

Transcript for FDA Media Briefing on Salmonella Outbreak

FTS-HHS-FDA

**Moderator: Michael Herndon
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Coordinator: Welcome and thank you for standing by. All participants are currently in a listen only mode. To ask a question during the question and answer session, please press star 1.

As a reminder, today's conference is being recorded. If you have any objections, you may disconnect at this time. I would now like to turn the conference over to your host, Michael Herndon. Sir, you may begin.

Michael Herndon: Thank you very much ladies and gentlemen. Welcome. I'm Mike Herndon with FDA Media Relations Staff. Thanks and welcome to this briefing on the Salmonella investigation.

We have speakers today from the Food and Drug Administration and from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. We also have several FDA officials here to answer any questions later on in this briefing.

Now our two speakers this afternoon, Dr. David Acheson, associate commissioner for food with the FDA; and Dr Robert Tauxe, deputy director, Division of Foodborne Bacterial and Mycotic Diseases with CDC.

Now our subject experts today are Ms. Mel Plaisier, associate commissioner, Office of International Programs; and Dr. Steve Solomon, deputy associate commissioner for compliance policies in the Office of Regulatory Affairs.

Now we will have a brief question and answer segment after the opening remarks. But as a side note, we have with us today as our guests a few reporters who are in the building covering another issue. So when we get to the question and answer segment, we will alternate between the reporters in the room and those on the phone.

Now with that, I would like to turn it over to Dr. David Acheson.

David Acheson: Thanks Mike. This is David Acheson, associate commissioner for Foods at FDA. I'd like to add my welcome to everybody. Apologies for a little late start but we had a lot of people calling in and we wanted to try to make sure that everybody was on the call who wanted to be on the call.

We'll follow our usual format with an update from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention and then I will follow up with FDA's update. So hand over to you Dr. Tauxe.

Robert Tauxe: Thank you very much and good afternoon everybody. Since April a total of 1251 persons infected with Salmonella Saintpaul with the same genetic fingerprint that's been identified now in 43 states, the District of Columbia and Canada.

At least 229 of these persons have been hospitalized and there were two outbreak-associated deaths. The latest reported date when an illness began is July 4, a date that has not changed now for several days.

This outbreak continues. This is 14 more cases than were identified had been reported as of last Friday. So we are still getting new cases reported and do not believe that it has ended at this point.

Thanks very much. And let me hand it back to you Dr. Acheson.

David Acheson: Thanks Dr. Tauxe. FDA wants to inform those on the call that we've had a significant break in the Salmonella investigation. As we reported in our last briefing, we expanded the scope of our investigations into the Salmonella Saintpaul outbreak to include jalapeno and serrano peppers as a possible source of the contamination.

Today we're announcing that one of the jalapeno pepper samples has tested positive as a genetic match with the outbreak serotype, Salmonella Saintpaul. The discovery of this positive pepper was the result of past weeks of investigation by FDA scientists and field agents as we have discussed many times in previous calls.

As explained in those calls, we've been tracing a number of clusters to determine the point that the peppers linked to the clusters may have passed through. So looking at the chain that the pepper would have passed through to determine whether any are a source of contamination.

FDA's visited these critical points to both inspect the facilities and take samples. And it was during one of these targeted inspections that the positive Jalapeno was found as one of the samples taken.

While this one sample doesn't yet give up the whole story, this genetic match is a very important break in the case because it enables us to focus our investigation on the production chain that we will ultimately allow us hopefully to pinpoint the source of the contamination, which has caused the outbreak.

I want to emphasize that the rest of the investigation is continuing and all points of this investigation are ongoing. This does not mean that the investigation has stopped.

Further things that I can tell you today is that the positive sample was obtained as I've said during an inspection and this was of a produce distribution center name of Agricola Zaragoza in McAllen, Texas. Let me spell that. It was A-G-R-I-C-O-L-A new word Z-A-R-A-G-O-Z-A. And it is in McAllen, Texas.

We can also tell you that the pepper that we found was positive was grown on a farm in Mexico. However, and this is important, that does not mean that the pepper was contaminated in Mexico.

Our investigation has focused on the entire production chain from the farms, the distribution centers, the packing houses, and we've been testing water, soil, work (businesses), pack boxes and many other areas to determine not only where the contamination originated but how it might have spread throughout the food supply to American consumers.

