



# Wild about strawberries

ISSUE NUMBER 17 - APRIL / MAY 2009



THE NATIONAL STRAWBERRY  
PEARL INDUSTRY BODY

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It was with regret and disappointment that Strawberries Australia learnt that without any consultation with our industry, the Victorian Government and particularly the Victorian Department of Primary Industries decided to cease supporting the entire Victorian horticultural industry, though we were led to believe for many months that the Program would continue.

The withdrawal of support for the **Southern Strawberry Breeding Program** and the closure of numerous Victorian horticultural institutions – with the loss of experienced and dedicated staff – will have a devastating effect on horticulture and our industry. The Victorian part of the Australian Strawberry Breeding Program has been in existence for many years and has encouraged the development of better strawberry varieties, which in turn

improved the quality of fruit and the financial well being of all growers. The closure of the Knoxfield Institute and the Toolangi Research Station will have major implications not only on the Victorian Strawberry Industry, but the entire Victorian horticultural community and major ramifications for all other States.

Our growers need Government support to improve our industry and the loss of this support will have a devastating impact in years to come. All growers are being made aware of these changes and the adverse effect these changes will have. Victorian Strawberry Grower Association members have been urged to fight these detrimental decisions and to write to Government MP's to seek a complete reversal of these decisions – but there has been no response. 🍓



## VICTORIA

- **VSGA Industry Ball** – Saturday, 30 May at Monte Carlo Receptions, Doncaster
- **The Berry Expo** – Thursday 16 July at “York on Lilydale Resort”, Cnr York and Swansea Roads, Mt Evelyn

Contact the Vic IDO, Ms Elizabeth Wharton for details on 0408 416 538

## QUEENSLAND

- **QSGA General Meeting** – Tuesday, 28 April at Beerwah RSL at 7.00pm
- **QSGA Field Day** – Wednesday, 6 May at 133 Laxton Road, Palmview (Jon Carmichaels Farm “Strawberry Fields”). From 8.30 am – 4.30pm – Entrance fee \$15
- **Annual Conference Dinner** – 29 May at the Novotel Twin Waters Resort, Sunshine Coast from 6.00pm – late.

Contact the Qld IDO, Mr Lourens Grobler for details on 0438 752 177

## NATIONAL EVENT

**Annual Levy Payers Meeting (ALP) and Dinner** (all Australian Growers are to be cordially invited)

Tuesday, 13 October from 6.30pm (meeting) followed by Dinner at 7.30pm

Because we need to cater for the dinner, growers attending will need to RSVP and details are to be posted to all growers in September 09 (in a special Invitation).

**Field Trip to inspect the new Southern Node Breeding Farm** – Wednesday 14 October

Details to be advised at the time of the despatch of the Annual Levy Payers invitation.

Contact the CEO for details on 0418 516 086

## New Breeding Projects Approved

As a result of the Victorian DPI decision to withdraw from the National Strawberry Breeding Program, Strawberries Australia Inc (SAI) has taken over the responsibility for the Breeding Program - with the assistance of Horticulture Australia Ltd (HAL). After many meetings and teleconferences over the last 12 months, a Project proposal was prepared and despatched to HAL in February 2009. The project aims for SAI to be the Service Provider for the Southern Node Breeding Project, whilst the Qld DPI will administer, manage and control the Northern Node portion of the Breeding program.

As most growers should be aware, DPIV and DPIQ&F have been breeding strawberries for the temperate and subtropical zones since 1990 and 1991 respectively. Both breeding programs have been beneficiaries of substantial funding from State governments, the strawberry industry and HAL, and a good number of varieties have been commercialised, but industry take-up has been low except in Victoria, where new varieties have contributed to outstanding industry growth (doubling from 8,000 tonnes in 1987 to 15,000 tonnes in 2006).

Development of new strawberry varieties with improved flavour and quality is a

key issue for industry viability. Overseas breeders are not interested in expending efforts or money to either specifically breed for our environment or develop management packages for Australia's unique conditions due to the relatively small market size (approx. 1,000 million plants are planted in California and Florida whilst only 55 million are planted in Australia).


