



## Ramshorn Timber Stand Improvement (TSI)

USDA Forest Service, Eastern Region  
Greenbrier Ranger District, Monongahela National Forest  
Pocahontas County, West Virginia

### I. Project Description

#### A. Summary Description of Project

The Greenbrier Ranger District will conduct timber stand improvements (TSI) within the Ramshorn area. This TSI project includes three components:

- Thinning of young stands previously harvested,
- Tree planting in riparian areas, and
- Releasing a biological control agent for hemlock wooly adelgid.

#### B. Purpose and Need

##### Thinning

This project is needed to increase and maintain mast species on approximately 733 acres of young stands that have undergone regeneration harvest in the last 10 to 25 years. The numbers of stems per acre are high, with more than 1,500 in some areas. The competition in these young stands is stressful on tree species that are desirable for both wildlife food production and potential future timber production.

In these young stands, as time progresses, crowding would become more severe. Crown size and vigor would be reduced, with an increased mortality of important wildlife tree species and valuable timber species.

The purpose of treatments is to increase the rate of growth in oak, black cherry, and hickory species to ensure a sustained food supply for wildlife.

The release or thinning is proposed to accomplish the following objectives:

- Increase the vigor and strength of canopy trees
- Maintain the species diversity of the stands
- Provide stronger potential for future mast and timber production

### Tree Planting in Riparian Areas & Releasing a Biological Control Agent for Hemlock Woolly Adelgid

Native to Japan, the hemlock woolly adelgid (HWA) is a serious pest in the United States of eastern hemlock (*Tsuga canadensis*) and a threat to Carolina hemlock (*T. carolina*). The latter tree species is found only in the southern region of the Appalachian Mountains. The range of HWA is expanding rapidly each year. HWA is currently established in eleven eastern states from North Carolina to Massachusetts, and tree decline and mortality has increased at an accelerated rate since the late 1980s. For example, in the Shenandoah National Park, hemlocks have declined drastically over the past nine years. In 1990, greater than 77 percent of the hemlocks were in a healthy condition. Today, less than 10 percent are in a healthy condition. New Jersey has estimated a loss of 9 percent of its hemlock resource, and 44 percent remains moderately to severely impacted. Similar adelgid-caused impacts are also affecting most districts of the Monongahela National Forest.

Releasing a biological control agent - the predatory beetle (*Laricobius nigrinus*) - could slow the HWA in hemlock. Plantings of conifers could replace dead and diseased hemlocks in riparian areas. This will help to provide stream and riparian area shading and keep water temperatures from increasing.

Chemical control of HWA is not an option for hemlocks within the general forest. *Laricobius nigrinus* may provide lasting and effective control in a cost efficient manner. If some type of control is not implemented, the entire hemlock resource within eastern forests could be lost in just a few decades.

### **C. Project Location and Description**

The Forest Service (USFS) proposes to implement TSI on approximately 833 acres of the Greenbrier Ranger District (RD) of the Monongahela National Forest, Pocahontas County, West Virginia (Figure 1). The Ramshorn area is located approximately 1.5 miles from Green Bank. It is bounded by: the North Fork of Tacker Fork Creek to the north; State Highway 6 to the west; the Greenbrier/Marlinton Ranger District boundary to the south; and the West Virginia/Virginia line to the east. This area is part of two Management Prescription (MP) areas as described in the Monongahela National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan, 2006): MP 6.1 (pages III-31 through III-39); and MP 3.0 (pages III-4 through III-8).

MP 6.1 emphasizes the enhancement of wildlife habitat by favoring tree species and forest communities that are beneficial to wildlife. The prescription also focuses on restoration and management of fire adapted oak-pine and oak-hickory communities.

MP 3.0 emphasis related to this project includes age class diversity, a variety of forest scenery, and habitat for wildlife species tolerant of disturbances, such as deer, grouse, and squirrel.