So while this pepper did originate from Mexico, I want to reemphasize this does not mean the contamination happened in Mexico and that is part of the ongoing investigation and why it's critical that this investigation continues. FDA has presented the information to the firm and a recall is now underway by that firm.

Finally, based on this information, FDA and CDC are changing their consumer messaging basically because we don't yet know the origin of the contamination. We're asking consumers to avoid eating fresh jalapeno peppers and food products made with fresh jalapeno peppers until further notice.

And obviously again, that is the importance of continuing with this investigation very aggressively. We shared this same advice with grocery stores, restaurants and others within the food industry and the recommendation will remain in place until we're able to confirm that the contaminated product or products are no longer on the market.

I want to emphasize however that this recommendation doesn't include processed, cooked or pickled jalapeno peppers. It is just related to fresh peppers.

Finally I want to recap and reemphasize statements that we made on the previous call at the end of last week that we are no longer advising consumers to avoid fresh tomatoes of any type as a result of the investigation because our results have indicated that fresh tomatoes that are currently on the market are not believed to be associated with the outbreak. So consumers can enjoy tomatoes that are currently on the market.

Let me just recap very briefly the significant break here is that FDA has found a genetically matched Salmonella Saintpaul isolate from a distribution center called Agricola Zaragoza in McAllen, Texas. The investigation is continuing. The firm has agreed to recall the product.

And the consumer message has been adapted in the context of this new information to warn consumer not to consume fresh jalapeno peppers or products made from fresh jalapeno peppers but processed peppers are perfectly okay.

And tomatoes as per the previous message are no longer - our advice for those is no longer to avoid them but we do not consider the tomatoes on the market currently a part of the current outbreak.

So with that, I'll hand back to Mike. Thank you.

Michael Herndon: Thank you Dr. Acheson. Now at this time ladies and gentlemen, we will take your questions. And as always, to be fair to everyone, please limit yourself to one question and one follow up. And please state your name and affiliation.

Now, operator, I think since we have guest reporters here, we'll start here in the room and then we'll go to the phones, okay?

Coordinator: Okay.

Michael Herndon: All right. And please...

Ricardo Alonzo-Zalidvar: Yeah.

Michael Herndon: ...give your name and affiliation. Thank you.

Ricardo Alonzo-Zalidvar: Thank you, yes. Ricardo Alonzo-Zalidvar with AP. Does this mean that tomatoes were not the cause of the outbreak?

David Acheson: The question was - I hope people on the phone can hear the questions. The question was does this mean tomatoes were not a part of the outbreak - is that correct?

Ricardo Alonzo-Zalidvar: Were not the cause of the outbreak.

David Acheson: Were not the cause of the outbreak. What this means is - as stated previously, the original part of the outbreak, the first scientific indication showed a very

clear association with tomatoes. And there is nothing to indicate that that association was incorrect or inappropriate.

As the outbreak has progressed, a new case control studies have been undertaken on the later cases. Jalapeno and serrano peppers have become more clearly implicated which is why we initiated the trace back from the testing of those. But tomatoes are not exonerated from the cause as part of this outbreak.

Ricardo Alonzo-Zalidvar: Okay. Thanks.

David Acheson: Dr. Tauxe, do you want to add anything to that because part of that was CDC information.

Robert Tauxe: Yes. Thank you. Yes I'd like to say that the recently investigated clusters and restaurant associated outbreaks appear to be explained by the peppers, jalapeno and probably serranos but that the fresh tomatoes are still under investigation and we're considering the hypothesis that the tomatoes - both that there may be more than one vehicle here.

Another possibility being that the tomatoes that were implicated were somehow always or virtually always consumed as a companion to a food with something else that might have been the contamination. But we are - we certainly do not consider that tomatoes have been exonerated. We're continuing to pursue that possibility.

David Acheson: Thanks Rob. Just to clarify slightly from FDA's perspective, the investigation relates to the tomatoes that were in the initial part of the outbreak. I don't want to confuse people to think that we still have concerns about tomatoes that are currently on the market.

Michael Herndon: Thank you. Operator, we'll take a question from the phone.

Coordinator: Okay. Our next question comes from Julie Schmit from USA Today. Ma'am your line is open.

