

# Cultivating a Conservation Grazing Program as a Public Land Manager



STATE  
WILDLIFE  
AREA

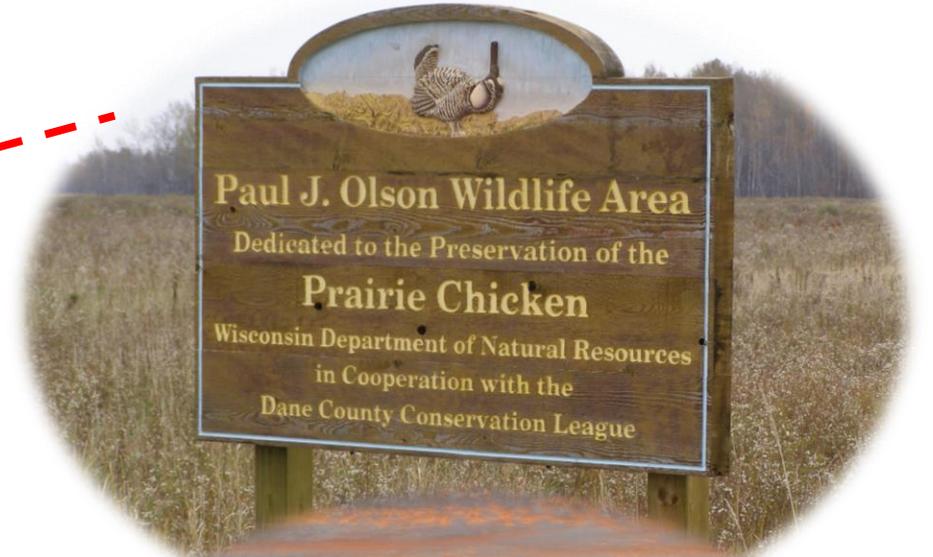
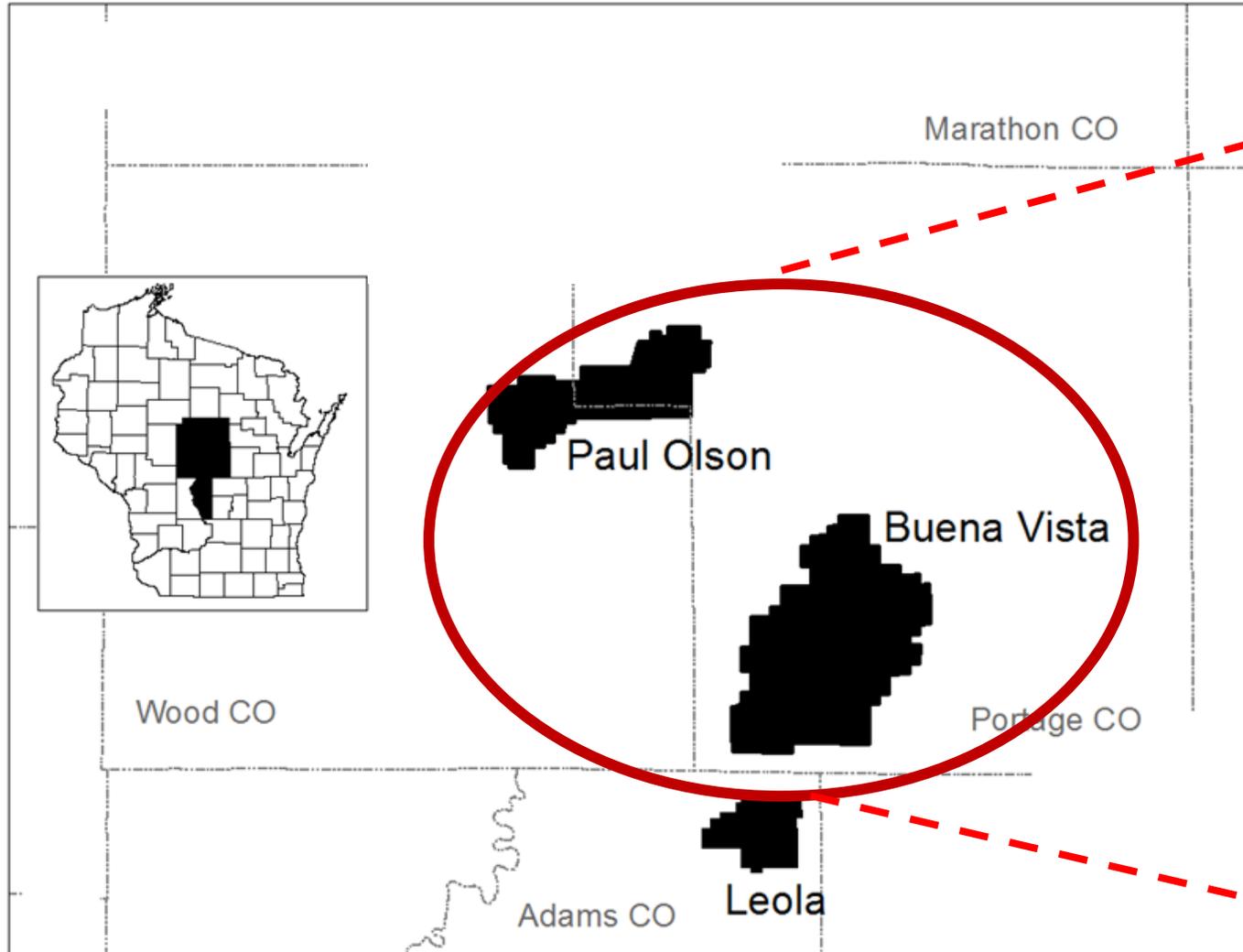
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# Topics Covered