### Thinning

The Forest Service is proposing thinning, or release, on approximately 733 acres within the Greenbrier Ranger District. The stands are on the Greenbrier RD in compartments 113, 114, 115, 116, 120, 121, and 122 (see Table 1). Most of the stands are in MP 3.0; management activities in these areas are geared towards the production of large high quality hardwood trees for lumber and veneer, along with hard mast production. Stands in compartment 122 are in MP 6.1; management activities in these areas are geared toward wildlife habitat improvement. These stands are all generally 10 to 25 year old sapling sized stands. The stands are over-stocked with 1,414 to 2,600 stems per acre. Understory shrubs will not be cut, unless necessary for safety. Vines may be cut in MP 3.0 stands if they are determined to be impeding crop trees. They will not be cut in MP 6.1 stands, since the District Wildlife Biologist has determined that will not be necessary in order to achieve wildlife habitat objectives. No logging equipment will be used, and commercial utilization of cut stems will not be possible because of their small size and value. The stems will be hand-felled and left on site with little or no ground disturbance. No new roads will be required; all work will use existing roads.

Research indicates that oak trees that are dominant in a 20-year-old stand have a much higher likelihood of surviving to age 80 than do trees with higher levels of competition. Dominant trees have a lower mortality rate. On a stand level, this means that crowded stands, with few dominant, and many co-dominant stems, are more likely to experience serious effects such as mast failures and mortality. Thus, the long-term goal of the thinning will be to reduce stand susceptibility to these problems. Trees will be chosen for release based on current good crown size, and will be species that can contribute to the diversity of the stand, whether by choosing a variety of oak trees, or other less common hardwood trees. Trees touching the crown of the tree designated for release will be cut.

**Table 1.** Ramshorn TSI thinning stands, acres, forest type, and year of origin

Compartment	Stand	Acres	Forest Type <sup>a</sup>	Year of Origin
113	075	8.0	89	1980
113	081	9.0	89	1997
113	082	9.0	89	1997
113	084	8.0	89	1980
114	011	44.0	89	1967
115	012	13.0	89	1990
115	014	12.0	89	1991
115	016	23.0	89	1991
115	017	7.0	81	1990
115	020	16.0	81	1989
115	021	4.0	89	1989
115	031	15.0	81	1989
115	033	27.0	89	1989
116	016	11.0	81	1991

Compartment	Stand	Acres	Forest Type <sup>a</sup>	Year of Origin
116	019	8.0	81	1994
116	022	14.0	59	1994
116	025	11.0	81	1991
116	028	13.0	85	1994
116	031	11.0	81	1991
116	036	26.0	86	1991
116	037	22.0	81	1991
116	040	17.0	81	1991
116	043	14.0	81	1991
116	058	11.0	81	1988
116	068	15.0	81	1991
116	076	17.0	89	1991
116	077	14.0	81	1991
116	078	11.0	89	1993
116	079	10.0	81	1991
120	012	10.0	81	1990
120	018	10.0	89	1989
120	073	10.0	89	1988
120	085	6.0	81	1989
120	088	23.0	89	1990
121	019	9.0	59	1985
121	080	20.0	89	1990
122	006	15.0	89	1970
122	010	10.0	52	1985
122	011	12.0	89	1986
122	059	9.0	89	1992
122	076	21.0	59	1988
122	078	18.0	59	1993
122	082	20.0	89	1990
122	094	8.0	59	1996
122	095	7.0	59	1996
122	096	11.0	89	1992
122	097	13.0	59	1986
122	098	16.0	59	1988
122	099	11.0	81	1994
122	100	11.0	59	1996
122	101	9.0	89	1990
122	102	3.0	89	1989
122	104	10.0	52	1989

Compartment	Stand	Acres	Forest Type <sup>a</sup>	Year of Origin
122	105	12.0	89	1992
122	106	9.0	89	1990
<b>Total Acres</b>		<b>733</b>		

- <sup>a</sup>
- 52 = Chestnut Oak;
  - 59 = Mixed Oaks;
  - 81 = Sugar Maple - Beech - Yellow Birch;
  - 85 = Sugar Maple;
  - 86 = Beech;
  - 89 = Mixed Hardwood

### Thinning Treatment Summary

- Timber stand improvement guidelines:
  - Release (leave) approximately 50 to 100 crop trees per acre.
  - Chainsaw fell trees touching or interfering with the crown of the crop tree.
  - Approximately 50 to 400 stems will be cut per acre depending on the age of the stand.
  - Cut vines in the stands within MP 3.0 if Silviculturist determines they are impeding growth of crop trees.
  
