



STATE SALINITY COUNCIL

Newsletter of the Western Australian State Salinity Council
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NAP closer to agreement

The Premier, Dr Geoff Gallop, recently announced that he had signed the Intergovernmental Agreement (IGA) for the National Action Plan on Salinity and Water Quality, a big move that paves the way for potentially large amounts of funding for salinity projects in the State.

David Hartley, Executive Director, Sustainable Rural Development with the Department of Agriculture, explained that by signing the agreement the State has committed itself to negotiating a bilateral agreement with the Commonwealth which could result in up to \$158 million in funding over the next six years.

"This will provide a major boost to the State's already considerable efforts in salinity management," David said.

"This expenditure will be based on the priorities established under the Regional NRM Plans and according to the State Salinity Investment Framework. The Regional NRM Groups will be very important partners in the NAP."

“The Regional NRM Groups will be very important partners in the NAP.”

David Hartley, Department of Agriculture

The signing is a positive move from the State Government that provides some comfort to the community, particularly regional groups who have been concerned for some time over the lack of certainty in their funding.

John Simpson, Chairman of the South Coast Regional Initiative Planning Team (SCRIPT), said that SCRIPT welcomes the signing of the NAP.

"We hope that signing of the bilateral agreement will follow rapidly and with good consultation with the regional communities who will have a major responsibility for implementing the plan," he said.

In the IGA, the State Government has flagged four proposed projects that would provide opportunities for joint funding priorities. These include foundation funding to assist the regional NRM groups to revise and finalise their regional NRM plans against the Federal Government's accreditation criteria.

John Simpson expressed concern that this has also been identified as a funding priority for the Natural Heritage Trust 2 program.

"It would certainly be our wish that the strategies continue to be supported under NHT and that the additional funding under NAP be directed to supporting the regional organisations to meet their other responsibilities, particularly building and strengthening the participation of all stakeholders in the regional NRM processes," he said.

UWA Associate Professor David Pannell, from the School of Agricultural and Resource Economics, was guarded in his endorsement of the Federal Government's plans.

"As a generalisation, thinking about salinity management in WA is well ahead of the thinking in Canberra," David said. "It is a good thing that the State has held back on

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Salinity Evolves to NRM

The State Government has announced that the State Salinity Council will be replaced by a Natural Resource Management Council. The membership of the NRM Council and arrangements for its administrative support are currently being decided by Government and the future of the State Salinity Council's website (www.salinity.org.au) and newsletter is being discussed. More information will be published on the website as it becomes available.



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signing the NAP in order to try to get a more sensible and effective policy in place.”

The State Government has been in negotiations with the Commonwealth over several aspects of the NAP since it was announced in October 2000; some of these issues are still to be finally resolved.

“It’s still not clear what the final agreement will contain, but I hope that the State Government is successful in negotiating significant changes to the original Commonwealth proposal, because the original version would force the State to divert resources away from high priority uses towards lower priority uses,” David said.

“**[The original NAP] badly neglects R&D and new industry development.**”

David Pannell, UWA

“A key problem with the original NAP is that it pre-supposes that all the money should be prioritised by and allocated via regional NRM groups.

“It doesn’t acknowledge that some of the most important salinity-related issues should be prioritised and managed at the state level, such as key environmental assets, and it badly neglects R&D and new industry development. This makes the policy seem rather shortsighted and out of touch with the scientific and economic realities of salinity,” he said.

Rod Safstrom, Deputy Chair of Greening Australia Western Australia said that the signing provides very important progress for communities dealing with salinity in Western Australia.

“Greening is committed to supporting communities to achieve revegetation and management of native vegetation through its regional Bushcare Officers and its own initiatives such as Living

Landscapes and Seed Management Services,” he said.

“Now with inter-governmental support and with the development of the [State Salinity Council’s] Investment Framework the community will be able to focus on on-ground action and capacity building where it will really count.”

Following the experiences of other states, WA may expect some initial funding to flow to specific projects, such as the regional groups’ foundation funding, before the bilateral is signed.

Other possible initial projects flagged by the State Government include:

- the Engineering Evaluation Initiative (see ‘Salty Bits’ in this edition);
- a trial groundwater pumping scheme in the east Collie; and
- incentives for natural vegetation management.

