



WEST VIRGINIA RIVERS

OUR WILD AND WONDERFUL MON



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Monongahela National Forest is the crown jewel of West Virginia's public lands. Created in 1920 and known as the Mon, it encompasses 1.7 million acres, 921,000 of which are actively managed by the United States Forest Service (USFS).

Located in central Appalachia, the Mon is one of the most biologically complex forest systems on the planet. It's home to at least 75 tree species, more than 225 bird species, 60 nongame/forage fish species, 12 game fish species, and numerous other wildlife species. Additionally, eight federally listed, threatened, or endangered bird, bat, salamander, and plant species call the Mon home.

This yearlong effort by West Virginia Rivers Coalition (WV Rivers) to listen to the public about outdoor recreation and environmental quality in the Mon enables WV Rivers to be inclusive of and responsive to the diverse array of users in its conservation and public lands policy work.

For nearly two decades, agencies across the federal government have experienced declining budgets, and the USFS has not been immune to these cuts. Throughout the Our Wild and Wonderful Mon Listening Sessions, forest users expressed concerns about the impacts of these cuts on both recreational experiences and environmental quality. Hikers, mountain bikers, anglers, and tourism developers alike voiced concern about the forest service's ability to creatively manage a 21st-century forest if the operating budget continues to wane.

West Virginia's waterways are most significantly at risk amidst the declining USFS resources. The Mon Forest is headwaters to five major rivers: Potomac, Greenbrier, Elk, Tygart, and Gauley. These waterways are crucial to local economies and provide drinking water to many residents downstream. In some regards, West Virginia is a water tower for the eastern United States; our waterways provide clean flowing mountain water to 9% of the nation's population.

Expanding the resources available to the USFS in the region is critical. Widening the financial and human resources available to the Mon Forest Service will take a concerted effort of advocacy by constituents and legislative action by West Virginia's elected officials, both in Washington, D.C., and Charleston.

While the budget and resources of the USFS need to increase, it doesn't mean the federal footprint of the agency must expand. The Mon Forest encompasses a diverse region of small communities with vibrant non-profit organizations and a strengthening business sector. Empowering these organizations as USFS partners is the creative solution to broadening recreational opportunities and environmental restoration within the boundaries of the forest.

The U.S. Forest Service could serve as the pass-thru of funding to organizations or businesses to operate any number of recreational and visitor services, in addition to necessary habitat restoration projects. Working through public and private partnerships, we can build a 21st century Monongahela National Forest that not only continues its legacy as a Land of Many Uses but also ensures that ongoing legacy is responsive to the changing needs of its residents and users. These types of cooperative partnerships empower local communities to have healthy relationships with the Forest Service. They leverage local and state investment into Mon Forest projects, and these efforts are attractive to private foundations. Additionally, this type of programmatic effort doesn't require an expansion of federal employees or property. It ensures that tax dollars are reinvested directly into projects that enhance the community.



There are many forces placing pressure on the integrity of the Mon Forest and its communities beyond declining budgets. The pandemic has increased visitation to the region, with many people looking for socially-distant outdoor experiences. Likewise, the newly designated national park at the New River Gorge will likely increase visitation to the state in the coming years. Once visitors experience the beauty of the Mon forest, the inevitably return.

Visitors create tremendous economic value, but also place pressure on facilities and natural habitat. Finding a balance between economic value and environmental sustainability is crucial and requires long-range planning with input from all entities that value the resources of the Mon Forest.