- My early grazing experiences
- Evolution of our grazing program
- Current grazing program – successes, challenges, lessons learned



# Central Wisconsin State Wildlife Areas



# Grazing as an Early Career Professional

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- Minimal experience with grazing
- Limited on-the-job training by veteran staff
- No formal training





## Pre-existing Grazing Program

- Management tool since 80s
- Continuous grazing
- Small group of local producers
- No grazing plan

# Managed Grazing - A New Tool

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- Initiated in 2015 by local wildlife technician
- Desire to adjust stocking, timing, intensity
- My pilot project
  - Infrastructure contracted (\$\$\$)
  - Grazing specialist wrote forage-based plan
  - Limited interest (1 bid)
  - Producer & myself new to rotational



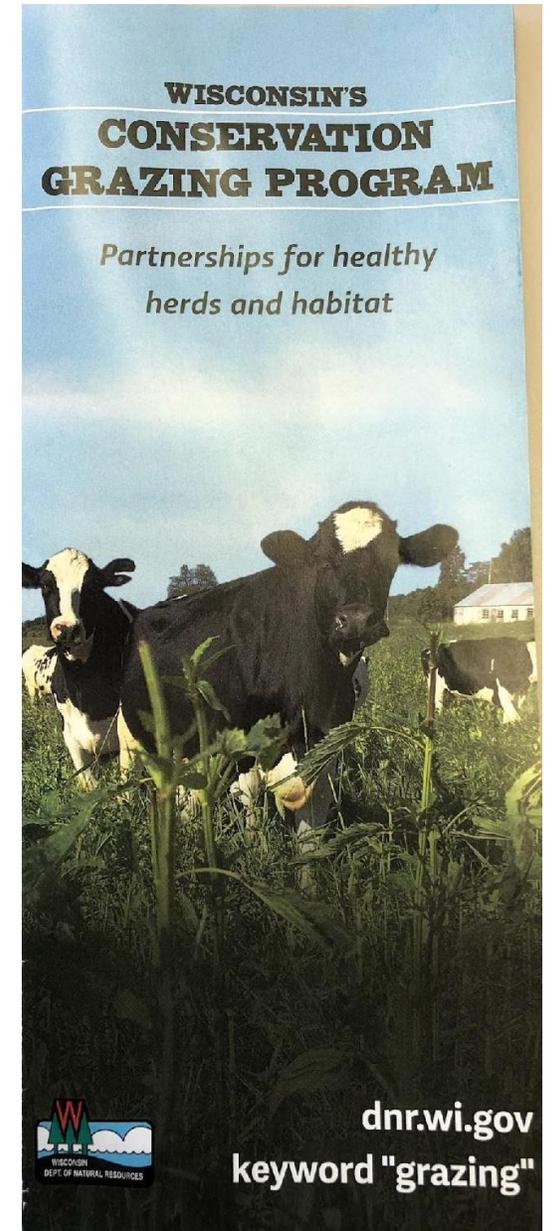
# Why Grazing?