Julie Schmit: Thank you for taking my call. How big is this company and how widely did they distribute peppers.

David Acheson: This is David Acheson from FDA. I'm not - because this is part of an ongoing investigation, I'm not able to disclose information about how large the company is. Obviously looking at the distribution records is effectively under way. And that will help determine the extent of distribution of these potentially contaminated peppers.

Turning to Dr. Solomon, anything you'd want to add field perspective Steve?

Steve Solomon: No. Well, this is just getting under way and so more information will be put together over the coming days.

David Acheson: Okay.

Julie Schmit: Well can you say - I mean is it a small company, a medium, large - I mean anything even generic like...

Steve Solomon: It's a - this is a relatively small company.

Julie Schmit: Thank you.

Michael Herndon: Okay. Thanks. We'll take a question from the room.

Justin Blum: Hi. It's Justin Blum with Bloomberg News. I'm wondering if you have any reason to believe that the pepper cross contaminated the tomatoes at the facility in Texas or if you could discuss where in the supply chain you think the pepper was contaminated.

David Acheson: Looking at possibilities of cross contamination is a key part of the investigation and the question of whether tomatoes could pass through this facility at some point is something that the inspectors and investigators will be looking into.

All we know at this point definitively is that a pepper in this facility is positive with the strain and I think it's important to emphasize we don't know whether it became contaminated in this distribution facility or at some point leading up to that distribution facility.

That's why the - looking at trail of the trace back going through the distribution facilities all the way back to the farms is so important and doing essentially the same process of testing, inspecting at each of those points.

Justin Blum: Have any other tests come back positive from within the facility? Were there any physical areas in the facility in Texas that had positive results?

David Acheson: To date, none of the other samples, swabs, environmental testing that's been undertaken at the facility have been positive to the outbreak strain.

Justin Blum: Thank you.

Michael Herndon: We'll take a question from the phone.

Coordinator: Our next question comes from John Wilkerson with FDA Week. Sir your line is open.

John Wilkerson: Will you say which grocery stores that this company distributes to once you know that information?

David Acheson: This is David Acheson at FDA. We are limited in terms of what we can disclose. That is commercial confidential information. So FDA will disclose whatever the law allows us to disclose. And that typically does not include all components of the distribution chain.

John Wilkerson: Okay. And also, there's a company called Grande Produce and that's also in Texas. They recalled over the weekend Jalapeno and Serrano peppers because they were positive to Salmonella. Nothing on the Website says anything about that being Saintpaul. Are they suspected as part of this outbreak too, specifically the Salmonella Saintpaul outbreak?

David Acheson: This is David Acheson. No, they're not. This - the recall from Grande, and Dr. Solomon can add to this, was that the testing there was done by the State Health Department. And the - and Texas State Health Department worked with the firm to initiate that recall. We have no indications that this the outbreak strain.

Steve Solomon: This is Steve Solomon. And the fact we've seen some recent finalized testing for that and it's a different pure type of Salmonella other than Saintpaul.

John Wilkerson: Okay. Thank you.

Michael Herndon: Thanks. Okay. We'll take a question from the room.

James Politi This is James Politi with the Financial Times. What kind of contacts did you have with Mexican authorities and what kind of coordination efforts are going on to determine whether or not the contamination occurred in Mexico and will they also be banning the fresh jalapeno peppers?

David Acheson: Briefly the - that the contacts with the Mexicans have been continuous, cordial and very positive. And the Mexican authorities have worked very closely on helping to investigate this problem. They did with - when we were investigating tomatoes and they are right now.

As I said on the last call, we have a team in Mexico and the Mexican Government is being incredibly helpful with that team. Obviously with the investigation ongoing and no indication where this contamination occurred, the only action that is occurring right now is the recall that I spoke of.

I turn to my international colleagues. Anything you want to add?

Mel Plaisier: No. I think you've covered it very nicely. We've had nothing but good cooperation (in that).

David Acheson: Thank you.

Michael Herndon: We'll take a question from the phones please.

Coordinator: Yes. Our next question comes from Bina Venkataraman with the New York Times. Ma'am your line is open.

Bina Venkataraman : Hi. Thanks in advance for answering my questions. What other types of produce are distributed from this plant? And is it a packing plant or strictly a distribution plant?