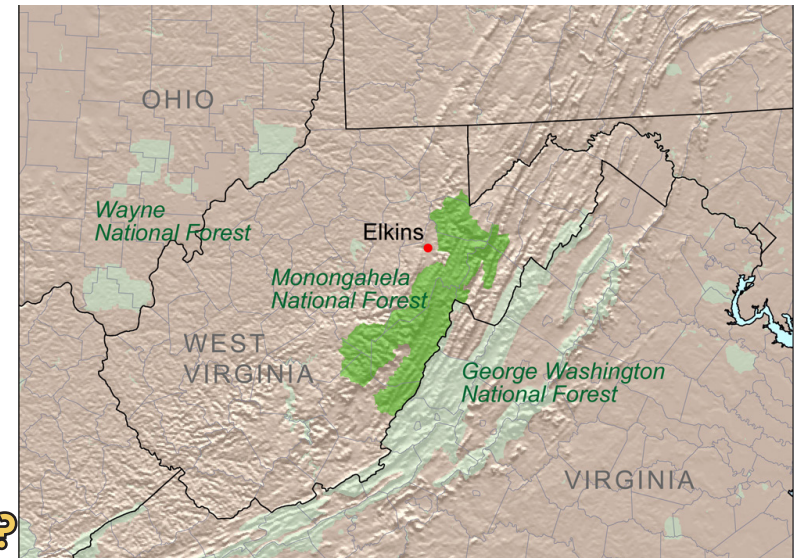
Timing is also critical on a political level, as each election brings new opportunities and challenges. West Virginia is in a unique situation with Senator Manchin serving as chair of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee. WV Rivers can take this opportunity to convey the public's experiences, concerns, and needs to the Senator, thus painting a broader picture of how public lands and conservation policies under his committee's jurisdiction impact West Virginia and users of the Mon.

The Mon Forest is the best of West Virginia, truly wild and wonderful. As a state, we should strive to create a forest that provides recreational users with unique experiences they will cherish for a lifetime. We should make the Mon Forest the most data-connected forest in the nation, giving foresters, scientists, and decision-makers cutting-edge tools for their work. Lastly, we should always ensure that this precious land is carefully managed and respected for the next century of West Virginians to enjoy.

PROJECT AREA

The Project Area is the Monongahela National Forest, which was established in 1920. It encompasses 1.7 million acres; 921,000 of which are actively managed by the United States Forest Service (USFS).

Located in central Appalachia, it is one of the most biologically complex forest systems on the planet. The forest is home to at least 75 tree species; more than 225 bird species; 8 federally listed, threatened, or endangered bird, bat, salamander, and plant species; 60 nongame/forage fish species; 12 game fish species; and numerous other wildlife species inhabit the forest.



WHY TAKE ON THIS VIRTUAL LISTENING SESSION NOW?

The Monongahela National Forest, also known as “the Mon”, is the crown jewel of West Virginia’s public lands. This yearlong effort by West Virginia Rivers Coalition (WV Rivers) to listen to the public about outdoor recreation and environmental quality in the Mon enables WV Rivers to be inclusive of and responsive to the diverse array of users in its conservation and public lands policy work. Locally informed and directed conservation priorities gleaned from this project will be critical as the Biden administration carries through an executive order to protect 30% of the nation’s lands and waters by 2030. Information collected from the project also informs a proactive approach to the forthcoming Monongahela Forest Plan, which should take place around 2026.

Additionally, West Virginia is in a unique situation at this moment, with Senator Manchin serving as chair of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee. WV Rivers can take this opportunity to convey the public’s experiences, concerns, and needs to the Senator, thus painting a broader picture of how public lands and conservation policies under his committee’s jurisdiction impact West Virginia and users of the Mon.

(National forests) exist today because people want them. To make them accomplish the most good the people themselves must make clear how they want them run.”

~Gifford Pinchot, The Use of the National Forest, Dept of Agriculture Pamphlet 1907



PROCESS

Our listening process began with outdoor recreation user groups as defined by the facilitator and staff. This list included several broad recreational interest groups, the forestry industry, and state and federal agencies that have oversight and input into the management of the Monongahela National Forest.

The facilitator focused initial work on understanding the operations and organizational history of WV Rivers Coalition through staff and board interviews. During this time, key players in the West Virginia public lands non-profit landscape were interviewed in preparation for focus groups.

Focus group work began in May. While there was hope for in-person meetings in the Monongahela Forest region during the summer months of this project, the focus groups were all held on the Zoom virtual communications platform due to complications brought on by the pandemic.

Ultimately, this virtual format provided the most suitable option for interviewing recreational users across the massive Monongahela Forest region. Users from across multiple counties and from out-of-state could participate in the meetings. The nexus of energy and input of users participating from across the region at once was truly invaluable.

