



St. Helens Brownfields Assessment Program Frequently Asked Questions

What is a brownfield?

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA), a brownfield is defined as real property, the expansion, redevelopment, or reuse of which may be complicated by the presence or potential presence of hazardous substances, pollutants, contaminants, controlled substances, petroleum or petroleum products, or is mine-scarred land.

What are the impacts of brownfields on communities?

The impacts of brownfields can extend beyond the boundaries of the property to affect the surrounding community and environment. Left in their current state, these properties can:

- Harm human health and the environment
- Become eyesores and contribute to blight
- Limit economic growth and development
- Reduce employment opportunities and tax revenue
- Reduce surrounding property values
- Contribute to neighborhood crime

People often think of contaminated properties as large factories in big cities, but most sites are small properties such as former gas stations, repair shops, and dry cleaners. In smaller communities the impact of these sites can be disproportionately large.

What is the St. Helens Brownfields Assessment Program?

The St. Helens Brownfields Assessment Program is funded through a USEPA Community-Wide Assessment (CWA) grant, which supports environmental investigation of properties that are suspected of being contaminated. The CWA grant also supports market studies for future redevelopment of these properties, community engagement activities, and land use planning.

This grant allows the City to work with property owners who think that the historic use of their property may have led to real or perceived contamination and provide them with the resources to conduct environmental assessments on their property. The City is recruiting interested property owners to partner with in this endeavor. If you are interested in learning more about this process, please contact:

Jennifer Dimsho

503-366-8207

jdimsho@ci.st-helens.or.us

You can also learn more about this program online: <https://www.ci.st-helens.or.us/planning/page/epa-cwa-program-2017-2019>

What does it mean for a property to be “contaminated?”

There are two main categories of contamination: hazardous materials and petroleum. Hazardous materials tend to include metals such as lead, chemicals used by the historic owner (such as those used for dry cleaning, wood treating, mechanical repair, etc.), and asbestos in old structures. Petroleum is often found around old automotive shops and gas stations that have or had underground storage tanks, fueling operations, and used petroleum products for operations.

What does it mean for a property to be “cleaned up?”

There are essentially three ways to clean up a property:

1. **Dig & Haul:** Dig out contaminated soil and haul it away
2. **Treat in Place:** Use technologies that can treat the soil or groundwater in the ground
3. **Engineering Controls:** Measures that bound contamination so that it is contained in place

These options vary in price and the extent to which the contamination is fully removed. It is rare that every inch of contaminated soil must be removed from a property. What cleanup really does is break the pathways of exposure. This means figuring out how humans and the environment could be exposed to contamination (i.e. through breathing in vapors, coming into contact with soil, or drinking the water) and putting in barriers to keep that from happening, such as vapor barriers, soil caps, and water treatment.

The extent to which contaminated soil or groundwater needs to be removed depends on how the affected property (or properties in the event contamination has migrated with groundwater flow) will be used. If the site is going to be used for new offices, the office building and parking lot can act as a cap that prevents contact with the subsurface contamination. Whereas, if the site is going to become a park where people frequently come into contact with the soil or groundwater, some amount of dig and haul will be required to eliminate exposure.

If my property is contaminated, am I responsible for cleaning it up?

The legal framework around contaminated property is built so that the current property owner is responsible even if he/she did not cause the pollution. Unless they have been granted liability protection from Oregon Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ). City staff can help explain these programs if you are concerned or interested.

How can this grant help me if I think my property is contaminated?

CWA grant funds can provide funding for environmental investigations to help you find out if your property is contaminated or get documentation asserting that there is no reason to suspect contamination. If some contamination is found, the grant can help create a plan to clean up the property and a market study to provide information about what types of development might suit the property. Remember that the extent (and thus cost) of cleanup depends on what you use the property for in the future.

Wouldn't it be better to sell the property rather than do the environmental investigation and find out the property is contaminated?

While it is certainly a bit scary to suspect that your property might have some contamination, selling without an environmental investigation is hard to do. In order to get a loan to buy a property, most banks require a Phase 1 environmental site assessment (like the ones funded by the CWA grant) before issuing the loan. By going through this process, the City can use these funds to help make the property *more marketable* if you wish to sell it.

How can I become involved in this program?

If you believe your property may be contaminated and are interested in using some of the City's grant funding to investigate the site, please contact:

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