

## Foundation seeks sugar beet waste solutions

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Posted: 11/27/2009 01:42:29 PM MST

The Great Western Sugar Beet industry, rich in history, is no longer a sweet subject in cities where they were once located in northeastern Colorado.

With a grant from the Environmental Protection Agency, the Colorado Brownfield Foundation — a nonprofit that provides services to promote the cleanup and reuse of environmentally impaired sites — sponsored a meeting in Longmont to discuss the issues of alternative uses for the excessive lime waste and the redevelopment of contaminated sugar factory properties.

Along with the EPA, the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment met with city representatives from Longmont, Greeley, Eaton and Fort Morgan to identify the unique environmental effects each factory presents in each community.

Fort Morgan has the last operational sugar factory out of the original 14 Great Western Sugar plants. The sugar beet industry of the early 1900s stabilized the agricultural communities of northeastern Colorado, which contributed a longer-lasting effect on the growth and development of Colorado than the discovery of gold.

However, the decline of the sugar beet industry has left a bad taste in the mouth with the large volume of blowing lime dust as well as a foul smell in the air from the leftover waste products and the abandoned, contaminated factories in the affected towns.

Most of the abandoned factories are now located on prime industrial properties, but the astronomical costs of the removal of the hazardous waste products are prohibitive to the potential land developers. The 100-year-old factory buildings are full of asbestos as well as other on-site contaminants such as abandoned electric transformers and underground tanks — not to mention the extensive vandalism.

Greeley has been the only city so far to successfully overcome the environmental obstacles to economic redevelopment. Leprino Foods bought the sugar factory property from Western Sugar Company and with the help of the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment was able to create a solution for the 13-acre lime piles.

A pilot project with one acre of property was established to test the result of mixing a nearby soil base with 50 percent lime, which helped bind the soil to create good compaction base for a construction site.

In addition to the lime problem, however, asbestos from old building materials was found in several locations buried underground, which cost several million dollars to clean up.

The city of Greeley used its Urban Renewal Authority to eliminate blighted areas for redevelopment, and through the use of the tax increment financing (TIF funds) Leprino Foods will be able to mitigate the environmental challenges plus offset the construction costs.

The Brownfield Foundation will continue to explore more possible uses for the excessive volume of lime waste located on 15 to 40 acres of land at each sugar factory site. The next two meetings will address the technical issues of disposing of the lime with state solid waste and re-use/recycling, state pollution prevention, the cement industry and engineered fill strategies.

The demise of the sugar beet industry began with falling sugar prices during the 1970s, which led to the sale of Great Western Sugar Co. in 1974 to the Hunt Bros. of Dallas, Texas.

The Hunts attempted to increase profitability with budget cuts and manpower, but the competition from cane sugar and corn syrup — both less expensive to produce — as well as artificial sweeteners led to further decline in beet sugar prices.

After several years of economic struggles and bad business deals, the Hunt Bros. filed bankruptcy in 1984. In 1985, a British sugar firm, Tate & Lyle, bought six sugar processing plants with five storage facilities over a four-state area and changed the name to Western Sugar Company.

By the late 1990s Tate & Lyle, in response to the volatile sugar market in the United States, began seeking a buyer for its sugar holdings. In December 2002, more than 1,000 sugar beet growers in Colorado, Nebraska, Wyoming and Montana united to form The Western Sugar Cooperative, believing that the future of the sugar beet industry in this area would be well-served by grower ownership of the company.

With company headquarters in Denver, Western Sugar currently operates sugar-processing plants in Scottsbluff, Neb., Lovell and Torrington, Wyo., Billings, Mont., and Fort Morgan.



The Colorado Brownfield Foundation, a nonprofit that promotes the cleanup and reuse of environmentally impaired sites, sponsored a recent meeting in Longmont to discuss the issues of alternative uses for the excessive lime waste, like these piles near the Fort Morgan sugar beet plant, and the redevelopment of contaminated sugar factory properties. (Lyn Deal/Special to The Times)