

BROWNFIELDS: FOUR DECADES OF REDEVELOPMENT POLICY DRIVING INVESTMENT AND INNOVATION

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Mary Ann Grena Manley
Founder & President,
15E Communications LLC
Washington, DC



Brownfields policy continues to stand out as one of the most impactful bipartisan environmental initiatives over the past four decades. Since the program's [official](#) inception in 1995, [EPA's Brownfields Program](#) has provided nearly \$2.9 billion in brownfield grants to assess and clean up contaminated properties, returning blighted properties to productive reuse. These investments have leveraged more than \$40 billion in cleanup and redevelopment funding and created more than 270,000 jobs, according to [recent congressional testimony and EPA](#).

During the most recent round of awards in May 2025, the EPA announced [\\$267 million in brownfields grants](#) for site assessments, cleanups, and revolving loan funds in communities nationwide. Although the most recent White House FY 2026 budget proposal [earmarked \\$80 million](#) for the federal brownfields program, funding for 2026 has not been finalized yet.

Federal Activity Related to Brownfields

Bipartisan support for brownfields redevelopment appears to remain strong. In February, the [Brownfields Reauthorization Act of 2025 \(S. 347\) passed unanimously](#) out of the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works. The legislation would reauthorize EPA's Brownfields Program through FY2030, expand eligibility for nonprofit entities, and increase per-site funding caps.

On July 4, President Trump signed into law the so-called "[One Big Beautiful Bill Act](#)," (OBBBA), a sweeping economic package that included permanent investments (via extensions and enhancements) in several key community development incentives: [the New Markets Tax Credit](#), the

[Low-Income Housing Tax Credit](#), and the [Opportunity Zone](#) tax incentives. These legislative measures aim to provide long-term certainty for investors and developers, with the goal of encouraging more private capital investment in economically distressed areas, which could also support brownfields redevelopment.

“These legislative measures aim to provide LONG-TERM CERTAINTY for investors and developers...”

Earlier this year, bipartisan legislation [reintroduced the Brownfields Redevelopment Tax Incentive Reauthorization Act](#) (H.R. 815), which would reinstate a long-expired tax incentive that enables developers to fully deduct the costs of cleanup expenses for contaminated property in the year the costs are incurred. However, this tax credit has not been flagged as a priority (and was not included in any OBBBA provisions), making passage in this Congress unlikely.

Brownfields, Data Centers, and Energy Demand

On the first day of his second term, President Trump declared a [national energy emergency](#). [House Republicans have since indicated](#) their intent to prioritize brownfields redevelopment to support the growing national demand for AI data centers, energy infrastructure, and enhanced grid capacity.

Brownfields offer ideal locations for AI data centers and digital storage hubs, particularly in regions with

decommissioned industrial or power plant infrastructure. National energy policy analysts expect that data centers will [more than double energy demand](#) by 2030, making brownfields viable candidates for grid-connected redevelopment. Duane Miller, executive director of the LENOWISCO Planning District Commission in southwest Virginia, recently [testified](#) before Congress that rural brownfields are ideal for data centers and could also hold small nuclear or hydrogen facilities to power them.

“ Brownfields offer IDEAL LOCATIONS FOR AI DATA CENTERS and digital storage hubs, particularly in regions with decommissioned industrial or power plant infrastructure ”

James Connaughton, who chaired the Council on Environmental Quality under President George W. Bush and has experience producing data center components, [testified](#) that “prolonged delays in approving site assessments” under the federal brownfields program could undermine these data center projects. He [noted](#) that outdated permitting processes and regulatory bottlenecks, causing years-long delays, are the problem and proposed “an automatic sign-off process,” which would allow for certified third-party expert site assessments to streamline these projects.

House Republicans [expressed interest](#) in Connaughton’s proposal. Notably, the Trump administration has indicated it wants to [greenlight](#) most data center and AI development projects, according to [Emily Domenech](#), the recently appointed executive director of the Federal Permitting Improvement Steering Council. (See related story, this issue.)

Agrivoltaics on Brownfields

Another emerging trend is the integration of agrivoltaics (solar generation combined with agriculture) on brownfield sites. These dual-use projects are being explored in both rural and urban areas, providing new value to marginal or partially remediated land. Since 2015, the U.S. Department of Energy’s National Renewable Energy Laboratory has [studied more than 600 sites](#) and demonstrated how solar installations can enhance soil health, crop yields, and community resilience. Agrivoltaics is an extension of EPA’s former [National Brightfields Initiative](#), which encouraged the productive use of brownfields and advancement of clean energy technologies.

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State Policies and Brownfields Redevelopment

State programs remain central to the practical implementation of brownfields redevelopment projects. Every state has a brownfields program with varying cleanup frameworks and redevelopment incentives, though some also create barriers through outdated or complex regulations. The following recent activity illustrates this dynamic.

“ STATE PROGRAMS REMAIN CENTRAL to the practical implementation of brownfields redevelopment projects ”



Connecticut

The Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP) finalized its [Release-Based Cleanup Regulations](#), which replace the [Transfer Act](#). Under this [new structure](#), cleanup obligations are triggered by the discovery of a release rather than tied to property transfers, enabling faster responses to contamination and facilitating redevelopment.



Michigan

Lawmakers introduced a [“polluter pays” package of bills](#). Supporters argue that the legislation would enhance accountability and cleanup efforts by holding polluters accountable for contamination. Opponents argue that the bills could penalize property owners who did not cause the pollution, potentially slowing voluntary cleanups and deterring redevelopment.



New York

Pending legislation would require the Department of Environmental Conservation to create regulations establishing a property remediation program for state-owned brownfield sites. This expansion of New York's Brownfield Cleanup Program would target properties contaminated with asbestos, lead, PCBs, and other hazardous substances. The program would help cover the cost of remediation, making the sites more attractive for redevelopment.

Brownfields 2025 Returns to Chicago

The National Brownfields Training Conference will return to Chicago August 5–8, 2025, marking the city's third time hosting since the conference series began in 1996. The conference will once again bring together thousands of public- and private-sector stakeholders to share practical strategies and explore the future of land reuse, including many of the topics discussed in this article. For the first time, this year's conference will be co-located with the Solar Farm Summit, which focuses on agrivoltaics.

ERIS will be exhibiting at Brownfields 2025. Please stop by booth #416 to say hello, and enter our raffle for your chance to win a great prize from Team ERIS. 

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mary Ann Manley is a consultant and founder of 15E Communications, a Washington, DC-based firm that assists clients with communications strategy, content, business development, and public relations. Prior to founding 15E in 2020, Mary Ann managed Bloomberg Industry Group's coverage and analysis of global Environment, Health, Safety, and Sustainability issues for more than 20 years. With experiences cutting across environmental law, policy analysis, journalism, and marketing, she most recently served as Deputy Editorial Director for Bloomberg Environment. Her areas of policy expertise include environmental compliance, environmental due diligence, risk management, brownfields redevelopment, sustainability, and ESG.

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