



CENTER *for* RURAL AFFAIRS

YOUR RURAL NEWS FOR OVER 45 YEARS | LYONS, NEBRASKA | POPULATION 851 | MARCH & APRIL 2019

RUTH FOCUSES ON SOIL HEALTH, GROWS FOOD

BY LIZ DAEHNKE, COMMUNICATIONS CONSULTANT

For more than two decades, Ruth Chantry has been gaining farming experience, and she's not planning to stop any time soon.

Ruth and her husband, Evrett Lunquist, run Common Good Farm, located outside Raymond, Nebraska. Their farm is certified organic and certified biodynamic, which means they meet organic agriculture standards, and also look at the farm as a whole organism.

"Much of what we do on the farm is focused on soil health and increasing organic matter through compost amendments," said Ruth. "Our work toward conservation includes the whole farm, not just one field."

When Ruth and her husband were trying to purchase land, more than 20 years ago, they found it to be a difficult process to find land they could afford. To make it happen, they worked with a private individual and made use



Ruth Chantry and her husband, Evrett Lunquist, run Common Good Farm, near Raymond, Nebraska. They have spent 22 growing seasons developing their highly-diversified farming operation. | Photo by Cody Smith

of Ag Nebraska Investment Financial Authority (NIFA) which offered a reduced interest opportunity to Ruth and her husband while allowing tax benefits to the private lender.

Since then, the couple has put their hearts, souls, and energy

into keeping Common Good Farm running in a conservation-friendly manner.

Originally from Omaha, Nebraska, Ruth grew up gardening and canning. Her husband, who grew

—SEE RUTH ON PAGE 3

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ABUSE OF AGRICULTURAL TRADE AID COSTS TAXPAYERS

BY CORA FOX, CORAF@CFRA.ORG

For many years, the Center for Rural Affairs has advocated for support of common-sense and effective policy reform to close loopholes in the farm safety net and curtail further abuse of taxpayer dollars. In preparation for a farm bill, I shed light on tiresome abuse of farm program payments and the

implications of poor policies that support this abuse.

Unfortunately, this isn't the only example of exploitation of loopholes and abuse of taxpayer dollars by some farming operations. Payments from the Market Facilitation Program, administered by U.S. Department of Agriculture's

—SEE TRADE AID ON PAGE 4

NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

BY RHEA LANDHOLM, RHEAL@CFRA.ORG

Since its inception, the Center for Rural Affairs has chosen to advance a set of values that reflect the best of rural America. This month's newsletter focuses on "Widespread OWNERSHIP and CONTROL of small businesses, farms, and ranches by those who work them."

In this edition, you will read about Ruth Chantry who has co-run a certified organic farm for 22 growing seasons, demonstrating hard work on land she owns.

Our staff took a deep dive into Nebraska's food system, concluding \$4.4 billion is spent annually on food, with only 10 percent expended on products grown and processed in the state, prov-

ing closer control is needed to strengthen our local economy.

We also demonstrate the need for control over our own climate and how to get there with carbon-free energy and bioenergy.

We hear more about widespread ownership in a piece about effective policy reform to close loopholes in a new program providing short-term relief to producers. It needs to benefit America's true beginning and small family farmers instead of a few large farming operations.

In our executive director's essay, he emphasizes the importance of small businesses. We believe the ability to own and build your own business should be widely available—including to



those who do not inherit a business or have access to traditional capital sources.

Lastly, you will meet Nick Bergin, our new development director, who is looking forward to meeting all of you as he spreads the news of our organization's values.

For more, visit cfra.org or follow us on social media.

CONGRESS INVESTS IN RURAL BUSINESS

BY CORA FOX, CORAF@CFRA.ORG

Across rural America, small businesses are the heart of main street. From local coffee shops to the hardware store, these businesses employ local residents, provide important services to the community, and serve as anchors for their local economies. With the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2019 passed on Feb. 15, Congress has made an investment in rural small entrepreneurs nationwide.

The Rural Microentrepreneur Assistance Program is a federal program that provides grants to organizations so they can provide

lending and technical assistance to rural small businesses. This program fills a gap where otherwise rural entrepreneurs often struggle to access these crucial services and capital.