Minister for the Environment, Dr Judy Edwards, said that the projects provided excellent opportunities for joint funding arrangements.

“These proposed projects will enable funding to start flowing and provide practical examples of how the State and Commonwealth can work together in fighting salinity through the National Action Plan, enabling us to expedite the bilateral process,” she said.

The majority of the funds will only become available following the signing of the bilateral agreement and the negotiation of such issues as targets, funding allocation, credit for State moneys already spent and the State’s involvement in national projects.

“The State Government will continue to push for acknowledgment of this State’s already substantial contribution of over \$30 million a year and more flexible funding arrangements for regional groups,” Dr Edwards said.

In the interim, the Government has made funding available to cover its immediate commitment to NAP and salinity management generally through its programs.

More information will be made available as the process develops.

Diversified farming project funding

A diversified cropping project for saline land in the Calingiri-New Norcia area has been awarded a grant of over \$20 000 from the Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal (FRRR).

The project, coordinated by the Calingiri-New Norcia LCDC, seeks to establish intensive horticulture as an option to manage salinity and land degradation in a broadscale agricultural enterprise.

The focal crop will be tomatoes, which will be planted on land too saline for productive traditional cropping and

grazing. The group plans to process the tomatoes into products such as sun-dried tomatoes and tomato pesto.

The funding will also be used to further other ventures, such as lavender and bush foods, that are already beginning in the shire.

If the ventures are successful, the group plans to establish a landcare levy on the sale of the products that will be directed to landcare and sustainable agriculture activities within the area.

For more information, contact Veronica North, Landcare Coordinator Shire of Victoria Plains on (08) 9628 7004 or email landcare@victoriaplains.wa.gov.au

FARMERS TO BE 'WORTH THEIR SALT'

Roman soldiers were paid in salt, giving us the modern word 'salary'.

Now Western Australian farmers have the opportunity to explore their ideas about increasing returns from salinity with the national Land, Water & Wool Sustainable Grazing from Saline Land program.

Sustainable Grazing from Saline Land (SGSL), a component of the Land Water and Wool initiative between Australian Wool Innovation Limited (AWI) and Land & Water Australia, will be worth about \$8 million nationally over five years. It includes financial support from Meat and Livestock Australia.

The program provides producer groups with funding and technical support to initiate their own salinity research aimed at improving productivity from grazing saline land.

Project leader for the WA network, Justin Hardy from the Department of Agriculture, said the new program aimed to turn saline land into a profitable asset using the practical ideas and know-how of producers combined with the technical knowledge of scientists.

Assistance is also available for groups who may have sound ideas but require help to determine their exact local needs and the areas of research that may best be pursued. An average of \$10,000 per project is available.

"About 20 projects covering a wide range of areas and grazing themes in the South West will initially be selected. Existing producer groups will be targeted for participation following strong messages from producers during early stage program consultation," Mr Hardy said.

Individual farmers will not be able to apply for funding, but are encouraged to join the SGSL network so they can share information with other producers and producer groups in the network.

For an information sheet, expression of interest form or for further details, call the free Cropline number on 1800 068 107 or Justin Hardy on (08) 9892 8408.



The SGSL project aims to document the production and environmental benefits of overall production systems like the salt-tolerant forage plants this local farmer is seeding. Photo courtesy Kim Diamond.

SOUTH WEST NRM STRATEGY LAUNCHED

The draft South West Regional Strategy for Natural Resource Management and the Peel-Harvey Action Plan were launched recently at Fairbridge Farm in Pinjarra.

The Draft Regional Strategy is a 25 year plan developed by the South West Catchments Council that aims to balance the sustainable use and conservation of natural resources with community development.

"The South West is one of the 21 priority regions across Australia for salinity and water quality funding through the National Action Plan," said Alex Campbell, who launched the draft strategy.

"This plan will guide future investment expected through the National Action Plan and the Natural Heritage Trust II as well as other funding sources and community action."

An unprecedented level of cooperation amongst farmers, catchment groups and government has been involved in the preparation of the Strategy. It will benefit natural resource management and the 193 000 people living in the five million hectare region by supporting partnerships, projects and funding applications.

The Strategy will be used to plan and manage priority issues such as salinity, water quality, biodiversity conservation and sustainable agriculture.