- Below ground: soil health, clean water
- Maintain/enhance grassland habitat
- My primary “above ground” objectives
  - Reduce brush, residual grass, herbaceous invasives
  - Enhance plant species diversity



# Support for Public Land Grazing Essential

- Staff
  - Permanent Grassland Specialist
  - Grazing Team
- Conservation Grazing Field Guide
- Secured funding
- Grasslands - priority habitat
- Training



# Training

- Classes
  - Farming 101
  - Grazing, nutrient management plans
- Conferences
- In the field
  - Fencing days
  - Grassland Specialist site visits



# Greater Prairie-Chicken Management Plan

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- Revised in 2022
- Expand conservation grazing



Photo: Sharon Potter



Partners are an essential part of our public lands grazing program



# Financial Support

- Equipment/infrastructure
- Land acquisition
- Access to grants, programs



# Outreach

- Landowner mailings, site visits, workshops
- Pasture walks
- Social media
- Outcomes
  - Improved agricultural community relations
  - Interest in public land grazing
  - Appreciation for public lands



# Environmental Quality Incentives Program

- Partners
  - U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service
  - Pheasants Forever
- 5+ year grazing contracts
- Public lands eligible
- Cost-share
  - Infrastructure
  - Grazing practice
  - Inter-seeding
- Lessons
  - Start early
  - Good communication



# Adopt a Wildlife Area Program

- University of WI-Stevens Point Student Chapter of The Wildlife Society
  - Pasture infrastructure
  - Brush/invasive species control
- Farmers of Mill Creek Watershed Council
  - Brush/invasive species control
  - Outreach to local agricultural community

# Finding Producers

- Limited outreach in past
  - mailing list
  - local paper
- Enhanced outreach, more diverse producers
  - pasture walks
  - workshops/conferences
  - partner organizations
  - webpage





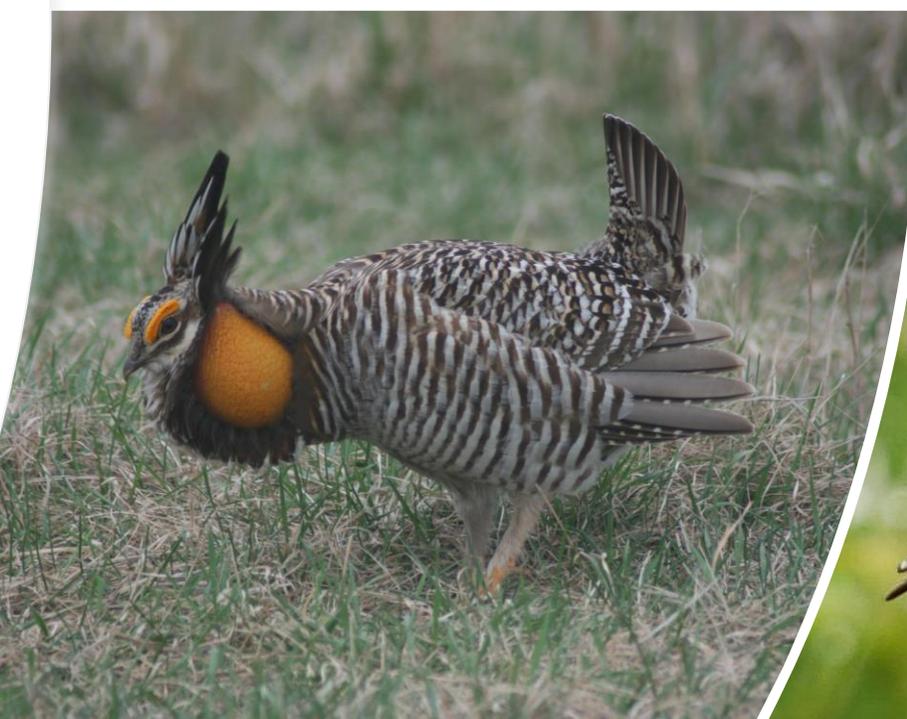
# Developing Relationships with Producers

