

Brownfields

Success Story

Verso Paper Mill

Bucksport, Maine

A large oceanside aquaculture system, a church, and an international maritime training center are among the enterprises preparing to open at the site of a former paper mill on the banks of the Penobscot River in Bucksport. Thanks to Bucksport, a town with the foresight to put money aside, as well as Eastern Maine Development Corporation which worked to involve the community, and a planning process that took seriously the need for a diverse economic base, this former industrial town will again have a vibrant coast, although one that is very different from its industrial past.

In the past 15 years, all six major pulp and paper mills sitting along the Penobscot River have closed. The mills were the bedrock of the local economy and their closures affected many of the other businesses that relied on the prosperity provided by the mills. Three decades before the Verso Paper Mill closed and removed 570 well-paying jobs from the community, the town of Bucksport set aside reserve funds, opening people's minds to the concept that Bucksport might not always be a mill town. Keeping an open mind, planning for the future, and diversifying the community's economy led to the success of this project.

The history of the Verso paper mill site began in the late 1800s with the construction of the Sherman Steel Mill. The steel mill was replaced in 1890 by the Blodgett Tanning Company, which was sold in 1929 to the Maine Seaboard Paper Co. Many paper companies then operated at this site. The last paper company there, Verso Paper Corporation, closed its doors in 2014.

Eastern Maine Development Corporation, a local non-profit economic development organization, has been working with the Town of Bucksport and the property owner, since 2015, to develop strategies to diversify the economy and revitalize the shuttered paper mill. Strategies focused on complementing the local economy, using the existing infrastructure, creating jobs, and bringing new life to the community. An advisory committee of residents, town and state officials, the development corporation, business owners, and others with an interest was put together. They held public events, created on-line forums and held one-on-one interviews to collect input. The group envisioned welcoming "partnerships and industries that provide clean, resilient, and diversified businesses."

The committee also analyzed economic and market opportunities for potential redevelopment of this 200-acre site. This analysis looked at real estate trends, physical conditions of the property, local zoning, and transportation issues. It brought to light concerns around brownfields issues and contamination based on the mill's long industrial history.



EPA Grant Recipients:

Eastern Maine Development Corp,
Hancock County Planning Commission,
Maine DEP

Grant Types:

Assessment, State Program Funds,
Targeted Brownfields Assessment

Current Use:

Commercial Aquaculture Facility,
Educational Facility, Industrial Park





"The EPA Area Wide Planning Grant which resulted in the ADAPT Plan, brought together all stakeholders in the community to create a realistic, working document to help shape the future of the former mill site - and the community. The partnerships created and reinforced in this process have been a key to our continued redevelopment."

Susan Lessard, Town Manager
Bucksport, Maine

Luckily, several of the project partners had Brownfields funding from EPA. By combining staff and resources from several Brownfields grant and technical assistance programs, the stakeholders were able complete the project planning and site assessment activities needed to get the site ready for redevelopment.

Today

The former Verso paper mill has been subdivided into a four-lot industrial park. Whole Oceans purchased two lots totaling 104 acres, which made them the anchor tenant. The company announced it would develop a land-based salmon farm and processing facility. The entire development will take about 10 years to complete and will culminate in 945,000 square feet of building area and create up to 150 jobs. The proposed Whole Oceans facility, which is one of the largest land-based aquaculture projects in the world, will produce 25,000 metric tons of salmon.

Maine Maritime Academy, a public college, has acquired one of the four lots for its Center for Professional Mariner Development program. The new training center will include a 20,000-square-foot administration and instruction building, which will house classrooms, offices, training labs and conference rooms.

Maine Maritime is also building a state-of-the-art, multi-purpose firefighting training facility on the property. This facility will serve municipalities, counties, and the state in training police, wardens, National Guard, and first-responders. The facility will also train cargo and dock personnel, providing shipyard skills like welding and electrical safety training.

The momentum created by development at the Verso Paper Mill site has inspired other industries to invest in Bucksport, including a local church, which bought two buildings as a fitness center and for gatherings, and the Greenhead Lobster and Pemaquid Mussel Farm, which bought two parcels totalling six acres.

EPA's invested approximately \$579,000 in this project through the Brownfields program as follows:

- \$200,000 areawide planning grant - Eastern Maine Development Corp
- \$49,000 in assessment grant funds – Eastern Maine Development Corp
- \$160,000 in assessment grant funds - Hancock County Planning Comm
- \$170,000 in EPA Targeted Brownfields Assessment technical assistance

The total value of this redevelopment project is estimated to exceed \$53M, which represents a multiplier on EPA's investment.

For more information:

Visit the EPA Brownfields website at www.epa.gov/brownfields or contact AmyJean McKeown at 617-918-1248 or McKeown.AmyJean@epa.gov.