The Peel-Harvey Action Plan, launched at the same time, fits within the Strategy but gives emphasis to those actions needed in the Peel-Harvey area.

Subject to funding, the Action Plan will deliver specific and achievable outcomes on ten priority programs over five years and will support community involvement in the sustainable management of the environment.

A summary of the Strategy can be downloaded from the 'Council>Publications' page of State Salinity Council's website at www.salinity.org.au

The full Strategy is available from Sasha Taylor, South West Catchments Council, on (08) 9721 0666.

Information flows through data tap

The "Opening the Data Tap" project, coordinated by the South Coast Regional Information Centre (RIC) and funded by the State Salinity Council's Community Support Scheme, has provided a flow of information to almost 600 land managers from across the region.

The project's focus was to increase regional community capacity to better understand the information technologies needed to effectively manage natural resources.

The following are some highlights of the project:

- 35 representatives trained in the practical direct application of GIS as a tool in NRM decision making;
- 12 representatives trained in advanced GIS skills, covering topics such as salinity risk, surface water drainage, non-point source pollution and management;
- Help Desk service provided to new trainees for six months after training;
- GIS-related equipment provided for loan (two digital data projectors, two laptops, two GPS units, one digital camera);
- 21 GIS software licences purchased for catchment and landcare community groups;
- 14 educational Roadshow events conducted, exposing over 550 land managers to GIS concepts;

- GIS for Managers seminar conducted, educating 51 regional middle and upper management representatives; and
- twelve GIS books donated to the Albany and Esperance Public Libraries, available across the South Coast through the inter-library loan system.

The program's success is confirmed by comments from participants, such as Johanna Cappelluti, Community Landcare Coordinator (CLC) for the Oyster Harbour Catchment. "[The project] has provided us with easier access to data, access to software and support in all of our data management and software needs," she said.

Jennifer Chambers, a Ravensthorpe farmer and CLC, agreed. "The training was very timely in meeting our community project needs. I am now better able to make effective catchment plans, project applications and final reports."

For more information on the project, please contact RIC Manager Kristina Fleming on (08) 9892 8494 or kfleming@agric.wa.gov.au or visit www.scric.org



GIS Trainer Jeffrey Lindhorst is delighted with the problem solving done by Quentin Brown of Jerramungup and Anthony Witham of Broomehill

"It is so important to be able to make use of this kind of technology and it will make mapping, catchment and project planning and project reporting so much easier. It was great being able to work on examples that were both local and relevant."

Kim Buttfield, CLC, Wilson Inlet Catchment Committee

ABS SURVEYS SALINITY

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) is systematically surveying around 20 000 farmers on how salinity issues are affecting them as part of the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality.

Preliminary results from the 2001 ABS Agricultural Census show farmers in Western Australia have the largest challenge with 37% of farms in the State reporting salinity, followed by South Australia (13%), Victoria (11%), New South Wales (6%), Tasmania (5%) and Queensland, Northern Territory and Australian Capital Territory (all 3%).

More than half of the farms in the Avon catchment reported either salinity or managing for salinity, the highest number anywhere. Farmers in other WA catchments also reported high levels.

The salinity survey will build on the census and has been developed with input from farmers.

Bob Harrison, ABS Environment Director in charge of the survey, said farmers had been very supportive and welcomed being asked about their experience with salinity.

"A large number of farmers responded to our call to help develop the survey questions," he said. "The result is a short survey which captures how different farmers are actively managing salinity issues around the country."

The 14 question, eight page survey will be targeted at those farmers who operate in salinity prone areas, such as southwest WA and southern NSW, and will look at how farmers manage or prevent salinity and the factors that influence land management decisions on farms.

The results will be released early next year, and should provide strong backing for informed decisions on salinity. More information is available on the ABS website at www.abs.gov.au

Carbon Rights Legislation Underway

Following on from the article in the last edition of this newsletter, the Government has announced that its carbon rights legislation has been drafted and will soon go before Parliament.

The carbon rights legislation, which has been drafted by the State Government's Greenhouse Taskforce, will in the long term create a legislative framework in Western Australia that would provide for:

- an innovative approach to tackling the State's greenhouse reduction responsibilities;
- greater efforts to rehabilitate large areas of land degraded by salinity and other environmental factors; and
- an enhanced ability to attract the overseas investment that will help establish new green industries.