David Acheson: I have to ask Dr. Solomon if he's able to provide any information - that it is part of an ongoing investigation.

Steve Solomon: This is primarily just a distribution point. Our understanding is they may do some sorting of product there but no a major processing in this facility.

Michael Herndon: Thank you.

((Crosstalk))

Bina Venkataraman : And the first part of the question was what other types of produce are distributed from the plant.

Steve Solomon: Our understanding is besides peppers, they may also do some tomatillos which is a husk type tomato in this facility.

Michael Herndon: Okay. Thank you. I'm checking the room to see if there's - we do have a question from the room.

Saundra Young: Hi. This is Saundra Young with CNN. Just wondering, do you think - we're a couple months into this thing now. Do you think that FDA could have caught the Salmonella sooner if they had had more resources and better technology?

David Acheson: This has been one of the most complex outbreaks that I personally have been even involved with and I think that speaks to many of my colleagues who've been at FDA for many years. A key point from any outbreak and this is no exception is to look at what lessons can we learn. What improvements can we make to the future?

It's public knowledge FDA has asked and should be getting more resources. And obviously we'll apply those resources in multiple areas in terms of foods and along the lines of food protection plans, prevention, intervention and response.

And there are obviously components that need to be considered in terms of preventing the problem, intervening to inspections and testing and then finally improved response in the context of any outbreak.

So, yeah, I mean there will be new resources and new thinking will be applied based on this. But I don't want to undermine the huge efforts and the amount of energy, hours and work that's been put in by Federal and state partners on trying to deal with this ongoing outbreak and they continue to do right - 24 hours a day literally in some cases.

So you can always say could we have done it better with different systems. The commitment is that we will look at lessons learned from this so that next time we're in an even better place.

Saundra Young: (One quick) follow up. What - said you asked for more resources. What have you asked for and soon do you anticipate that you'll be getting?

David Acheson: The resources that we've asked for essentially are outlined in the President's budget request for '09. So it's - that's public information. Rather than take up time on the call, it would be fair if you want to look it up.

Michael Herndon: Thank you Dr. Acheson.

Robert Tauxe: This is Dr. Tauxe at CDC. I'd also like to comment. I certainly want to echo that thought that we want very much to learn what we can do better and what

we can learn in each outbreak investigation. It is a continuous improvement process.

In this outbreak as in many, the issue began with detecting the problem with sick people and then working to find out what it was that those sick people had eaten and what they'd - where they had eaten it and what the ill people had eaten that was different what well people had eaten.

And that entire process was also extensive and arduous and involved a large number of people. First implicating the tomato issue and then continuing the investigations as the outbreak continued and developing the information, the epidemiologic information that led to the trace back to the point where the positive culture was found.

There's a tremendous amount of resources required to do this at the state level in the laboratories and the epidemiologists and in the food safety group and that certainly was stretched thin in some states or even overwhelmed.

Michael Herndon: Thank you Dr. Tauxe. We'll take a question from the phone.

Coordinator: Yes. Our next question comes from Steve Hedges from the Chicago Tribune. Sir your line is open.

Steve Hedges: Thank you. I have a question about exactly how you determined that Salmonella Saint Paul was found at this facility. You said several times that you're not sure where the pepper was contaminated in the supply chain. Was the pepper taken from the facility and tested? And does that suggest that it's the facility at fault or could there be other places where it was contaminated?

David Acheson: This is David Acheson at FDA. The pepper was taken from the distribution facility that I mentioned. It was sampled as part of an inspection. It was processed in our lab. And it said nothing about where that contamination occurred. It could have occurred in the facility or at some point leading up to the facility as I pointed out.

Steve Hedges: How many different steps would be involved in getting it to the facility? Where could other points of contamination occur?

David Acheson: Contamination could have occurred anywhere from the farm all the way through to the facility. At any point in that chain where the peppers were exposed or there was an opportunity for contamination.

Michael Herndon: Thanks. Thank you Steve. Looking around; there is a question.

Lisa Richwine: Hi. Lisa Richwine with Reuters. Kind of following up on that. I know you say you don't know exactly where the contamination occurred but if this distributor is a small, you know, company in McAllen, Texas, how likely is it that it started there when the outbreak was so widespread?