- Determination of crop trees:
  - Species in order of importance:
    - Red oak
    - Black cherry
    - Sugar maple
    - White oak/chestnut oak
    - Yellow-poplar/Cucumber tree
    - Basswood
    - White ash
    - Red maple
  
  - Other guidelines:
    - No forks below 17 feet
    - Select sprouts low to the ground
    - Select best 2 to 3 sprouts per stump
    - No black knot on main bowl of cherry
    - Butternut and healthy American chestnut will be treated as crop trees
    - Avoid picking red maple stump sprouts as crop trees
    - Retain shagbark hickory
    - Retain healthy beech
    - Girdle large residuals interfering with crop trees
    - There will be no trees cut within 25 feet of ephemeral streams
    - There will be no trees cut within 50 feet of intermittent streams
    - There will be no trees cut within 100 feet of perennial streams

### Releasing a Biological Control Agent for Hemlock Woolly Adelgid

The *Laricobius* beetle will be released in areas where the HWA is infesting hemlocks. The amount of the biological control agent released will depend on funding and beetle availability.

### Tree Planting in Riparian Areas

Conifers will be planted in approximately 100 acres of riparian areas. Numbers and densities of planting will depend on the numbers of trees already in the area, their health, and the success of the *Laricobius* beetle.

### Mitigation measures and design features to reduce the spread of NNIS (non-native invasive species)

FP standard VE22, states: “Projects that may contribute to the spread or establishment of noxious weeds shall be designed to include measures to reduce the potential for spread and establishment of noxious weed infestations.”

Compartment 122 harbors a large infestation of garlic mustard along FR 757 and various woods roads. Garlic mustard also occurs in smaller patches scattered throughout the compartment. Vehicles that become muddy while being operated on FR 757 or woods roads in Compartment 122 will be cleaned prior to being operated on other areas of National Forest System land. Cleaning should remove all soil, seeds, vegetative matter, or other debris that could contain or hold seeds. Cleaning will be conducted in a location and manner that 1) does not spread seed to unimpacted locations, and 2) does not contaminate soil, surface waters, or groundwater with oil, grease, or other contaminants.

If TSI work is conducted during the seed dispersal season for garlic mustard (mid-June through October), workers will be able to identify garlic mustard and will avoid walking through garlic mustard patches to the extent practical. If working in garlic mustard patches during this time period is unavoidable, workers will clean their boots, pant cuffs, and equipment prior to going to any other area of National Forest System land. Cleaning will be conducted in a manner and location that does not spread seed to unimpacted locations.

### Mitigation measures and design features for sensitive plants

Before-after-control-impact monitoring has been shown to be an effective tool for detecting impacts of management activities on plant and animal populations.

We have not conducted TSI in areas containing rock skullcap before. Scientific literature on the effects of canopy manipulation on this species is scarce to nonexistent. Monitoring is necessary to verify that our activity is not having a substantial detrimental impact on this species.

Within Compartment 122 Stand 99, the large rock skullcap population will be monitored before TSI and for at least three growing seasons after TSI to determine any population changes. Populations outside of TSI units will be monitored as a control. To the extent that timing of implementation overlaps, this monitoring could occur in conjunction with similar monitoring for the prescribed fire project.

#### Mitigation measures and design features for wildlife

Grape vines are an important food source for many of our desirable wildlife species, especially wild turkey, an MIS. Healthy beech (i.e. beech not infected by beech bark disease) are also rare, and are an important wildlife species.

No grape vine cutting in MP 6.1 stands.

Retain all healthy beech.

## **II. Reasons for Categorically Excluding the Project**

Decisions may be categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or environmental assessment when they are within one of the categories identified by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 36 CFR 220.6(e)(6) or one of the categories identified by the Chief of the Forest Service in Forest Service Handbook (FSH) 1909.15 sections 31.12 or 31.2, and there are no extraordinary circumstances related to the decision that may result in a significant individual or cumulative effect on the quality of the human environment.

This project is appropriately being categorically excluded from documentation in an environmental impact statement or environmental assessment as it is a routine activity within a category of exclusion, and there are no extraordinary circumstances related to the project that may result in a significant individual or cumulative effect on the quality of the human environment. This conclusion is based on information presented in this document and the entirety of the project file.

