

Republican Leader Cathy McMorris Rodgers
Subcommittee on Energy
“Back from the Brink: Restoring Brownfield sites to Economic Engines”

February 15, 2022

As Prepared For Delivery

Good morning, Mr. Chairman and my colleagues. Thank you for bringing us together today to discuss this important program. A brownfield is an abandoned or underutilized property with known or suspected contamination, which discourages development and buyers.

Cleaning up and reinvesting in these properties increases local tax bases, creates jobs, utilizes existing infrastructure, takes development pressures off undeveloped, open land, and improves and protects the environment.

Cities and towns across the United States have seen positive changes in their communities as a result of the Brownfields program:

- Minute Maid Park in Houston, Texas
- the Georgia Sea Turtle Center on Jekyll Island, Georgia
- the Woodbridge Waterfront in New Jersey
- and the University District in Spokane, Washington.

EPA’s Brownfields program, first authorized over two decades ago, took dead aim at addressing the challenges preventing these sites from receiving the interest necessary to foster clean up and redevelopment. Specifically, the law instituted defenses to liability for innocent landowners and prospective purchasers who comply with statutory requirements.

The Brownfields law also authorized grants to encourage environmental assessment and cleanup of brownfield sites. The law has been hugely successful. It removed barriers to addressing environmental contamination. It issued 3,200 grants for pollution assessment and cleanup, removed abandoned and blighted properties, and restored community opportunities.

In 2018, this Committee – led by subcommittee Republican Leader McKinley – advanced a bipartisan extension of EPA’s Brownfields program that built on these successes. In fact, the City of Spokane, Washington was one of many beneficiaries of that bill. The numbers are noteworthy.

According to EPA, as of the beginning of the current fiscal year, this program has:

- Contributed to more than 34,000 properties being assessed for environmental contamination.
- Aided the cleanup of 2,261 properties.
- Leveraged more than 180,000 jobs and \$34.6 Billion in investment.
- Returned more than 9,000 properties back to communities for reuse; and
- Readied more than 144,000 acres for anticipated reuse.

The funding authorizations from the 2018 law expire at the end of the next fiscal year.

I understand today's oversight hearing is an attempt to kick off the "Regular Order", reauthorization of the bipartisan law and this bipartisan program. I am interested in what our panelists have to say, and sincerely hope this effort will again be bipartisan, but I also have concerns about making major changes to this law.

The Majority's CLEAN Future Act would impose huge increases in funding authorizations for the Brownfields program. After all the money that Congress and the President have spent recently, I have serious concerns about increasing the national debt that will be imposed on our children.

I also have practical concerns about mandating dramatic spending increases for the Brownfields program. For instance, how does considerably increasing overall grant money affect the quality of the brownfields grant application pool. Giving EPA more money without a showing of very qualified projects going unfunded, decreases the incentive for applicants to craft their proposals for long-term success.

Separately, what is the impact of permanently increasing the amounts that EPA can give in grants, including the implications on project matching requirements? Lastly, the law, including the reforms made in 2018, provides a great deal of flexibility for the program to address several different issues and reach many types of applicants. We don't need to make changes to the law unless a genuine need is shown or there are statutory authorities lacking for successful implementation.

Also, I am concerned about any efforts to have this program de-emphasize economic redevelopment and the public private partnerships it creates. Before closing, Mr. Chairman, thank you to you and your staff for working with us collaboratively on this hearing and hope we can continue to work together on a bipartisan reauthorization.

While it's unfortunate the EPA is not a witness today to answer questions about a program it has operated for 21 years. I hope the Committee will undertake aggressive, bipartisan oversight of this program and the \$1.5 BILLION provided to EPA under the Senate Infrastructure Law. Prior to EPA testifying on any legislation – which is essential, we need to take important steps to meaningfully understand the program as part of our "run up" to reauthorization.

I am pleased that our witness panel has the experience and perspectives on this subject that it does. I want to extend a special welcome to Whitman County, Washington Commissioner Michael Largent who is joining us on behalf of the National Association of Counties. Whitman County is in my district, and I look forward to hearing what Mike will share with us today. I yield back.