The focus group work has expanded as we have identified other user groups throughout the process. We continue focus group work and one-on-one conversations through the fall. This report serves as a mid-project update and reflection of information collected through September 2021.

GENERAL FINDINGS

The Monongahela National Forest is truly a “Land of Many Uses,” as evident when users championed their favorite activities, locations, and memories in our listening sessions.

ECOLOGICAL PRESERVATION

Focus group attendees recognize the Mon Forest as some of the most pristine and beautiful lands in the state. It was with that in mind that many expressed concerns for the ecological future of the area. Fishing and boating communities all expressed a need to protect the headwater areas of the forest. They recognized that safeguarding these areas is not only critical to their recreational interest but also to the economy and health of the state.

Anglers were concerned with inappropriate stream restoration, which often takes place after flood events. While no specific stream locations were referenced to in group discussions, it was merely pointed out that the widening of streams to ameliorate flooding can have damaging long-term effects on cold water fisheries upstream.

Several individuals also expressed concern about the growing off-highway vehicle movement. While OHVs are not allowed within the boundaries of the Mon, there will be continued pressure for OHV on all public lands. Focus groups expressed concern over sedimentation created by OHVs and general noise pollution.

Non-native invasive species were also a concern expressed by focus groups. Currently, West Virginia lacks a coordinating entity to oversee invasive species management across government agencies, nor does one exist at an interstate agency level. This leadership vacancy is problematic and should be resolved so state, federal, and local governments have a cohesive understanding of the problems and can work towards unified solutions.

The atmosphere, the earth, the water and the water cycle - those things are good gifts. The ecosystems, the ecosphere, those are good gifts. We have to regard them as gifts because we couldn't make them. We have to regard them as good gifts because we couldn't live without them.

~ Wendell Berry, Farmer, Poet, and Writer



ACCESS

Concerns over impeded access to recreation were expressed in all focus groups. These issues included inadequate parking facilities, appropriate signage, camping facilities, internet service while traveling, and mapping services.

Handicapped accessibility is an issue throughout the Monongahela Forest region. While federal and state government buildings meet ADA standards for accessibility, many small businesses do not. The lack of accessibility hinders West Virginia's attempts to attract and accommodate the largest minority group in America. In addition, virtually no public streams or docks in the region provide modern accessible boat launches. Parking lots often do not accommodate the vans and trailers necessary to haul handicap-accessible rafts.

SIGNAGE

While signage is part of access issues, it is a different problem. Signage has been a perpetual concern in the travel and hospitality industry for many years. The signage in West Virginia rarely matches that of other states and regions, particularly in terms of its aesthetic: robust size, vibrancy, and consistency.

Signage needs to be considered broadly, beyond just directional signage, which often is constrained by the Federal Highway Administration's Manual on Uniform Traffic Code Devices. However, West Virginia could be more creative with our traffic signage in the Monongahela Forest.

We need to consider increasing the amount of interpretive signage that educates the public about the places they visit. Cautionary signage also needs to be improved in critical habitats such as Dolly Sods, where it will protect users and critical habitats as visitation increases in the future.

TRAIL MAINTENANCE

Mountain bikers, hikers, and tourism directors are all concerned by the declining conditions of trails throughout the region. The Forest Service makes an easy scapegoat for deferred trail maintenance, but the problem seems to lie more within their shrinking budget than with any other factor. Regardless, the declining quality of trails in the region impacts the user experience and may eventually impact the region's economy.

RECREATIONAL DISPARITIES BETWEEN FOREST SERVICE DISTRICTS

The diverse landscape of the region provides ample opportunity for exploration and recreation. In the northern districts of the Monongahela Forest, Rock climbers frequent the Seneca Rocks National Forest Recreation Area; there is no comparable feature anywhere else in the forest. The northern districts also possess a significant number of wilderness areas, as mountain biking is prohibited in wilderness areas this affects that activity in the northern region of the forest. As a result, the southern region of the forest has a greater network of mountain biking trails. While this isn't a large issue, it was brought up in several meetings and is worth keeping in mind for recreational planning purposes.