### **A. Category of Exclusion**

This project can be categorically excluded because it is within the category of exclusion identified in Forest Service Handbook (FSH) 1909.15, Chapter 30, Section 31.2(6) and in 36 CFR 220.6(e)(6):

Timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities which do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than one mile of low standard road construction (Service level D, FSH 7709.56).

This project will result in thinning that improves timber stands and wildlife habitat by controlling understory hardwoods and improving plant vigor. Tree planting and releasing a biological control agent for HWA will also improve wildlife habitat. This project does not include any road construction.

## **B. Relationship to Extraordinary Circumstances**

The extraordinary circumstances have been reviewed and are summarized below. Additional details are contained within the project record. Therefore, I find that no extraordinary circumstances exist.

### 1. Federally listed threatened and endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species.

#### a. Aquatic Wildlife

There are no threatened or endangered aquatic species within the project area. The proposed activities will have no measurable direct or indirect effects on water quality, aquatic biota, or other aquatic resources. The amount of felling proposed within a given watershed is negligible and will not have a measurable effect on water yield, flooding, sedimentation, or nutrient cycling. The act of felling of trees creates little to no soil disturbance and therefore will not cause sedimentation. There is no road construction proposed and there will not be any felling of trees in channel buffers.

#### b. Terrestrial Wildlife

Field surveys and a biological evaluation were completed. There are no federally listed threatened or endangered species or their designated critical habitat in the project area. While the entire Forest is potential Indiana bat habitat, proposed activities will have no effect on the Indiana bat or its habitat because no trees greater than 5" dbh (diameter at breast height) will be cut. Likewise, there will be no effect on other listed or proposed threatened or endangered species, proposed species, or designated or proposed critical habitat.

There is potential habitat for several Forest Service sensitive species, including the eastern small-footed bat, Allegheny woodrat, Henslow's sparrow, red-headed woodpecker, vesper sparrow, golden-winged warbler, northern metalmark, columbine duskywing, a noctuid moth, cobweb skipper and the timber rattlesnake. There are no known locations and/or limited habitat, or the proposed activities are such that they "may impact individuals, but will not cause a trend toward listing".

With regard to other wildlife species, thinning to promote tree species desirable to wildlife will have a beneficial effect.

#### c. Botany

Field surveys were conducted for threatened, endangered, sensitive, and non-native invasive plants in various parts of the project area during 2005, 2006, and 2007. No threatened or endangered plants are known to occur in the project area, although some low-potential habitat exists for running buffalo clover (*Trifolium stoloniferum*) and



small whorled pogonia (*Isotria medeoloides*). Due to marginal habitat and lack of known occurrences despite extensive surveys, the project is extremely unlikely to affect these species.

Regional Forester's Sensitive Species (RFSS) known to occur in the project area include rock skullcap (*Scutellaria saxatilis*) and white alumroot (*Heuchera alba*). Potential habitat may exist for other species, although the likelihood of occurrence for other species is considered low because none were discovered during field surveys. The likelihood of occurrence document (filed in the project record) evaluates the potential for occurrence for all RFSS.

The sensitive species rock skullcap is fairly abundant in the project area and is known to occur in three of the stands proposed for TSI. It could occur in other stands because surveys did not specifically focus on areas proposed for TSI. However, rock skullcap is generally considered to be a forest species, so the young sapling stands proposed for TSI are not considered to be high quality habitat. The TSI work will not cause any ground disturbance, and thinning the dense saplings will hasten the development of the more mature forest conditions that constitute typical habitat for rock skullcap. The TSI work is unlikely to harm rock skullcap populations, and it could benefit them. Even if the work does prove to be detrimental to individual occurrences, rock skullcap is abundant in parts of the project area that will not be treated, and it occurs in several other locations around the Forest. Any negative effects that might occur are not likely to lead to loss of viability or a trend toward federal listing.

White alumroot, which is the only other TES plant known to occur in the project area, is not known to occur in any of the proposed TSI units. However, because surveys did not specifically focus on the proposed TSI units, white alumroot could occur. As with rock skullcap, white alumroot is generally considered to be a forest species, so the young sapling stands are not considered to be high quality habitat. White alumroot is closely associated with rock outcrops, and often occurs under partial canopy openings. Therefore, because of the lack of ground disturbance and the creation of partial canopy openings, the proposed TSI work is unlikely to harm white alumroot, and it could have a beneficial effect. If any harm does occur, it will affect a very small portion of the Forest's known occurrences. Therefore, the activity is not likely to lead to loss of viability or a trend toward federal listing.