To ensure that the valuable gene pool which has taken 25 years to develop would not be lost with the closure of the DPIV trials at Knox, agreement was reached by all parties involved (VSGA, SAI, HAL, QDPI&F and DPIV) that the former project would be extended by paying DPIV a “fee for service” for a period of 12 months until SAI could arrange for a study into the feasibility of the Australian Strawberry industry and if proved satisfactory – a new Breeding Project would be funded and commence in the first half of 2009. HAL insisted that a business case be conducted to prove the worth of such a scheme of arrangement – for the continuation of the Breeding Project. After many months of discussion and meetings it was resolved that there is a continuing need for the development of the unique germplasm developed by the Southern Breeders.

Because the Knox Research Station was to close in late 2009 (and the staff of the

breeding project made redundant in April 2009), it was necessary to relocate and re-establish the Southern Breeding Program and the transfer of the current intellectual property rights over the breeding germplasm from DPIV to a new service provider. SAI received notification on 16 April 2009 that it had been granted the first “transitional” Contract and to be the “Service Provider” for the Southern Node Breeding Project.

As at writing this Report, SAI are preparing to sign a lease for land for the establishment of a new small trial farm in the Yarra Valley. Site selection, relocation and a Breeding Program are being developed, as well as arranging for the employment of full-time scientific and part-time field supervising staff.

These are exciting times and the establishment of a Strawberries Australia Breeding Sub-committee comprising growers (members of the SAI Board), scientists, a HAL representative and Team Leaders from both the Northern and Southern Nodes and QDPI&F management is also being arranged by the CEO of Strawberries Australia (who will also be an ex-officio member of the sub-committee.

More information will be made available to all growers in future newsletters. 

# Western Flower Thrips Project

## Crisis at HAL

Strawberries Australia were surprised to learn that the Managing Director of Horticulture Australia Ltd (HAL), Mr John Webster, tendered his resignation and departs the organisation at the end of April; 2009.

Mr Webster was the initial MD (when HAL was created 8 years ago) and leaves the company at a critical time, what with the world in financial crisis; Australia in drought in the south; floods in the north; new Horticultural Awards and Horticultural Codes of Conduct, to name but a few of the emerging crises.

Many members of HAL (including Strawberries Australia) have also expressed serious misgivings at the way the company (HAL) was being managed and without due consultation with its members, before making major financial decisions.

Strawberries Australia is only one of the smaller members (that comprises 43 horticultural member Associations) that make up Horticulture Australia Ltd.

At a special members meeting, held in Sydney in March 2009, members expressed in no uncertain terms their disappointment at the way the Board and Management were conducting the business. There was almost an expression of mutiny by members – and request for a “cultural change”.

Only one week after that Members meeting, the MD tendered his resignation.

The Board of HAL are now fully aware of members concerns and hopefully will resolve these without further loss of senior staff.

Since John Webster commenced at HAL, the value and esteem of Australian horticulture has grown substantially and we thank him for his efforts and wish him well in the future.



Western Flower Thrips (WFT) Forums were initiated in Victoria by the Victorian Strawberry IDO, Elizabeth Wharton due to industry concern over the extreme levels and damage caused by WFT to strawberry fruit yield and quality over the last two seasons. Industry Forums were held on 19 June and 16 July 2008 - which aimed to consult growers only in order to establish how big the problem was, as well as to ascertain what management strategies were currently in place to control WFT.

The second Forum on 16 July brought 23 WFT specialists from across Australia together at DPI Knoxfield. Specialists came from many fields and different backgrounds including - entomology, **Integrated Pest Management (IPM)**, chemical resistance, chemical regulation, AQIS, Horticulture Australia, agronomy, field inspections, Departmental admin support and policy and field extension.

After the Forums, Workshops were held offering growers assistance and information free of charge. These workshops were designed to introduce growers to the IPM concept and also to develop an IPM strategy that would control WFT as well as many other pests on their farms. These workshops were conducted by IPM Technologies Pty Ltd and held on four occasions in August 2008 throughout the Yarra Valley. Funding for these workshops was obtained from HAL with the co-operation and endorsement of Strawberries Australia.

Specialists discussed the current practices of growers in the industry to control WFT and also their experiences using other strategies. Specialists agreed that

chemicals would not be a long-term solution to control WFT due to their short lifecycle and insecticide resistance. Thus, they agreed that IPM in conjunction with good farm hygiene practices should be used, as this method has proven successful in strawberry crops in VWA as well as in many other crops throughout Australia.