Chair of the Greenhouse Taskforce, Francis Logan MLA, said that increasing the amount of stored carbon is an important way for WA to contribute to the mitigation of the enhanced greenhouse effect.

"Throughout the world, governments are trying to address the key questions of who has the rights to the carbon stored in plants – how can these rights be protected and how can they be transferred?" he said.

"Here in WA we now have the legislation to provide a clear, open and verifiable process for establishing carbon rights, including their ownership, transfer and accounting."

The package of legislation comprises the Tree Plantation Agreements Bill 2002, Carbon Rights Bill 2002 and Acts Amendment Bill.

Acidic drainage

Highly acidic waters (pH of 2.5 – 3) found in drains within the Wheatbelt have the potential to cause serious ecological and health problems, a forum was told recently.

An Inland Acidic Waters Forum, held at CSIRO (Floreat) in April to pool knowledge on the extent of the problem and formulate an action plan, was attended by forty agency and research staff and a farmer.

The acidity is generated when iron, dissolved in oxygen-depleted groundwater, reacts with atmospheric oxygen at discharge areas. The red discolouration in drains, playas and at spring lines is evidence of this process.

The forum concluded that:

- the process should be called *secondary acidification* as the naturally occurring phenomenon is often exacerbated by human development such as drains;
- the permeability of soils surrounding drains can change over time;
- the acidity problem can be worsened when the aerated root zone becomes an anoxic groundwater zone; and
- downstream ecological interests are potentially at threat from changes in acidity, salinity, hydrology and the period of inundation.

Forum participants agreed that more coordinated research is needed to understand the generation of acidic waters and the risk to receiving water bodies.

An interdisciplinary Secondary Acidification Working Group has been recommended and should report to the Advisory Committee on Engineering Evaluation (see 'Salty Bits' in this issue).

Further information and copies of the presentations are available from Louise Stelfox at the Water and Rivers Commission on (08) 9278 0450.

Yenyening Lakes Management Strategy – Five year review

The Management Committee of the Yenyening Lakes System in the Avon Region is undertaking a review of their Lakes Management Strategy.

In 1996 the Yenyening Lakes Management Committee, comprising adjacent landholders and representatives from Quairading, Brookton and Beverley shires, the Water and Rivers Commission and the Department of Conservation and Land Management, agreed to a ten year Lakes Management Strategy with a review after five years.

As part of the review, four well-attended workshops have already taken place and have identified recreation, biodiversity, surface water and groundwater as major management issues.

Given the considerable developments in science and bio-physical research since 1996, the reviewed strategy will factor in new information and management commitments.

Whilst the 2002 Management Strategy will focus on the Yenyening Lakes and its immediate environs, there is much interest in the document from landholders and community members within the greater Avon River Basin.

There is potential for the Strategy to be adopted as best practice for management of other salt lake systems throughout the Wheatbelt.

The review process is being funded by the Water and Rivers Commission and the Department of Conservation and Land Management.

For more information contact Martin Revell, Water and Rivers Commission, on (08) 9690 2821.

WAGGA-WAGGA FINDS VALUE IN SALINE GROUNDWATER

A new saline water treatment system is being trialed in the New South Wales city of Wagga-Wagga.

The system combines Western Australian and Sydney-based technologies to extract useful resources from saline groundwater.

Western Australian company Normach Pty Ltd has linked their desalination process with a chemical extraction process called SAL-PROC™, developed by Geo-Processors of Sydney.

By combining the technologies the city is able to generate fresh water for agricultural and town supply use as well as useful chemical products for industry and environmental applications.

Geo-Processors Managing Director, Aro Arakel, claims that there are no waste products from the process and the treatment can be financially self-supporting.

Dr Arakel said the trials are providing real time information for assessing the options for saline-affected areas.

"One trial is to maximise the different minerals that could be recovered," he said.

"Another would examine how to use recovered minerals to increase the life of the membrane filters used in the seawater-strength desalination plant, thus making it more economical to run."

Another round of trials on different groundwater types is scheduled for Dubbo, NSW, and others are being discussed with industry groups and desalination plant operators in Australia and overseas.