- Lack of trust in some government
- Seek first to understand, then to be understood
- Manager should be
  - Responsive, available
  - flexible with work schedule
  - Adaptive in communication style

# Rare Species Protocols

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- To reduce/prevent incidental take
- Multiple rare species
- Requirements
  - Avoidance periods
  - Stocking rates



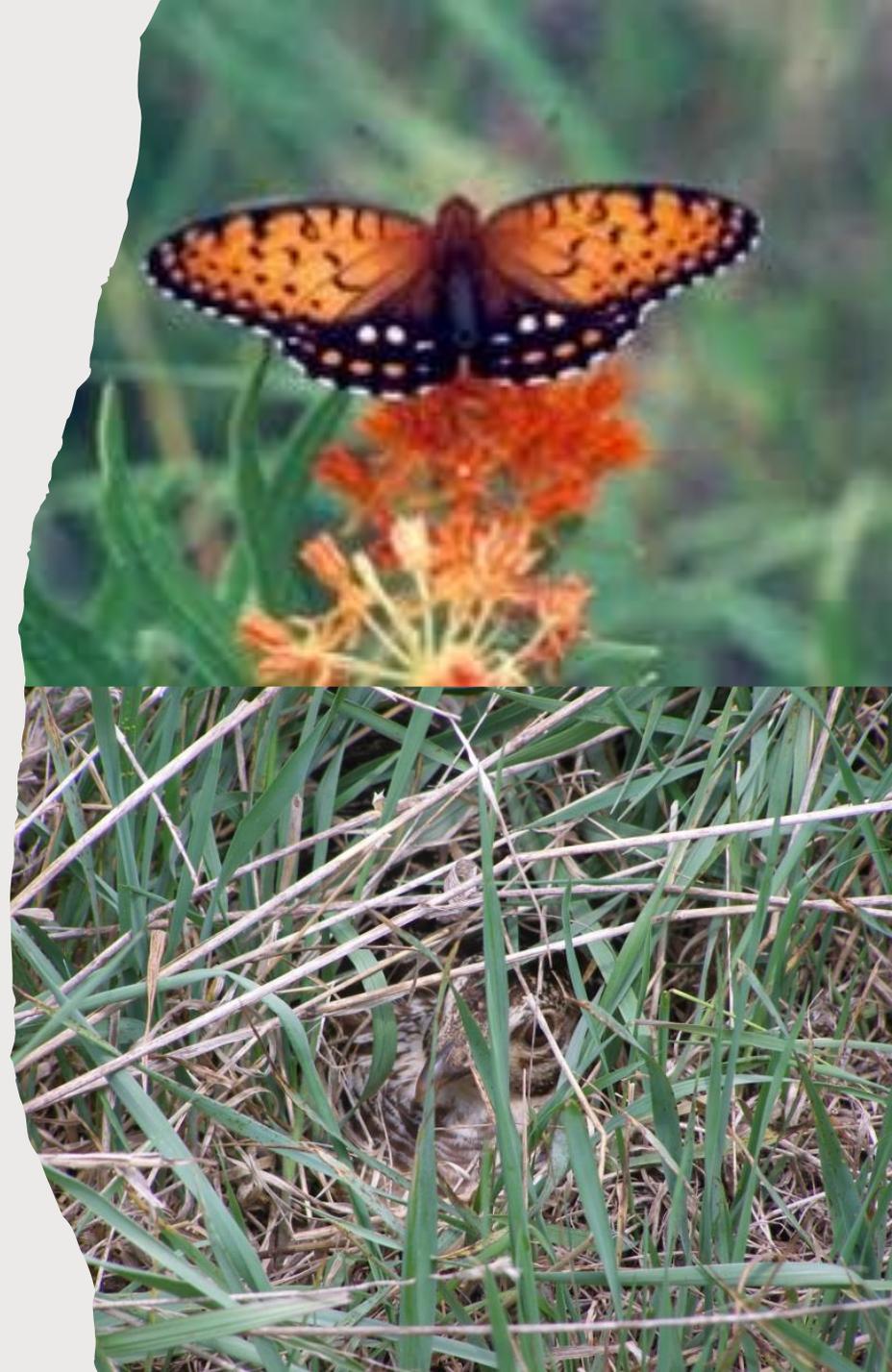


# Grazing Management Plans

- Grassland specialist consultation
- Habitat/species goals & objectives
- Resource and forage inventory
- Plans
  - Livestock grazing
  - Monitoring
  - Contingency
- Operation/maintenance
- Maps

# Grazing regimes

- Habitat objectives drive regime
- Average residual grass height (6-10")
  - Wildlife cover
  - Start date, stocking, contingencies
- Move every 1-2 days (May-June)
  - Minimize nest trampling
  - Higher quality forage
- Move every 3 days (cool season grass slump)
- Longer rotations during nesting when possible
- Refuge areas



# Monitoring

- Are we meeting our objectives?
- Weekly monitoring
  - Average residual grass height
  - Rotations, stocking
- Contingency plan
  - Below average residual grass height
  - Reduce/remove livestock
  - Sacrifice area(s)