After the final 2018 farm bill was passed in December, the Rural Microentrepreneur Assistance Program was given authority to operate, but was left without mandatory federal funding. Without mandatory funding, the future of this program hinged upon discretionary funding from congressional appropriators, which requires renewal each fiscal year.

After months of dialogue between members of Congress, rural small business owners, and others, appropriators and appropriations committee staff in the U.S. House and Senate included \$3 million in discretionary funding for the Rural Microentrepreneur Assistance Program in the final spending deal for this year. This is a win for rural America and the small business owners who invest in their communities every day.

With this funding, Congress has shown that rural small businesses and the communities they serve are worth the investment.

PAPER & E-NEWS

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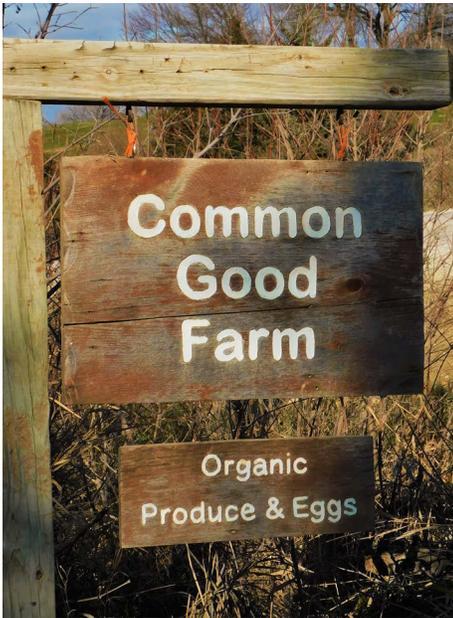
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At Common Good Farm, owners Ruth Chantry and Everett Lunquist believe livestock is important on a sustainable, biodynamic farm, and every intricate part of the farm works to support another. They grow 45 kinds of vegetables and herbs, as well as raise a few hogs, 900 laying hens, and have small herd of cattle to produce grass fed beef. | Photos by Cody Smith

RUTH, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

up in Minnesota, has a degree in sustainable food and agricultural systems, and had some experience working on Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) and market farms.

Together, they developed an interest in growing food for people. The couple started out on a community farm in Wisconsin where a steep learning curve equipped them with the tools and knowledge needed to start their own farm. To spread the word about CSA and biodynamics, Ruth and her husband decided to move to Ruth's home—Nebraska—to give it a try.

Twenty-two growing seasons later, Ruth and her husband have a highly diversified farming operation. At Common Good Farm, they own 20 acres of land where they grow 45 kinds of vegetables and herbs, as well as raise a few hogs, 900 laying hens, and have a small herd of cattle to produce grass fed beef.

For the couple, it all comes back to conservation.

“Soil health and conservation are important for the health of the plants and animals we grow

“SOIL HEALTH AND CONSERVATION ARE IMPORTANT FOR THE HEALTH OF THE PLANTS AND ANIMALS WE GROW AND RAISE, AS WELL AS THE TASTE AND QUALITY OF THE PRODUCTS WE SELL.”
—RUTH CHANTRY

and raise, as well as the taste and quality of the products we sell,” said Ruth. “We almost have a closed-loop system on our farm, meaning that we attempt to recycle all nutrients and organic matter back to the soil in a sustainable manner.”

Ruth and her husband believe that livestock is important on a sustainable, biodynamic farm, and every intricate part of the farm works to support another—the introduction of hogs to their farm addressed a growing bindweed problem; manure from livestock enriches the soil; and field scraps feed the animals they raise.

On Common Good Farm, they also incorporate the use of rotational grazing for cattle and hogs, cover crops, buffer strips, tree planting, wildlife habitat, and managing soil erosion.

In addition, the couple has used

USDA Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) conservation programs including the high tunnel cost share and a separate organic EQIP program focusing on rotational grazing, cover crop, nutrient, pest management, and EQIP Drought Assistance Funding in 2012 for reseeded pastures.

Today, Ruth and her husband present classes and host farm tours for beginning farmers to help those who were once in their shoes. She says learning how to apply all these practices takes time and hard work, and sometimes you need to ask for help.

