EPA Offering Millions To Clean Up After Dirty Manufacturers

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LANSING, Mich. (AP) — Federal grants will help clean up and redevelop 214 polluted sites such as abandoned gas stations and shuttered factories in 40 states, Environmental Protection Agency chief Lisa Jackson said Monday.

Three tribal nations also will receive federal money under the EPA's "brownfield" program, which is designed to spur growth in cities where contaminated industrial and commercial sites have been a drag on the economy while contributing to joblessness and crime, agency officials said.

The grants will help "make our communities cleaner, healthier and more prosperous places to raise a family and start a business," Jackson said during a news conference near the site of a former power plant in Lansing that a previous grant helped restore. An insurance company turned the historic brick building towering over the Grand River into new offices, saving Art Deco touches and attaching a new glass office building.

Instead of seeing a tired relic when they gaze across the river from the downtown convention center, visitors now see a vibrant sign of the city's comeback and future, Mayor Virg Bernero said.

There are about 450,000 abandoned and polluted waste sites nationwide that have been tainted by oil or chemicals, or scarred by industries such as mining, the EPA says. A revision of the law in 2002 expanded the definition of brownfields to include places such as "meth labs" where illegal drugs are made and distributed.

Developers and local governments have been reluctant to reuse many of those sites for fear of being saddled with cleanup costs, the EPA says.

"When this mayor and other mayors try to go out and compete for jobs and businesses and investments, these grants are quite a carrot and a lot better than having to say to someone, 'Well, you can clean it up,'" Jackson told reporters in Lansing.

Since the brownfield program began in the mid-1990s, the EPA has awarded $937 million in grants. More than 17,200 properties have been investigated to determine the nature of the contamination, while 610 have been cleaned up and 20,300 acres have been readied for reuse.

The government says the cleanups trigger new investments on the sites themselves, but also in surrounding communities. The EPA says its grants have led to $16.3 billion in redevelopment spending by other government agencies and the

private sector, creating thousands of jobs.

Government and academic studies show that brownfield cleanups boost property values in the community, said Mathy Stanislaus, the agency's assistant administrator for solid waste and emergency response.

"It helps to remove the blight effect and makes neighborhoods safer because vacancies tend to draw crime," Stanislaus said.

Opening new businesses in those areas makes sense because they already have water and sewer lines, electricity and other infrastructure while a previously undeveloped location in the suburbs or countryside might not, he said. Brownfield redevelopment also benefits the environment by reducing sprawl, stormwater runoff and air pollution from vehicles, he said.

Lansing, Michigan's capital city, will receive $1 million this year for cleanups. Among locations under consideration are a former General Motors plant site near downtown and the corridor linking downtown with East Lansing.

Jackson joined state and local officials for the announcement by the Grand River, overlooking the New Accident Fund of Michigan office building where the Depression-era power plant once stood.

"The power station sat idle on the riverfront for nearly a decade," Bernero said. "Now once again . . . (the site) is energizing our city."

Six other Michigan communities will get a combined $1.9 million, including Northville, which receives $200,000 for cleanup of a former regional psychiatric hospital, and the Downriver Community Conference, a consortium of southeastern Michigan communities that gets $500,000.

Other recipients around the nation include Milwaukee, where a formerly contaminated property will be converted into a business park; Springfield, Mo., which will turn a former rail yard into a natural wetland open space with greenway trails; and Nassau County, N.Y., where waterfront land will be cleaned for a hotel complex, affordable housing, restaurant and retail space and a commuter ferry.

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Flesher reported from Traverse City, Mich.

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