One of the areas proposed for conifer planting and beetle release overlaps part of a large population of rock skullcap. It is likely that rock skullcap occurs in other areas proposed for these activities because the areas encompass the kind of moist riparian habitat that harbors large populations of rock skullcap elsewhere in the project area. The planting and beetle release activities will tend to maintain the forest canopy and prevent the sites from transitioning to an open-canopied shrub/sapling thicket. Ground disturbance will be minimal and will be limited to the locations where individual tree seedlings are planted. These activities are unlikely to harm rock skullcap, and they could have a beneficial effect by mitigating loss of the tree canopy. If any harm does occur, it will affect a very small portion of the known occurrences of rock skullcap in

the project area. Therefore, the activities are not likely to lead to loss of viability or a trend toward federal listing.

White alumroot is not known to occur in any of the conifer planting and beetle release areas. It is considered unlikely to occur in these areas because the characteristic habitat for this species is dry rock outcrops, not moist riparian areas.

## 2. Floodplains, Wetlands, or Municipal Watersheds

### a. Floodplains

The stream channel buffers will help to maintain a balanced nutrient cycle within the aquatic environment and will protect the integrity of the riparian areas and floodplains.

### b. Wetlands

This project will have no measurable direct or indirect effects on wetlands. Where available, a canopy of 60 to 100 percent crown closure will be maintained within and adjacent to any wetlands that may exist within the project area (MNF LRMP, SW51). This will help reduce any effects to wetlands from evaporation.

### c. Municipal Watersheds

There are no municipal water supplies within or immediately downstream of the project area. There will be no reduction in the suitability of water within the project area as a source for drinking water.

## 3. Congressionally designated areas, such as Wilderness, Wilderness Study Areas, National Recreation Areas, or Wild and Scenic Rivers

### a. Wilderness

There are no Congressionally designated wilderness study areas within or near the project area. Laurel Fork North and Laurel Fork South Wilderness Area are north/west of State Highway 250 and State Route 28 respectively. None of the proposed activities will affect the untrammeled, natural, undeveloped character of any nearby wilderness area or affect opportunities for solitude within nearby wilderness areas.

### b. Wilderness Study Areas

There are no Congressionally designated wilderness study areas, or national recreational areas within or near the project area. Therefore, there will be no effect to wilderness study areas.

c. National Recreation Areas

There are no Congressionally designated national recreational areas within or near the project area. The Spruce Knob Seneca Rocks National Recreation Area is located north of State Highway 33 and west of State Route 28. Therefore, there will be no effect to National Recreation Areas.

d. Wild and Scenic Rivers

The Wild and Scenic River Study completed by the Monongahela National Forest in 1995 did not identify any eligible segments of any rivers for potential designation as a wild and scenic river within the project area, therefore no effect to Wild and Scenic River resource is expected. Therefore, there will be no effect to wild and scenic river segments.

4. Inventoried Roadless Areas

There are no Inventoried Roadless areas within or near the project area. Little Mountain, the closest area, was considered under the Roadless Area Conservation Rule (RARE II) but not in the 2006 Forest Plan Inventoried Roadless Area review. Little Mountain is located west of State Route 28. Therefore, there will be no effect to inventoried roadless areas.

5. Research Natural Areas

The MNF has no designated Research Natural Areas (RNAs), and four candidate RNAs (Forest Plan, pages III-46, 48, 49, and 63). This project is not within or near any candidate RNAs, and will have no impact on them.

6. American Indian and Alaska Native Religious or Cultural Sites

There are no tribal trust or ceded lands in the proclamation boundary or in West Virginia. There are no federally recognized Indian tribes in West Virginia. Therefore, there will be no impacts to any American Indian or Alaska Native religious or cultural sites as a result of this project.

7. Archaeological Sites, or Historic Properties or Areas

This project will not result in any effects to any historical or cultural sites. The WV State Historic Preservation Office has concurred.