“Starting out, if you can go work somewhere to gain some experience—do so,” she said. “Learning how other farmers do things is important. Farming can be demanding—day and night, but it is worth it.”

TRADE AID, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

(USDA) Farm Service Agency, are also being misused.

In 2018, President Trump pledged \$12 billion through USDA's Commodity Credit Corporation to provide direct aid to corn, cotton, dairy, hog, sorghum, soybean, and wheat producers. Through the Market Facilitation Program, USDA has administered this direct aid to provide short-term relief to producers who are feeling the effects of ongoing trade disputes with foreign governments.

To participate in the Market Facilitation Program, applicants must have ownership in the commodity; be actively engaged in farming; have an adjusted gross income of less than \$900,000 for 2014, 2015, and 2016; and comply with USDA's Highly Erodible Land and Wetland Conservation regulations. Additionally, Market Facilitation Program payments are capped per person or legal entity at a combined \$125,000 for qualifying commodities.

These requirements are not unlike those for other farm programs. Yet, a recent report from the Environmental Working Group highlights two major flaws in the way Market Facilitation Program payments are divvied up:

1. Some farming operations are receiving excessive payments because they are able to take advantage of loopholes, like having numerous absentee managers or family members claim "active personal management."

2. Some of these payments are going to individuals who do not live or work on the farm.

According to the report, 85 Market Facilitation Program payment recipients received more than the cap of \$125,000. One legal entity received nearly \$440,000 in Market Facilitation Program money. Likely, USDA made more payments of this size that we don't know about: the information shared covers only \$356 million in



A recent report highlights major flaws in an aid program to provide short-term relief to producers who are feeling the effects of ongoing trade disputes. | Photo by Cody Smith

direct aid to farmers, nearly \$840 million has been paid out in the first round of relief.

The problem is there is no cap on the number of payments that can go to one farming operation, which makes the \$125,000 cap on a single Market Facilitation Program payment meaningless. Since Market Facilitation Program payment limitations are not tied to commodity subsidies, crop insurance subsidies, and other forms of federal assistance, some farming operations are harvesting hundreds of thousands of dollars from taxpayers' wallets.

How is this happening? A few of the largest farming operations are claiming several individuals and/or legal entities are actively engaged, and current policy makes it difficult for USDA to determine whether or not their contribution is significant enough to qualify. This allows for numerous "managers" and/or family members to stake claims for payments, even when they may have never stepped foot on the farm.

While this information brings awareness to the gross abuse of taxpayer dollars in the Market Facilitation Program, it's just the beginning. In light of the newly released farm bill, it's apparent Congress is fine with expanding loopholes for crop subsidies, undermining already weakened policies that have been on the books for years. Distant relatives, includ-

ing nieces, nephews and cousins, are now eligible to qualify for subsidy payments under the umbrella of exemption: farming operations comprised solely of family members are exempt from active personal management restrictions.

These policies for both farm programs and the Market Facilitation Program are a heavy burden on the shoulders of American taxpayers. The pre-existing and recently expanded exemption from active personal management for family members is a loophole that drives large, corporate farms to reorganize as "family" farms to reap maximum benefits from government programs. And, without a strong actively engaged rule, large sums of taxpayer dollars will continue to line pockets of individuals who aren't spending time in the field or on the farm.

Policies are worthless if they aren't enforceable. A farm safety net riddled with loopholes allows for a few large farming operations to greatly benefit, while America's true beginning and small family farmers struggle to make ends meet. The lack of oversight, accountability, and enforceability in these policies—intended to help farmers stay afloat when times are tough—hurts the vast majority of producers in the long run.

Congress' poor policies are driving farm consolidation and hurting our rural communities. The time for change is now.



In a recent report, the Center for Rural Affairs found 1,300 Nebraska farms sell directly to consumers with sales of \$5.9 million, contributing 0.04 percent of the farm product sales in the state. Here, food is grown for a local restaurant. | Photo by Kylie Kai

REPORT, RECOMMENDATIONS ARE STEPS IN MAKING NEBRASKA MORE FOOD SECURE

BY RHEA LANDHOLM, RHEAL@CFRA.ORG

More than \$4.4 billion is spent annually on food in Nebraska, with only 10 percent expended on products grown and processed in the state, according to a report recently released by the Center for Rural Affairs and the Nebraska Food Council.