David Acheson: The key question is we need to look at the distribution record from this facility and to determine where they distribute. That's happening as we speak. The critical part of this is not to say it looks like we've got this figured out. Clearly there are questions where contamination occurred. Could it have happened in the distribution facility or was it some other place?

And if it was some other place, where else could those have contaminated peppers gone assuming they didn't all flow through this one distribution center? So hence the importance of continuing the ongoing investigation. It's a

very good question and that's why we need to push the investigation hard to answer those kinds of questions.

Michael Herndon: Thanks. We'll take a question from the phones now.

Coordinator: Our next question comes from Jim Downing from the Sacramento Bee. Sir your line is open.

Jim Downing: Hi. Thanks for taking my call. Is the consumer warning nationwide on all Jalapenos or is it going to be specific in the way that tomatoes were - where lets say tomatoes grown in California will not be covered in the warning?

David Acheson: This is David Acheson at FDA. Currently the warning is nationwide for all fresh jalapenos and products made from fresh jalapenos but doesn't include processed products. The reason for that is that at this point we do not know the exact source of this contamination.

Again, it points to the fact that we have found a point in the supply chain with a positive which was a huge break and a very important clue to show we're on the right track. But we have got to push this through to continue the investigation, to really to get to the point the last question was addressing is where else could these peppers have gone.

I mean at this point there is no indication that we can narrow it. But obviously that is a primary and immediate goal for FDA to push the investigation hard to try to narrow this.

Jim Downing: Do you have any estimates? I mean this seems like this is likely to cause another, you know, a lot of peppers to be thrown out in the way that tomatoes

were thrown out. Do you have any estimates as to how much that's going to cost?

David Acheson: I don't. I don't. No.

Jim Downing: Okay.

Michael Herndon: Thank you. We're going to take a question from the room now. Okay. Not seeing any hands. We'll go to the phones now.

Coordinator: Our next question comes from Louise Schiavonne from CNN. Ma'am your line is open.

Louise Schiavonne: Thank you for taking my call. Dr. Acheson, a question. There for instance are jalapeno and serrano growers in the Eastern part of the United States whose product is shipped directly to places on the eastern coast of the United States whose product has not gone to McAllen, Texas. They might be asking why should they be punished.

And Dr. Tauxe, how do you plan to ever determine that tomatoes were a culprit in this outbreak when as Dr. Acheson has noted that tomatoes from the outbreak period are out of circulation today? Thank you.

David Acheson: This is David Acheson. This is not about punishing anybody. It's about protecting public health. The importance of pursuing the investigation is to understand the various distribution points that these contaminated peppers may have passed through.

Because obviously if a contaminated pepper has moved from McAllen, Texas to some other distribution center and peppers from some other growing area

have passed through that distribution center, one would have to ensure that there was not cross contamination occurring in that distribution center, the second one.

So we have got to step up to the plate and protect public health with the science that we have right now today and that's what we're doing; hence, the warning. But I want to emphasize that we're pulling all the stops out to push this investigation hard and fast to narrow this because I recognize that there is a need to narrow this as quickly as possible. And that is exactly what we're trying to do.

Robert Tauxe: This is Dr. Tauxe in Atlanta. Let me address the second question from Ms. Schiavonne that's how can we, at this point, exonerate tomatoes? What would it take? What sort of research would be needed? And I think your pointing to a question that's a very difficult one to answer.

And let me say up front it's possible we will not be able to determine ultimately whether tomatoes were part of this conclusively or not. It is very difficult to prove a negative like that especially after several months. But we are very actively pursuing and investigating several clusters of cases who all ate at the same restaurant or group of restaurants.

So we have several field investigations going on now. And we are also conducting extremely detailed interviews in the heartland of the outbreak if you will down in the southwest to determine whether there was something about the way Jalapenos were used in people's homes or in restaurants that just failed to get reported in the way that we would have hoped it would have.

So we have active investigations, both of those individual cases in the southwest and several outbreaks or several clusters around restaurants and that

combined with the additional information from trace backs may give us a chance to clarify the importance of tomatoes.

Michael Herndon: Thank you. We'll take the next question from the phone.

Coordinator: Our next question comes from Annys Shin from the Washington Post. Ma'am your line is open.

Annys Shin: Thanks for taking my call. So I just want to be sure. At this point you don't know completely the trace forward and trace back from this facility. You don't know where it's - where the peppers would have gone from here and where they've come from before exactly.