NEED FOR INCREASED VISITATION TO THE REGION

There is a consensus that the region will benefit economically from responsible tourism development that increases visitation by outdoor recreationalist. Participants see both the short-term economic activity and the long-term economic stability for the communities as helpful to the region and state. However, some worry about overuse and the ability to manage growth in the long-term.

OVERUSE OF PRIMARY VISITATION AREA AND CRITICAL HABITAT

Visitor impacts to the Dolly Sods Wilderness Area is a primary issue for Mon Forest users. It was called to attention in every single focus group and many one-on-one phone calls throughout these listening sessions. It brought out frustration and even visceral anger in some participants.





Despite most participants' interest in attracting more visitors to the area, there is concern about managing the impacts of increased visitation. Dolly Sods is an extreme example. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has increased visitation to nearly all the Monongahela Forest counties as people have sought socially distant outdoor experiences. Expectations are that this trend will continue even as the pandemic problems may even out over the coming years.

Participants were concerned that this type of overuse will spread to other areas as West Virginia becomes more popular, given the jump in visitors to the newly designated national park.

HUNTING AND FISHING INPUT

WV Rivers prioritizes learning about the recreational needs of hunters and anglers. The return on these efforts has been mixed. Fishing focus groups have been well attended with valuable input. A focus group was held with Trout Unlimited, and there was a general fishing focus group, also.

Efforts to engage hunters have resulted in sparse participation and, thus, little input. Surveys were deployed to National Wild Turkey Federation, Ruffed Grouse Society, Backcountry Hunters and Anglers Association, WV Bowhunters Association, and West Virginians for Better Buck Management. The latter three groups have been responsive to accepting the survey, though their survey responses have not been submitted at this time.

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

This section represents broad policy considerations for WV Rivers as they move forward in their work on The Mon and public lands in West Virginia. These are policy considerations at the mid-point in the study. The policies shouldn't be interpreted as an endorsement by the WV Rivers Coalition and its Board of Directors.

These policy considerations were formed based on the discussions generated in focus groups and may continue to be shaped and constructed in the future. Several policies were initially presented in West Virginia University's BRIDGE Initiatives report, *The Waters of West Virginia: A Science & Technology Policy Perspective*, released earlier in 2021.

FEDERAL POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

WEST VIRGINIA HEADWATERS LEGACY ACT

This act could be modeled after the proposed Montana Headwaters Legacy Act. In Montana, the outdoor economy industry supports 71,000 jobs and \$7.5 billion in spending, more than its mining and utility sectors. The proposed act, scheduled for re-introduction by U.S. Senator Jon Tester in 2021, would designate and protect 336 miles of Montana rivers as scenic rivers, thereby ensuring water quality is maintained or enhanced to maintain a river's special values. In West Virginia, such an act would benefit not only West Virginians but the states downstream of its headwaters—about 9% of the U.S. population.

American Whitewater (AW) helped craft the Montana Headwaters Legacy Act, which is a Wild and Scenic Rivers Act that fits Montana's needs. The AW staff feels it is an excellent time to put together a Wild and Scenic Rivers package, as there are over 6,000 miles of waterways currently eligible for designation.

Additionally, several past board members of the WV Rivers Coalition expressed a need for WV Rivers to get back to this effort. It was one of the original campaigns that unified the organization in its early days. Lastly, there was consensus among those who directly rely on water resources for their outdoor adventures (including paddlers, anglers, and wildlife enthusiasts) that headwaters in the Mon region should be conserved and protected.

"If the trails don't get maintained, if new trails aren't built, it's going to be hard to keep people coming here. There are so many other cool places to go mountain biking like Deep Creek Lake, Big Bear Trail Center, Harrisonburg, VA, Allegrippis (PA), New River that are working hard to develop the product."

~ Tucker County Small Business Owner and Mountain Bike Advocate



INCREASED FUNDING FOR US FOREST SERVICE AND PARTNERS

All focus groups expressed concern about the year-over-year diminishing maintenance funds available to the Monongahela Forest Service staff. The WV Rivers staff and facilitator have begun initial conversations with USFS staff about budget trends. Budgets are expected to continue diminishing. West Virginia's congressional delegation must work to improve the funding for the Monongahela Forest. The continued diminished funding places West Virginia at a competitive disadvantage with other states regarding user experience. It can have an impact on the economic activity of the region going forward.