“Biting Into Food Access: A View of Nebraska’s Food System” provides background research describing the current food system in the state, taking a look at state-level and national-level data.

“When we spend food dollars outside of the state, that weakens our local economy and limits local access points,” said Sandra Renner, project associate with the Center for Rural Affairs and co-author of the report. “We rely on other areas of the country, the strength of their food systems and local economies, and the availability of their natural resources to provide us with food. The idea that we are ‘feeding the world’ ignores

the unsustainability of our current food system.”

The report examines demographics, food production and land use, food consumption and access, and food waste.

The final section of the report zooms in on next steps for the newly-formed Nebraska Food Council. Members of the Nebraska Food Council reviewed the research in this assessment and created an initial list of research topics, policy work, and areas of focus they would like to pursue.

“We’re looking at how to better feed our population and how to shift toward creating opportunities for more food production aimed at human consumption,” Renner said. “By addressing key issues in food, farm, small business, and community-level and institutional policy, there is potential to identify strengths, changes needed, and gaps in the food system.”

Key findings of the report include:

- Nebraska agriculture has be-

come more concentrated over time.

- Very little farmland in Nebraska is used for fruit and vegetable production so these items are imported. The state lacks readily accessible vegetable and fruit processing locations.

- Nationally, the state is first in beef and veal exports. Local communities are not always able to access Nebraska beef in local stores.

- During the 2017 to 2018 school year, Nebraska Farm to School reported \$2.7 million in total local food purchases. Products included melons, various vegetables, chicken, and milk.

- 1,300 Nebraska farms sell directly to consumers with sales of \$5.9 million, contributing 0.04 percent of the farm product sales in the state.

For more information and to view “Biting Into Food Access: A View of Nebraska’s Food System,” visit cfra.org/publications/BitingIntoFoodAccess.

A DIRE OPPORTUNITY: RURAL COMMUNITIES IN THE FACE OF CLIMATE CHANGE

BY KATIE ROCK, KATIER@CFRA.ORG

Climate change can be difficult to fully wrap your mind around. My fear is that more people will engage only after facing a crisis themselves—losing a home due to flooding, markets upended by multi-year droughts, or water shortages. We know warming trends can accelerate or decelerate depending on emissions and policies. We do not know when we will have crossed a threshold from which we cannot return. Carbon emissions increased in 2018 to nearly twice the rate seen in 2017 after three years of little to no increases.

This summer, two major reports were released with serious outlooks for our future in facing climate change. The Fourth National Climate Assessment presented a look at climate change facing the U.S. and weather variability for the next century. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released a deep dive on what it would take to limit global warming to 1.5° C. The latter says we can still limit warming if we make drastic changes by 2030. That means we have 11 years to transition to a carbon-free economy or we will face significant consequences.

So, how far behind are we, and how much do these reports change the conversation? In 2017, James Hansen, a native Iowan and one of the top climatologists in the world, published a report. We have warmed the world beyond 1° C and have enough carbon dioxide in the atmosphere to commit ourselves to at least 1.3° C. To stay at or below 1.5° C would mean keeping atmospheric carbon dioxide concentration



We believe soil health can play an even larger role than bioenergy in building a healthier climate and retaining our agriculture productivity. Our rich soils can act as a carbon sink by restoring soil health and topsoil. The pictured soil, in south central Kansas, is held together with cover crop roots. Cover cropping is just one effort in the most recent farm bill to expand work in this area. | Photo by Rhea Landholm

to 350 parts per million (ppm) or lower. We crossed the threshold of 400 ppm in 2013.

The goal of the Paris Climate Accord of 2015 was to commit nations to pursue the common goal of limiting warming to 2° C. But, even the goal of 2° C would mean sea level rises of 20 to 25 feet or higher, and a doubling of the current warming we are living in.