David Acheson: This is David Acheson at FDA. Yeah, we have a good idea where they have come from which is why we know that they have come from Mexico. And we have inspectors in Mexico right now looking at that trail taking samples, determining if there's any evidence of a contamination with the outbreak strain at those points. That's part of the trace back.

The trace forward, which is asking the question where else did the Jjlapenos get distributed to in the United States is part of what we're doing now, looking at the distribution records from this firm. So that part is currently under way.

Annys Shin: And my only follow up is the - you mentioned last week that you had people at a packer in Mexico.

David Acheson: Yeah.

Annys Shin: Is that packer at all still suspected as being involved at all?

David Acheson: That investigation is still ongoing. We still have investigators in that area looking at farms, packinghouses and general operations around there and taking samples. So yes, that still continues.

Michael Herndon: Thank you. Next question from the phone please.

Coordinator: Our next question comes from Emily Walker with MedPage Today. Your line is open.

Emily Walker: Hi. Thanks for taking my call. I just wanted to clarify so is that the next (trip)? I know that investigators are still there. But did that trip exactly lead to this discovery?

And my second question is if you tested the tomatillos and the Agricola plants and what you found with those?

David Acheson: This is David Acheson. The trail that led us to this facility in Texas started with the clusters. So we're working back from a group of patients who got sick in a single geographic area who ate at a specific place, that's the cluster, and ask them the question where did the peppers linked to that cluster come from?

And as we've discussed on previous calls, we worked back through the spider's web of complexity through the various distribution centers that are part of that link. We'd go into those distribution centers, we inspect them and we take samples. And one of them as we discussed is positive.

So that's essentially the way this works. It drives us down from the cluster to the distribution center. And then as part of the ongoing trace back, we continue through which is why we know it was a product that came from Mexico.

In terms of other samples, what I can tell you is that all the other samples that we have taken at this facility are negative for the outbreak strain. And - but I think samples are continuing to be analyzed. Is that right Steve?

Steve Solomon: That's correct.

David Acheson: Yeah.

((Crosstalk))

Emily Walker: Were any - I'm sorry. Were any found positive for other strains of Salmonella, just not Salmonella Saintpaul?

David Acheson: No. There were not. No other positive strains of Salmonella.

Emily Walker: Thanks.

Michael Herndon: Thank you. Operator, we'll take two more questions.

Coordinator: Okay. Our next question comes from Kris Hundley from the St. Petersburg Times.

Kris Hundley: Hi. Thanks for taking the call. Does this mean you're lifting the warning against serrano peppers or does that continue?

David Acheson: This is David Acheson. The warning on serrano peppers does not change. The science hasn't changed. The information hasn't changed. So the warning remains the same.

Kris Hundley: Okay. What does the recall - the recall, the distributor involved; are you asking him to recall everything that he shipped out over a certain timeframe or is it limited to the Jalapenos?

David Acheson: I'll ask Dr. Solomon if he could see how much specific information he can share with you on that.

Steve Solomon: We have the original base or shipment where the pepper that was positive came in on. So the current recall is from shipment date forward as being (the products) being recalled.

((Crosstalk))

Kris Hundley: All products that have been passed through the distributor?

((Crosstalk))

David Acheson: They're recalling all peppers.

Kris Hundley: Oh, okay.

Michael Herndon: Okay. Thank you. Operator we'll take the last question.

Coordinator: Yes. Our last question comes from Jane Jhang from the Wall Street Journal. Your line is open.

Jane Jhang: Oh, hi. Thanks for taking my call. Dr. Acheson, are you also recommending that restaurants stop serving jalapenos?

David Acheson: Yes we are. This is David Acheson. This advice would apply to anybody consuming jalapeno, fresh jalapeno peppers and that information has been shared with the retail industry...

(Jane Jones): Thank you.

David Acheson: ...and the restaurants.

Michael Herndon: Okay. Thank you. Ladies and gentlemen, that concludes today's media conference. Thanks for your participation.

The replay will be available in about an hour and will be available until July the 28th. If you have any follow up questions, please don't hesitate to call the respective agencies. Also please check with both the FDA and CDC Websites for the updated information that was discussed here today.

Thanks and have a great day.

Coordinator: That concludes today's conference. You may disconnect at this time.

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