Specialists were asked to return to their respective organisations and to develop project proposals to control WFT. Proposals were received in September 2008, and after the SAI Board meeting (also in September), the Board of SAI agreed to financially support these projects.

Strawberries Australia recommended to HAL that the Project be broken into two parts:

- On 12 January 2009, the CEO of SAI received notification that a HAL Contract for Project BS 08011 – was approved and signed by Dr Paul Horne of IPM Technologies P/L for a three year contract totalling \$105k.
- The second part of the Project dealt with **Rutherglen Bug** – which the SAI Board felt was a **national problem** and accordingly could be funded from SAI levy money. This part of the project was submitted by SARDI as a 2 year project at a cost of \$18,000 per annum.

Strawberries Australia, and HAL have been willing to fund research projects and trials with the support of industry to determine strategies that will be effective in the short-term and ultimately it is hoped that these projects will control, and perhaps even eradicate thrips from strawberry crops in the longer term. 🍓

Left: Don Hutton inspecting strawberry plants at Maroochy for the presence of crown rot

## Improving runner quality for commercial strawberry growers

By Chris Menzel, Don Hutton, Chris Freebairn, Apollo Gomez, Jonathan Smith, Lauren Stirling and Lindsay Smith - from Maroochy Research Station Qld.

Poor runner quality, lethal yellows and crown rot continue to affect the strawberry industry in southern Queensland, and contribute to losses of up to twenty percent in individual fields on the Sunshine Coast. This report gives an overview of activities carried out by the DPI&F over the past two years to address these issues in the HAL runner quality project, BSO6005.

### Optimum planting systems for commercial strawberry growers in south-east Queensland

The quality of strawberry planting material is usually defined in terms of plant size. It is also possible that the amount of chilling accumulated prior to digging affects the quality of the runners. Thus, we have been examining the impacts of some of these factors on the productivity of 'Festival' in experiments at Nambour.

Results to date show that:

- "Large" runners yield 10 to 20 percent more than "small" runners.
- "Large" runners usually crop earlier than the "small" runners.
- "Large" runners return about a \$1.00 more than "small" runners.
- Runners from Queensland are generally just as profitable as those from Victoria or Tasmania.
- The optimum time of planting can vary with the season.
- The best yields are obtained with a planting in mid- to late March.
- Slightly later planting times (early and mid-April) are as productive in a warm growing season, but not in a cool-growing season.
- Poor yields are obtained with plantings in early March.
- Poor yields are obtained with plantings in late April or early May.
- Early plantings return \$1.00 to \$2.00 less than the optimum planting.
- Late plantings return \$1.00 to \$4.00 less than the optimum planting.

### Reducing the incidence of lethal yellows

Current strategies to control strawberry lethal yellows (SLY) in runner beds at Stanthorpe include weekly application of the insecticide dimethoate to kill the insects which transmit the disease organisms. However, this technology is only partially successful, with severe infections still occurring in some seasons. Plants showing symptoms in the runner beds are culled, but symptomless runners infected prior to digging can be consigned to the fruit farms on the Sunshine Coast. Fine nets have been shown to exclude the potential vectors and prevent SLY, but are expensive to install and maintain.

Our research has shown that:

- SLY in the runners is predominantly caused by a rickettsia-like organism (RLO); the phytoplasma, *Candidatus Phytoplasma australiense* (CPa), is uncommon.
- The RLO has been detected in only two of the many local plant species: dogwood, *Jacksonia scoparia* and Carolina mallow, *Modiola caroliniana*.
- The vector of SLY is probably a leaf- or a planthopper, possibly *Orosius argentatus*, but neither RLO nor CPa has been found in 37 samples of this species tested so far.
- SLY may be brought in by hoppers that fly in from outside the Granite Belt, possibly on N/NW winds.
- Oil sprays may limit infection of strawberry runners by reducing hopper feeding. In experiments last year, applications of oils up to 1.5 percent had no detrimental effects on the runners at Stanthorpe. This was an unduly cool summer on the Granite Belt, and similar research in a more typical year is required to confirm these results.