Some WA scientists, including Dr Richard George from the Department of Agriculture, have reviewed the process and are keeping a 'watching brief' on the trials.

More information about the trials is available from the Geo-Processors website at www.geo-processors.com.au

Tough WA Mission to Turkmenistan to Find Salinity Solutions

A research mission to remote Turkmenistan in the former USSR will begin this month to search for new ways to help manage dryland salinity in the Western Australian wheatbelt through the development of new perennial legumes.

Department of Agriculture senior technical officers Peter Skinner and Kevin Foster will visit Turkmenistan to collect and conserve perennial legume seed and associated rhizobia (bacteria) that could be used to develop plant varieties suited to the acid soils of the WA wheatbelt.

Mr Skinner said the new plants could help in the management of dryland salinity by reducing deep drainage through their enhanced water use.

"A significant area of our agricultural land in Western Australia will succumb to salinity unless we can identify perennial plants which have the water use capabilities of lucerne, but are adapted to the State's acid soils," Mr Skinner said.

Mr Foster said Turkmenistan was a particularly harsh environment for plants to survive in, and plants adapted to those conditions were likely to provide the answers for Western Australia.

Mr Foster said the proposed collection could make a very important and significant contribution to sustainable farming systems by leading to the development of new perennial species for the wheatbelt.

"Hopefully, with this material local researchers will be able to identify new, deep-rooted, herbaceous perennial legumes for use in Western Australia," Mr Foster said.

The scale and intensity of the collection mission to Turkmenistan is expected to be demanding, with tough camping and climatic conditions for the two technical officers. Both have more than 20 years experience working on pasture legumes, and both have been involved previously in overseas collection missions.

This mission forms part of a series of collection expeditions to sites including South Africa, the Canary Islands, Mexico and western USA. The project was initiated by Prof. John Howieson of the Department for Agriculture and Centre for Rhizobial Studies at Murdoch University and is funded by the GRDC.

Another Local Prize Winner

Perhaps it's something in the water...WA has produced another national salinity award winner.

The Toolibin Lake Salinity Management System was awarded the inaugural \$30,000 National Salinity Prize in May by Prime Minister John Howard at a ceremony at Parliament House, Canberra.

The National Salinity Prize recognises the outstanding efforts community and agency-based groups have made in battling salinity in the Toolibin Lake region, which is at the headwaters of the Blackwood River east of Narrogin in the Western Australian wheatbelt.

Federal Environment Minister David Kemp and Agriculture Minister Warren Truss congratulated the group: "The Toolibin Lake Salinity Management System has put in place a range of integrated management practices to help protect the lake – an internationally recognised wetland – and improve the region's environmental and agricultural assets," they said.

"With over eight per cent of the local catchment severely affected by salinity, and another 24 per cent at high risk, Toolibin Lake and its surrounding ecosystems were in real danger."

The scheme is using a range of innovative measures, including:

- reducing recharge through revegetation and protecting remnant vegetation;
- using contour farming practices and perennial grasses for grazing;



The Toolibin Lake Salinity Management System's range of engineering works helped win the salinity prize.

- better managing surface water to reduce agriculture-related waterlogging, and to help divert low-volume, highly saline inflows to a saline lake downstream; and
- groundwater pumping, to lower the water table beneath the lake.

A particular aspect of the project's success has been the team's willingness to

use the most appropriate engineering and scientific tools, including geophysics, remote sensing, computer modelling and ecological function analysis.

The National Salinity Prize is sponsored by the Institution of Engineers Australia, the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality and the Murray Darling Basin Commission.

New 'big picture' soils map

If soils maps and reports often cause your eyes to glaze over from the sheer weight of detail, the Department of Agriculture has an answer.

A new map describing the characteristic soils of south-western Australia has been prepared by the Natural Resources Assessment Group and is available on request.

The map is based on systems-level information from soil-landscape mapping of the State. It provides a very useful overview of regional soil resources relevant to salinity planning, education, regional planning, farming systems, plant breeding, agricultural extension and soil based hazards.

Eight main soil groups are indicated such as deep sandy soils, gravelly soils, texture contrast soils etc. Some are sub-divided further and they are grouped by colour themes for easy reference.