Our best path forward is to stay focused on solutions. This means a dramatic increase in carbon-free energy such as wind and solar, or what experts call decarbonization. More states, cities, and even some utilities are stepping up and setting timelines to become 100 percent powered by clean energy. Another key element is the need for negative emissions through soil health, and, specifically mentioned, bioenergy with carbon capture and storage. A major benefit of bioenergy is that plants used for energy pull carbon from the atmosphere before being harvested. Negative emissions are

yielded by combining the plant's natural ability to retain carbon with capturing and sequestering carbon from manufacturing. Just down the road from our office in Nevada, Iowa, is a facility that will soon be making natural gas derived from plant cellulose in corn stalks.

At the same climate summit that resulted in the Paris Accord in 2015, a new effort kicked off focused on rebuilding agricultural soils around the world. The “4 per 1000” Initiative is based on “An annual growth rate of 0.4 percent in the soil carbon stocks, or 4 percent per year, would halt the increase in the CO₂ concentration in the atmosphere related to human activities.”

We are engaging rural communities on the challenges and opportunities with climate change and clean energy. While large cities across the country are taking on their own climate initiatives, rural communities can offer valuable insight and cannot be left out of these conversations.

STAFF SPOTLIGHT

NEW DEVELOPMENT DIRECTOR WILL USE SUPERPOWERS IN RURAL AMERICA

BY LIZ DAEHNKE, COMMUNICATIONS CONSULTANT

Nick Bergin is a big believer in superheroes.

As a child, he lost himself in the fantasies written of those possessing powers beyond this world. Today, he searches for new kinds of superpowers—those found within the hardworking people who live in rural America.

Newly hired as development director for the Center for Rural Affairs, Nick is looking forward to meeting more superheroes and helping them discover and lever their own powers. He says this role hits close to home.

“There are lots of different kinds of heroes out there,” he said. “They can be anything from business owners who take risks to create jobs, to farmers and workers, like my grandpa, who produce nutritious food. Or, accountants, like my dad, who make numbers sing, and nurses, like my mom, who tend to sick children.”

Nick’s duties as development director include leading the Center’s individual donor fundraising activities and coordinating insti-



Nick Bergin

tutional funding strategies across the organization, among others.

He joins the Center team well-prepared for the job.

“I spent 10 years as a newspaper reporter, then worked for 18 months as a marketing director,” said Nick. “The passion for storytelling and community that drew me to those roles will be an asset for communicating a consistent and positive message in outreach, grant writing, and donor cultivation as development director for the Center.”

Nick believes in a team-oriented approach to developing promotion-

al strategies and achieving data-driven goals, and says the skills he learned as a reporter will help him in his new position, too.

“I’ve come to realize I have my own superpowers, though they’re less dramatic than shooting lasers from my eyes,” he said. “I have grit. I have work ethic. And, I’m not afraid to ask tough questions.”

He’s enthusiastic about using those superpowers to help better rural America.

“Rural communities are diverse places full of diverse people,” he said. “Those people have their own unique voices, dreams, and challenges. I’m proud to be a part of the Center’s ongoing work to create strong and sustainable communities.”

Nick and his wife live in the small community of Bronson, Iowa, where they’re raising their two daughters. When he has spare time, Nick enjoys watermelon seed spitting contests, gardening, and reading horror novels.

He can be reached at his office in Lyons at nickb@cfra.org or 402.687.2100 ext. 1035.

ENTREPRENEURSHIP, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 8

Institute demonstrated that this approach to business development works. Through a combination of business assistance and financing, participants are able to increase household income, reduce poverty, and reduce reliance on public benefit programs. The same study found that with proper supports, the working poor were able to use small businesses to create jobs

for both themselves and others in their community.

The Center’s small business program serves rural Nebraska. There are similar programs serving most states and regions around the country. To increase funding for programs offering small business services in rural areas, the Center drafted and won the Rural Microentrepreneur Assistance

Program in the 2008 farm bill, a program that has supported similar work in over 40 states now.

Small entrepreneurship is one of the most promising strategies for creating genuine opportunity in rural communities. Whether it reaches its full potential depends on whether communities embrace it and whether public policy supports it.



