

The optional design is available at <http://clu-in.org/bfwebsite>. Appendix D reports information about the optional design. The optional design includes a search function using combinations of parameters and links to other web sites to provide more detailed information about the properties listed and the capability to provide printed reports.

The optional design suggests a **minimum set of data elements** that should be present if the property is to be listed on the web site. The 13 elements are:

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- | | |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| • Street name | • Proposed zoning |
| • City | • Status of site investigation |
| • County | • Status of remediation |
| • State | • Redevelopment incentives |
| • Zip code | • Contact name |
| • Size | • Contact phone number |
| • Public or private ownership | |

The items were selected because: (1) they are likely to be the minimum elements that a prospective purchaser of the property requires to determine whether the property is of interest and (2) it is reasonable to assume that the items will be available for a large number of brownfields properties. Providing information about the city, county, state, or Zip code allows users of the system to search the properties at a variety of levels. Operators of individual web sites can modify the minimum data elements to meet the needs of the potential users of their system.

To maximize the use of information available in local, state, or other web sites across the United States, it may be possible to design a national web site to serve as a central link for all. One option could be to use the minimum required data elements as a basis for the links. If the operators of the web sites agree to use the minimum data points for their systems, a national web site could function as a search engine for those systems.

4.0 SAMPLE FUNCTIONAL REQUIREMENTS DOCUMENT

The sample functional requirements document included in Appendix E to this report presents a general framework for the development of more detailed procedures that may be necessary to operate a web site with information about brownfields properties. The sample functional requirements document is based upon the optional web site design prepared by EPA. The functional requirements document describes the relationship between the screens of the web site, procedures for entering data to the web site, definitions of the suggested minimum data elements that must be present for each property, procedures for searching the web site, and a sample search report. The sample functional requirements document also is available at <http://clu-in.org/bfwebsite>.

5.0 SUGGESTIONS FOR PROCEEDING

Drawing on the findings of its study, EPA offers the following suggestions to assist others who are planning, designing, and operating web sites that include information about brownfields properties:

- *Consider the requirements of all potential users of a web site:* To help ensure the success of a web site, discussions should be held with target audiences that could benefit from the site. Those audiences might include national corporations that purchase brownfields properties, as well as associations with members who have redeveloped brownfields properties successfully and actively seek new opportunities. The optional web site design prepared by EPA can be used as a basis for further discussions about the items of information that would be most useful to users of a web site.
- *Identify opportunities to build on lessons learned:* The study revealed that many cities, states, private parties, and other entities are embarking on individual efforts to develop and operate web sites. Because many of those systems will be similar to one another, efforts might be combined to save time and money. The information obtained through the study could be used to guide that process. Any resources saved when developing web sites could be used instead to gather, enter, and maintain complete and current property information in the web site.
- *Identify opportunities to share information:* A variety of entities have expended vast resources to plan and design web sites. Increasing communication among potential users and operators of web sites to identify common needs and approaches could save significant funds.
- *Define actions and resources for moving forward:* Any effort to list information about the potentially thousands of brownfield properties across the nation will require a well-defined plan and extensive resources. The steps to be taken in a national effort must be defined and shared with all stakeholders in the process. Once the steps have been defined, an estimate of the resources necessary can be made. Then parties could begin to allocate the resources necessary to accelerate the concept.
- *Encourage the sharing of views and the development of strategic alliances:* During the study, EPA held discussions with a cross-section of potential users of web sites. However, because the potential number of users is large, additional discussions are warranted to ensure all valid views are represented. Many individuals, government agencies, associations, and other entities have worked on brownfields web sites. However, much of the work to date has been performed by individuals working on their own. It would be beneficial to identify opportunities to bring those entities together to form strategic alliances and partnerships as a means of maximizing resources and “brainpower.”
- *Identify past and current efforts:* It would be beneficial to identify efforts by local, state, and federal agencies and other entities that can serve as a basis for others to consider.

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The efforts should include both web site designs and procedures for the collection and maintenance of information about properties. Information about efforts that have not been successful also should be shared.