# Industry Development Officer (IDO) Projects

- The systemic insecticide imidacloprid (Confidor) probably has greater potential to reduce the incidence of SLY.

## Reducing the incidence of crown rot

Crown rot caused by the fungus *Colletotrichum gloeosporioides* (Cg) is the major disease causing the loss of strawberry plants in southern Queensland. The organism can be isolated from a small number of plants in the nurseries in Brisbane and the runner farms in Stanthorpe where it causes insignificant losses. However, when infected material is consigned to the fruit farms on the Sunshine Coast, there can be more serious problems, with losses on individual farms of up to 20 percent in some seasons.

Results to date show that:

- The disease organism causing crown rot is not likely to remain viable in the soil over winter in the runner-growing areas.
- Infected runners are probably the main source of infection.
- There are indications of resistance to prochloraz, the main chemical used to control the disease in the runner beds.
- Industry has been granted a permit for the use of cyprodinil plus fludioxinil (Switch), and these chemicals should be used in the commercial runner nurseries along with prochloraz.
- Industry has been granted a permit for the use of cyprodinil plus fludioxinil (Switch) and pyraclostrobin (Cabrio), and these chemicals should be used exclusively on plants in the tissue culture and foundation nurseries.

For more information contact:  
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All Australian Commercial Strawberry Growers can be pleased with the progress and achievements made by our two Strawberry Industry Development Officers, one based in Victoria and the other in Queensland. Their endeavours and successes have made our industry stronger and richer.

Victoria applied for the first IDO in late 1999 and **Miss Elizabeth Wharton** is the third person to fill that post since the position was created.

The first IDO (**Mr Jonathan Jenkin**) was an excellent initiator of groundbreaking developments, who moved on after three years to the private sector.

Jonathan was replaced by **Miss Chloe Thomson** who continued Jonathan's excellent hard work. Chloe also moved on after three years to the private sector.

Elizabeth Wharton commenced in March 2008 and comes from a background with the DPI Victoria and has proved to be just as good as her predecessors in getting excellent results.

The current Victorian IDO project concludes on 30 September 2009.

The Statutory levy collecting arm of the VSGA, (the VSIDC) applied for a new IDO Project to HAL in March 2009 and the industry awaits the outcome of that application with interest and patience – as the Victorian industry cannot afford to lose this wonderful asset.

**Queensland** applied for its first IDO in 2004 and Mr Lourens Grobler has filled the position with success and wonderful achievements since day one. Qld is not in such a favourable position as Victoria - as

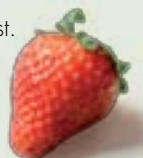
Qld has to ask its members to voluntarily contribute funds to the QSIPC to assist it in paying the matched contribution to HAL for the employment of its IDO. (Victoria has a compulsory State levy system – in addition to the Federal Levy).

So far, Qld grower funds have been forthcoming and fund raising events have been held with great success – and at the same time instilling a great camaraderie within the Qld industry – that doesn't seem to be as obvious in other States.

The current Qld IDO position expires on 15 July 2009 and QSIPC applied to HAL in February 2009 for a new three year project, (as an extension to the current project). HAL have allocated a Project number (BS09004) and Strawberries Australia has endorsed both the Vic and Qld new projects at its March 2009 Board meeting.

Strawberries Australia (SAI) was also asked to conduct a Needs Assessment exercise to prove to HAL the worth of Industry Development Officers. This exercise was conducted in Brisbane and the Presidents of the QLD and Vic Grower Associations as well as the NSW representative on the SAI Board met with the CEO of SAI and the HAL Strawberry Industry Service Manager (Mr Stuart Burgess) to conduct an indepth exercise into the future of our IDO's and what the industry expects them to do in the future. This worthwhile exercise was submitted (along with the two IDO applications) to HAL for IDO approval. We await their decision with interest.

The next newsletter shall report on HAL's decisions. 