8. Other Extraordinary Circumstances

No other extraordinary circumstances related to this project were identified.

### III. Public Involvement

The Greenbrier Ranger District (RD) of the Monongahela National Forest (MNF) has been working for several years on developing plans for potential projects in the Ramshorn area to help meet desired conditions.

The Ramshorn project has been listed in the Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA) for the MNF since before the July 1, 2006 edition. Information in the SOPA was updated for the April 1, 2008 edition.

On June 26, 2006, the first scoping letter requesting input was sent to about 375 interested parties and adjacent landowners. This scoping letter summarized the purpose and need for action, the proposed action, and described various ways to get additional information and how to provide input. A legal notice about the proposed project was published in *The Pocahontas Times* newspaper the same week.

On April 27, 2007, a second scoping letter requesting input was sent to about 375 interested parties and adjacent landowners. This scoping letter updated the project based on the revised MNF Forest Plan, which was implemented in the fall of 2006. A legal notice about the proposed project was published in *The Pocahontas Times* newspaper the same week.

On June 26, 2007, an open house was held at the National Radio and Astronomy Observatory. Specialists were on hand with maps and information to discuss the project with interested persons and get input. More than 30 people attended.

On March 28, 2008, an update letter was sent to over 400 people describing those projects we had decided to move forward with in the analysis process.

In June, 2006, the original proposal and request for input were posted on the Monongahela National Forest's website at [www.fs.fed.us/r9/mnf/](http://www.fs.fed.us/r9/mnf/) under "Forest Planning". This information was updated in April, 2007.

Approximately 60 individuals and organizations have contacted us about the Ramshorn proposal in the form of letters, e-mails, phone calls, or in-person visits since the scoping process began.

On July 16, 2008, a legal notice about the 30-day Notice and Comment period was published in *The Pocahontas Times* newspaper. The project description and draft analysis were sent out hard copy or by e-mail to those individuals and organizations who had previously indicated an interest in this project. The project description and draft analysis were posted on the Monongahela National Forest's website at [www.fs.fed.us/r9/mnf/](http://www.fs.fed.us/r9/mnf/) under "NEPA Documents" on July 23, 2008. The information also described how and when to comment to be eligible to appeal.

One response was received during the Notice and Comment period. It was very supportive of the project. It recommended that white ash be added to the list of crop trees. White ash was added to the list.

#### **IV. Findings Required By And/Or Related To Other Laws and Regulations**

This project will comply with all applicable laws and regulations. Some pertinent ones that are not discussed above are summarized below.

Forest Plan Consistency (National Forest Management Act): This Act requires the development of long-range land and resource management plans. The Monongahela National Forest Plan (Plan) was approved in 2006, as required by this Act. The Act requires all projects and activities to be consistent with the Plan. The Plan has been reviewed in consideration of this project. As required by NFMA Section 1604(i), I find this project to be consistent with the Monongahela Plan.

Environmental Justice (Executive Order 12898): This Order requires consideration of whether projects would disproportionately impact minority or low-income populations. This project complies with this Act. This project is not expected to adversely impact minority or low-income populations.

National Environmental Policy Act: This Act requires public involvement and consideration of potential environmental effects. Public involvement is described in section III above. The entirety of documentation for this project, including the project file, supports compliance with this Act.

#### **V. Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities**

The 30-day Notice and Comment period for this project ended on August 15, 2008. Since no comments expressing concerns were received or only supportive comments were received during the Notice and Comment period, this decision is not subject to appeal (36 CFR 215.12).

#### **VI. Implementation Date**

Implementation may begin immediately.

#### **VII Contact Person**

Further information about this project may be obtained from Kristine Vollmer during normal office hours (weekdays, 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.):

Kristine Vollmer, North Zone NEPA Coordinator  
Cheat Potomac Ranger District  
HC 59, Box 240  
Petersburg, WV 26847

Phone: (304) 257-4488, extension 24  
Fax: (304) 257-2482  
E-mail: [kvollmer@fs.fed.us](mailto:kvollmer@fs.fed.us)

**VIII. Signature of Responsible Official and Date**

/s/ Lauren Turner  
LAUREN TURNER  
Monongahela National Forest  
District Ranger – Greenbrier Ranger District  
Responsible Official

8/29/2008  
Date

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