# Fencing

- Mostly DIY
- Adapting/refining our process
- Lessons for success
  - Plan ahead
  - Staff training
  - Preliminary work





# Electric

- Equipment we provide
  - Fence energizer w/ solar panel kit
  - Batteries
  - Fence tester
- Challenges
  - “Off the clock” damage
  - Vandalism/theft
- Lessons
  - Have backup supplies
  - Keep equipment well hidden
  - Inventory for insurance



# “Your Cows Are on the Road”

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- When livestock escape public land pastures, expect
  - A lot of phone calls, texts
  - Evening, weekend occurrences
- Lessons
  - Regular fence checks
  - Create pasture maps with producer mobile #
  - Share map with warden, county dispatch, neighbors



Photo: NBC news

# Water Systems

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- Ponds
- Gravity-fed (pumping)
- Well with electric or solar pump
- Portable water tanks
- Waterline (above/below ground)





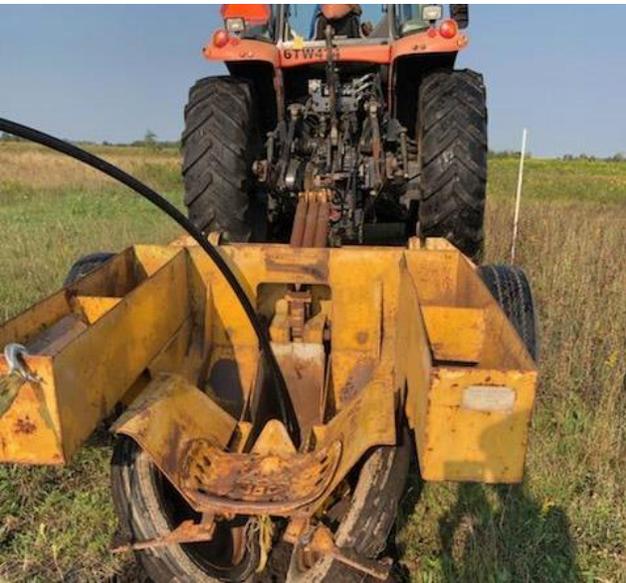
## Challenges of Creating Water Sources

- Well drilling can be expensive
- Wetland permits (ponds)
- Water transport on flat terrain



# Water Installation and Maintenance

- Mostly DIY
- Above vs below ground waterline
- Biggest lesson – plan ahead!