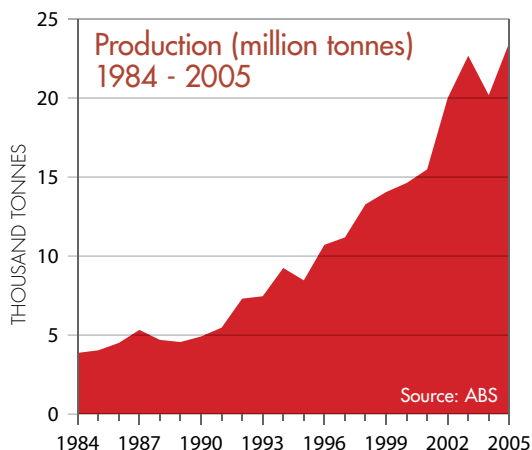
## Economic Evaluation of Australian Strawberry Breeding

by eSYS consultants

The following information might be of interest to growers. These facts were included in a Study of the Australian Strawberry industry whilst investigating the feasibility of a new National Breeding Project.

Australia produced about 27.5 thousand tonnes of strawberries in 2006 (ABS 2007). There is considerable uncertainty surrounding estimates of industry production, as smaller producers may not be included and productivity has been changing over recent years. The increase in production since the mid 1980's is evident in the adjoining chart and has largely been achieved through yield improvements rather than expanding production areas in most instances.

Queensland, Victoria, and Western Australia account for most production. There are essentially two production periods based on latitude. The 'Late Autumn Winter Spring' (LAWS) period in SE Queensland and the 'Spring Summer Autumn' period in Southern and Western states. The Albany area accounts for approximately 10% of runner sales, but no good data is available on sales volume.



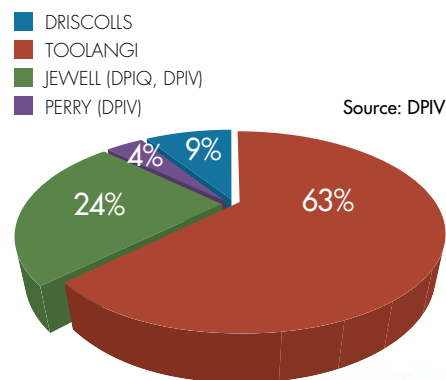
Colour and gloss, fruit shape conformity, productivity, flavour and pest and disease susceptibility, govern the attractiveness of Australian strawberries. To address these issues, Strawberries Australia in conjunction with Horticulture Australia Limited, Department of Primary Industries Victoria, Department of Agriculture and Forests Queensland, Department of Agriculture and Food Western Australia and Primary Industries Research South Australia have funded strawberry breeding. Through the strawberry breeding program, new short day and day neutral strawberries are being developed with the following characteristics:

- Cultivars suited to the fresh market with adaptation to the northern, southern and western production areas of Australia. These environments vary widely, from sub tropical, to wet and dry temperate areas with mild or high summer temperatures.
- Cultivars with lower levels of dependence on expensive crop protectants. This has been achieved by selecting against susceptibility to a range of pests, leaf, and fruit diseases under Australian growing conditions.
- Cultivars with resistance to minor pathogens and stronger root systems, which are not dependent on fumigants, have been developed through repeated selection from non-fumigated soil.
- Improved flavour has been a prime target of the national breeding program. Many of the existing commercial cultivars bred overseas fail to produce a flavour or aroma under Australian growing conditions that satisfies consumers. Coles and Woolworth buyers telephone survey conducted in September 2005

indicated: new varieties are needed, and better flavour, quality and freshness will lead to increased sales.

- Profitability has at times been marginal therefore new cultivars must be efficient to produce. Fruit which will detach easily, tare well displayed, have low grading losses with little variation in shape, are more efficient to pick and pack.
- The climate in Australia is often harsh with extended rain or heat waves, which can damage the fruit of susceptible cultivars. Selection for resistance to rain damage and freedom from sunburn has improved the reliability of Australian production.
- Appearance is a critical factor in the acceptance of any new cultivar. Consumers frequently buy by visual appeal, therefore fruit has to be attractively shaped, bright, free from blemishes, uniform and appealing, and varieties have to hold this appearance throughout the season.

Runner Supplies by Supplier (%) 2007  
Total runners = 60 - 70 million



## Market and Economic Analysis

- 60 million runners are planted per annum, with Toolangi Strawberry Runner Growers produce accounting for a significant proportion of the market.
- Only 10% of all varieties planted in Australia are derived from Australian breeding programs.
- If adoption of Australian varieties could be increased to 15%, cost-benefit analysis indicates the breeding program would generate positive net economic benefits.
- Risks including access to genetic material, uncoordinated independent runner growers and lack of uptake by fruit growers delay the realisation of the economic benefits.

