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# Reclaiming Rural America's Brownfields: Alternatives to Abandoned Property



A Report by the  
National Association of Development  
Organizations Research Foundation  
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**D**uring NADO's first year of research under a cooperative agreement with the US Environmental Protection Agency, staff members gathered and assessed a small focus group of members to discuss obstacles to redeveloping brownfields in small metropolitan and rural America. The information gathered was featured in *Reclaiming Rural America's Brownfields: A National Report on Rural Brownfields Redevelopment*, which was published by the NADO Research Foundation in January 2000. This report, *Reclaiming Rural America's Brownfields: Alternatives to Abandoned Property*, is the culmination of a second year of expanded research under the cooperative agreement with EPA, to evaluate the involvement of small metropolitan and rural communities in brownfields assessment, cleanup and redevelopment. Research activities included an assessment of the brownfields activities of a representative sample of 350 small metropolitan and rural regional development organizations. To supplement this information, site visits to rural communities at various stages in the process of brownfields redevelopment were made. The results from this expanded research reinforce findings from the NADO Research Foundation's previous research: small metropolitan and rural communities experience many obstacles to redeveloping brownfields sites, including lack of funding, staff expertise and time; liability concerns and property issues.

NADO staff visited and spoke with many people about the actual everyday activities of brownfields assessment, cleanup and redevelopment in small metropolitan and rural communities. From organizations involved in the three primary phases— identification, cleanup and redevelopment — and others who have finished brownfields redevelopment projects, staff learned about numerous approaches to brownfields redevelopment. There are many factors in the success of brownfields redevelopment and many factors that prevent regional organizations from incorporating brownfields redevelopment into their economic strategies.

NADO's research has added value: it is increasing awareness of brownfields redevelopment and the positive benefits it yields to a broad audience throughout small metropolitan and rural America. More regions are applying to EPA for Demonstration Pilot grants and Targeted Brownfields Assessments. However, small and rural communities are still not receiving the funds and assistance they need. According to some organizations, the matching requirements for federal funding are often difficult for a small community with limited funds. In addition, many of these communities are simply not receiving grants. There is a need for more technical assistance to these communities.

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Rural communities considering brownfields redevelopment face obstacles unique and almost nonexistent to urban communities. These obstacles include:

- ◆ Remote and rural geographic location often inhibits economic growth, making it difficult to recruit new and/or retain existing businesses and difficult to justify funding brownfields redevelopment.
- ◆ Costs associated with brownfields cleanup and redevelopment often far exceed costs of developing abundant green space.
- ◆ Absence of funds necessary to recruit expertise required to manage a brownfields redevelopment project.
- ◆ Lack of a formal self-help network of other rural development practitioners involved in brownfields redevelopment to share experiences and exchange information.

The redevelopment of brownfields holds promise as an essential component of economic development strategies for rural and smaller communities. Many are beginning to find a lack of developable space for plant locations and expansions within their boundaries. Other communities are increasingly concerned about preserving their green space. Some communities have brownfields sites in the middle of an ongoing revitalization effort. Brownfields redevelopment has the potential to clean up and redevelop abandoned buildings and sites that can then be returned to productive use, in the process saving green spaces. Faced with increasing outmigration and severe unemployment, many distressed small metropolitan and rural communities need a boost in terms of job creation and revenue generation. This type of development can also prevent the loss of economic activity to surrounding communities. The benefits of brownfields redevelopment are very real.

*Reclaiming Rural America's Brownfields: Alternatives to Abandoned Property* profiles 16 communities from 12 states that have embraced brownfields redevelopment as a critical component of their economic strategies. These profiles offer strong examples of communities throughout small metropolitan and rural America that are overcoming obstacles to turn abandoned property into businesses, homes, parks and tourism opportunities. Throughout the report, there is information about funding resources and technical assistance. The document highlights findings and recommendations from the initial year of research, aimed at promoting brownfields redevelopment more aggressively throughout rural and small metropolitan America.

# Findings and recommendations

## 1 Federal and state agencies should collaborate with regional development organizations to promote rural brownfields redevelopment.

The US Government Accounting Office reports 450,000 brownfields in the United States. It is not known how many brownfields are located in rural America.

Regional organizations have established collaborative relationships with rural local governments to develop and implement services and programs, because local governments often lack resources to hire staff to manage these efforts.

These regional development organizations are positioned to serve as champions of rural brownfields redevelopment.

## 2 Existing brownfields resources and networks should be encouraged to promote productive dialogue about rural brownfields redevelopment throughout rural America.

Regional development organizations — staff and board members — are not aware of the Federal Interagency Working Group on Brownfields.

Federal agencies are not reaching rural areas through existing programs; they are also not informing each other about their programs.

Rural communities would like to clean up and redevelop brownfields, yet they are faced with obstacles such as lack of technical assistance and information about funding sources.

Rural communities report slow responses from federal agencies when requesting information about brownfields redevelopment funding and technical assistance.

Previous experience with federal and state environmental agencies has resulted in strained relations.

## 3 A national working group on rural brownfields should be established to promote networking and information exchange.

Rural communities want to redevelop brownfields as a means to boost local economies, protect the environment, preserve open space and revitalize neighborhoods.

Peer networks, industry publications, the Internet and conferences are primary sources of information about brownfields redevelopment.

## 4 There needs to be greater awareness about rural brownfields redevelopment.

There is a lack of awareness and understanding of rural brownfields by all potential participants, including governments, public entities, for-profit businesses, educational institutions and the nonprofit sector.

In some rural areas, abundant open space often negates incentives to redevelop brownfields, because it is perceived to be less costly to develop open space than clean up brownfields.

There is great confusion regarding the difference between Superfund and brownfields sites.

There are concerns about potential liability issues surrounding brownfields redevelopment that need to be resolved as part of a comprehensive rural brownfields redevelopment initiative.

## 5 Increased and more diverse funding must be made available to rural communities for brownfields identification, cleanup and redevelopment.

There is a lack of available private capital for rural brownfields redevelopment.

Rural areas have limited resources (financial, personnel, training and equipment) to undertake brownfields redevelopment.

Regional organizations and rural local governments receive limited state and federal funds for brownfields redevelopment.

## 6 Regional development organizations should incorporate brownfields redevelopment in their comprehensive economic development strategic plans.

Brownfields redevelopment is a low or nonexistent priority for most small metropolitan and rural areas.

Regional organizations acknowledge brownfields redevelopment can create jobs and income for their communities.

These findings and recommendations are based on research conducted during the project's first year. Further research during the second year indicate they are still applicable.