**Before**



**After**

# Equipment Storage/Inventory

- Label all equipment
- Dedicate a storage area
- Check out/check in list
- Repair/replace in winter



## Organic Producer Considerations

- National Organic Program Pasture Rule
- Fence infrastructure/maintenance
- Pesticide use
- Forage improvement

# Achieving Our Wildlife Habitat Objectives

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# Managed Grazing for Structural & Species Diversity of Plants

Short grass



Medium grass



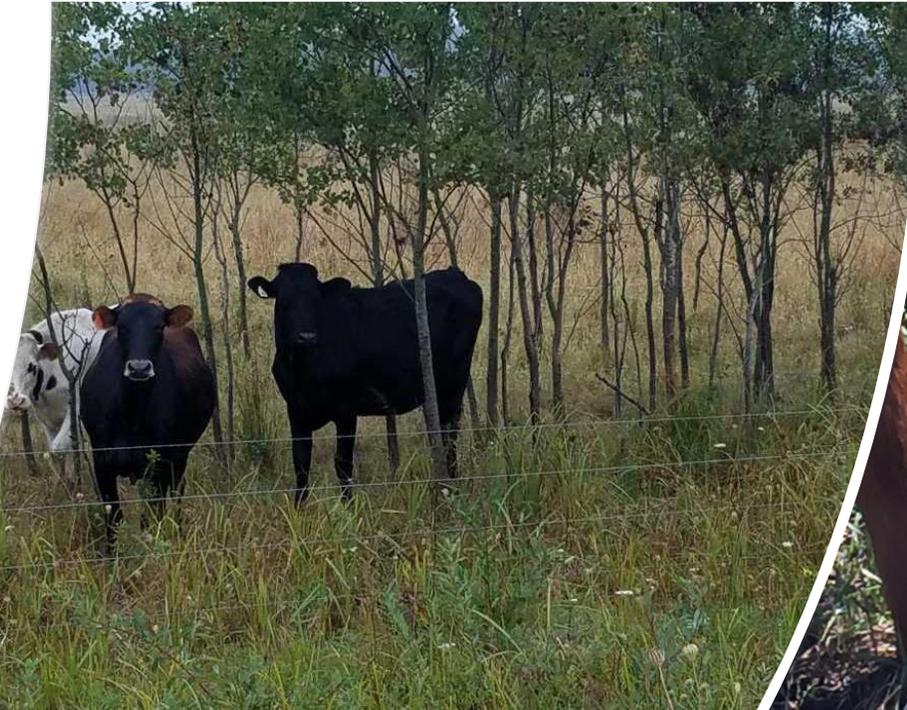
Tall dense grass



# Woody Vegetation Control

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- Some control
  - Browsing (aspen)
  - Rubbing
- Stocking density important
- Combine with mowing & herbicide
- Consider livestock hoof injury



# Herbaceous Invasive Control, Buena Vista Wildlife Area

- Canada Goldenrod
  - Native, but aggressive
  - Reduction (local study)
  - Anecdotal evidence (managers, producers)
- Thistle species





# Inter-seeding

- Clover, native flowers
- Dormant (frost) seeding





Public land grazing:  
More than a habitat  
management tool

- Focus on people & partnerships
- Promotes
  - engagement in conservation efforts
  - appreciation for public lands
  - Understanding/trust between public land managers & agricultural community
- Fosters partnerships

Thank you.

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