- Domestic consumption of strawberries in Australia was 1.35 kg per capita in 2004, whereas consumption per person in California is four times higher.
- Strawberry production and consumption in the US has trebled to meet demand.
- For Australian growers to meet consumption demand of this magnitude domestic production would need to treble.
- Perceived flavour, sweetness and juiciness are major contributors to a consumer's overall satisfaction with strawberry.
- There is high production and price variation based on the volume of production.
- Much of the efforts of the Queensland program have targeted the development of varieties that can produce fruit for the late autumn early winter period during which premium prices are received due to limited supplies 🍓

## Overview of the AUSTRALIAN STRAWBERRY Industry

c	VIC	QLD	WA	SA	TAS	NSW	TOTAL
<b>ABS Data (2005)</b>							
Production <sup>(1)</sup>	7,279	13,579	4,233	1,759	366	273	27,489
Area <sup>(1)</sup>	345	647	178	69	40	51	1,330
(\$)m	48.0	77.4	22.6	17.2	2.2	1.9	169.2
<b>Assumptions</b>							
Plants/ha	45,000	45,000	55,000	45,000	45,000	45,000	45,000
Yield t/ha	21	21	24	25	9	5	18
% Total (area)	26%	49%	15%	6%	1%	1%	100%
Plants (million)	15.5	29.1	9.8	3	1.8	2.3	61.5
Punnets (mill)	32	42	22	7	4	5	113
\$/kg	6.59	5.69	5.34	9.78	6.01	6.96	6.16
\$/punnet	1.65	1.42	1.34	2.47	1.50	1.74	1.54
% Total	29%	37%	20%	6%	4%	4%	100%

Source: ABS, 7112.0 Selected Agricultural Commodities, Australia, Preliminary, 2005-06, ABS 7503.0 Value of Agricultural Commodities Produced, Australia

Note <sup>(1)</sup> The 2005 ABS data used here does not reflect the long term size of the industry in southern Australia as plantings and production in this season were reduced by approximately 35% due to the effects of the drought.

## What is happening at Strawberries Australia

For your information the Board consists of nine (9) members each with one vote at SAI Board meetings (which are held as face-to-face meetings at least twice a year, plus numerous teleconferences).

The members as at April 2009 are as follows:

**Sam VIOLI** – Victorian Grower and Chairman SAI

**Brian TAYLOR** – NSW Grower and Deputy Chairman SAI

**Jon CARMICHAEL** – Queensland Grower and Treasurer SAI

**Kerry LANGLANDS** – West Australian Grower

**Vanessa SHERRY** – South Australian Grower

**John CALLE** – Victorian Grower

**Neil HANDASYDE** – West Australian Grower

**Ray DANIELS** – Queensland Grower (who replaced Rick TWIST in October 2008)

**Craig MORRIS** – Tasmanian Grower (who replaced Beth LUCKHURST in June 2008)

The Board of Strawberries Australia has undertaken **six telephone "teleconferences"** in recent months, as well as face-to-face meetings in July, and September 2008 and March 2009 - to discuss the problems confronting your industry, particularly the National Breeding Program.

The Board has, after many hours of discussion, approved the revised Strategic Plan (2009 – 2013) at its last Board meeting in Hobart in March 2009.

If any grower requires a copy of either the new Constitution or the revised Strategic Plan, please write to the CEO of Strawberries Australia and he will be happy to oblige.

The Strategic Plan is also available on the Strawberries Australia website

[www.strawberriesaustralia.com.au](http://www.strawberriesaustralia.com.au) 🍓



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Letters to the Editor at the above address are welcome as are suggestions for topics to be covered.

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**W:** www.sweetstrawberryrunners.com.au

Toolangi Strawberry Runners Co-operative Limited  
Victoria

**T:** (03) 5962 9220

**F:** (03) 5962 9416

Tasmanian Highland Strawberry Runners  
Peter Bignell

**T:** (03) 6259 1400

**E:** pbignell@strawberryrunners.com.au

Perry Certified Strawberry Runner Growers  
Toolangi (Vic)

**T/F:** (03) 5962 9429

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