Full colour A3 sized copies are available through Noel Schoknecht on telephone (08) 9368 3707 or can be downloaded from the Department's website at www.agric.wa.gov.au/progserv/natural/assess

■ More than 40 papers have been offered for the **Prospects for Biodiversity and Rivers in Salinising Landscapes Conference**, to be held in Albany from 20 to 27 August 2002. Speakers will include a roll-call of Western Australian salinity specialists as well as Eastern States notables such as Tim Flannery and Kevin Goss and representatives from universities, government departments and non-government organisations. Early-bird registrations close on 30 July 2002; contact Monica Durcan at mdurcan@iinet.net.au or on telephone (08) 9291 8249 for registration forms.

■ The **Salinity, Land Management and New Technologies** symposium is fast approaching – it will be held in Katanning on 29 July 2002. The symposium's complementary aims are to demystify emerging technologies for catchment and land managers and to convey to the technologists and researchers what the land managers actually require. The conference is sponsored by the Australian Society of Exploration Geophysicists. More information and application forms are available at www.salinity.org

■ The Victoria Plains **Saltland Rehabilitation Project** is moving ahead, with plantings of pasture being established this year following trees and understorey establishment in 2001. Subtropical perennial grasses will be trialled with balansa clover, tall wheat grass and puccinellia at three demonstration sites at Piawaning, Tardun and Three Springs. The use of raised beds in cropping salt-affected sites is being assessed at the fourth site at Buntine. The project is funded by the State Salinity Council's Community Support Scheme and managed by the Shire of Victoria Plains. Contact Alison Cooke on (08) 9628 7004 or alisonc@victoriaplains.wa.gov.au

■ Forty-three **groundwater monitoring bores** were installed on eight farms in the Woodanilling and Wagin Shires during April to increase the coverage of the Wagin-Woodanilling Combos network. On several farms the bores will provide groundwater monitoring data to assess salinity and recharge treatments being established. One set of bores is linked to a surface water monitoring site. The remainder will provide general groundwater information for catchments in the Wagin-Woodanilling Zone and important information on long-term groundwater trends. Farmers are responsible for monitoring the bores drilled on their properties and the data will be added to the Wagin-Woodanilling ComBores database, an initiative of the Wagin-Woodanilling Landcare Zone. Contact Sally Thomson on (08) 9861 2222.



Woodanilling farmer Dale Douglas with Great Southern Drilling

■ Council understands that the **Engineering Evaluation Steering Committee** has been formed and will soon meet. The steering committee comprises John Ruprecht (DEWCP-chair), Neil Coles (DAWA), Greg Keighery (Dept of Conservation), Tom Hatton (CSIRO), David Pannell, Kevin Lyons, Gordon Davidson and Garry English. As part of the Engineering Evaluation project, the Government is also reviewing legislative issues in relation to improving processes for drainage and engineering works and supporting local governments in their control of legislated areas.

■ The **James Crossing Demonstration Site** in the Wellington Dam catchment is the site of an investigation into the links between groundwater levels and stream salinity, funded through the State Salinity Council's Community Support Scheme. Two interception bores on either side of the stream will pump groundwater, so reducing the level of the watertable. The Water and Rivers Commission and the Water Corporation hope that by lowering the watertable the connection between the stream and the groundwater will be broken so the stream should get fresher. Contact John Platt, Water and Rivers Commission Bunbury, on (08) 9721 0666 or john.platt@wrc.wa.gov.au

■ The **Association of Community Landcare Professionals** has a new part-time Executive Officer, funded by the Community Landcare Coordinator Support Project. Kathy Elliot will fill the position – she can be contacted on gelliott@iinet.net.au

■ The Department of Agriculture is developing a framework for defining, measuring and achieving **Environmentally Responsible Agriculture (ERA)** in partnership with industry and the community. ERA will develop credible environmental standards and benchmarks for agricultural production, which will provide input into QA systems and regional branding or eco-labelling initiatives as a means of demonstrating environmental performance. The ERA framework is different to Environmental Management Systems (EMS) but will feed into it to ensure that environmental management is based on realistic and well-defined information. For information contact Carina Calzoni, Department of Agriculture, on (08) 9368 3468 or ccalzoni@agric.wa.gov.au

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