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Inside: a list of our amazing donors

FROM THE DESK OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

ENTREPRENEURSHIP LIFTS FAMILIES AND SUSTAINS COMMUNITIES

BY BRIAN DEPEW, BRIAND@CFRA.ORG

The Center for Rural Affairs is a small business lender, but we are different than a bank. In the last year, we made loans to support 126 small businesses in rural Nebraska, investing a total of \$2.4 million. For us, that is just the start of our work.

We know that capital alone cannot ensure success. Education, training, and mentoring are essential to establishing any new business. That is why our business specialists work with business owners on planning, projections, and helping navigate the details that come along with running a

small business.

For example, we offer a class called the Cleaning Academy where participants learn skills to develop cleaning based businesses. The course covers everything from cleaning techniques to contract and billing. Graduates receive a certification they can use in marketing their business. Graduates report that the class helped them formalize their business, attract new clients, and increase revenue.

We do this work because we believe in the value of widespread ownership. We believe that the ability to own and build your own

business should be widely available—including to those who do not inherit a business or have access to traditional capital sources.

We know that strong small businesses create jobs, help people build assets, and are essential for the long-term sustainability of our small towns. Entrepreneurial development also creates opportunities for young people in rural areas.

It is a proven model. A longitudinal study of similar organizations conducted by the Aspen

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—CONTINUED ON PAGE B2



WITH YOUR HELP, WE SAT DOWN WITH 75 POLICYMAKERS AMPLIFYING OUR VOICES LOCALLY, REGIONALLY, AND IN WASHINGTON, D.C. SOME OF YOU JOINED US ON THESE VISITS TO WIN PUBLIC POLICY THAT ADDRESSES THE IMPORTANT ISSUES FACING RURAL AMERICA.

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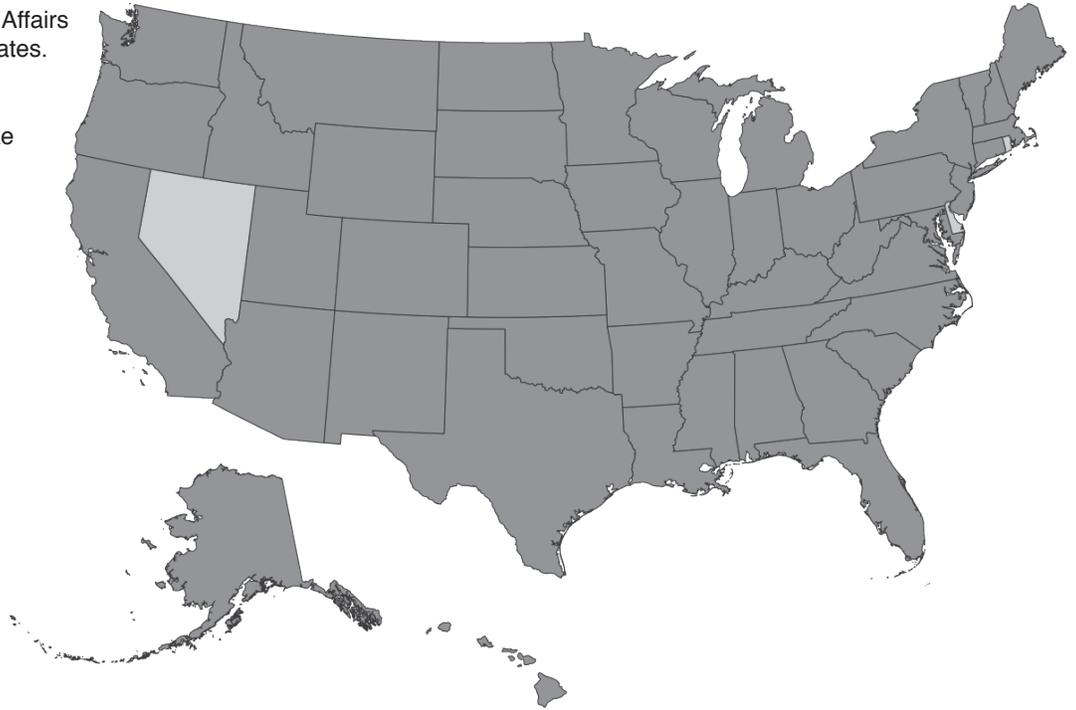


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