Based on focus group conversations, the primary areas to devote funding include:

RECREATION MAINTENANCE

TRAILS

- Develop an INTENTIONAL Trail Management Plan for the Mon Forest, a plan that is sanctioned or at least recognized by the USFS.
- Hold a Monongahela Forest Trail Work Recognition Day with Senator Manchin. USFS staff work tirelessly to find money and keep trail maintenance groups working. Yet, they rarely get proper recognition for their effort. An appearance by the Congressional delegation would bring the public's attention to the Forests Service's work and inform the Senator of problematic maintenance issues in the forest. Invitations to Appalachian Conservation Corps, WV Scenic Trails Association, Appalachian Forest National Heritage Area, and Mon Forest Towns.
- Recruit or build up more programs like Appalachian Conservation Corps and WV Scenic Trails Association; well-organized groups can effectively tackle large quantities of linear feet of trail each year.

FACILITIES

- Increase funding for expansion and maintenance of facilities. Facilities are aging and are the next amenity that may suffer the diminished funding of the USFS. These include restrooms, campgrounds, parking, interpretive centers, and other visitor services.
- Prioritize funding to improve and upgrade parking to meet current needs. Upgrades should include modern ADA requirements.
- Meet ADA accessibility needs for outdoor recreation throughout the forest. USFS should look at trail access and existing boat launches at lakes and provide and new means of access to streams and rivers. New flotation devices exist that allow those with ambulatory disabilities to safely whitewater raft. The USFS should re-evaluate access to streams for this population.

SIGNAGE

There is a need for signage investment throughout the entirety of the Monongahela Forest. Funding priority should focus on:

1. Wayfinding signage could be a mix of USFS funds and DOT appropriated funds.
2. Cautionary and interpretive signage at visitor hotspots, federally appropriated funds with signage either created by the USFS or USFS funds awarded to partners with a track record of producing quality interpretive signage, such as the Appalachian Forest National Heritage Area.

MAPPING

Mapping of resources is a critical piece of any planning and development project. It is also typically a piece that goes underfunded. A good trail maintenance plan, creating new trails, and connecting dormant logging roads for mountain biking and hiking would require map building, either by USFS staff or by a third party that the USFS would accept as a partner.

USGS STREAM GAGES

An appropriation to install and manage additional USGS stream gages would help scientists study water quality and habitat in the forest ecosystem. Anglers and boaters travel hours to Mon waters, they monitor water temp. and stream levels to determine when and where to fish.





STATE POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

BRIDGE BILL

A West Virginia bridge bill would provide public access to streams & rivers from county roads & bridge rights-of-way, providing more recreational activities. This could include working with private land and railroad companies. The bill could be modeled after the Washington State Bridge Bill as it is the most recent bill passed in the country.

American Whitewater is interested in helping to write the bill. AW has worked on most bridge bills across the country, including Montana's and Washington's.

SIGNAGE

The State of West Virginia receives and manages Federal Highway Administration/DOT funding, any wayfinding improving on roadways will be a partnership with the state.

COMMUNITY RECREATION GRANT PROGRAM

The governor, working with the legislature, could establish a grant program for communities to support outdoor recreation initiatives. For example, the Utah Governor's Office of Economic Development, working with the legislature, provides outdoor recreation grants that support communities interested in building tourism in their region with matching funds for constructing and expanding outdoor recreation amenities. For every dollar of state money, an additional seven dollars was received by communities from private sources with 700 jobs supported—primarily in rural Utah—over five years.

NON-NATIVE INVASIVE SPECIES COORDINATION

The governor should create an Invasive Species Coordinator housed in an appropriate state agency that can coordinate interagency efforts, communications with other states, and public education. West Virginia is the only state without an Invasive Species Coordinator within its government framework. Invasive species can have a devastating impact on local ecosystems, but also have wide scale implications for species diversity.

West Virginia should better understand and manage the threats that could cripple our forestry industry, threaten our water systems, or direct tourist dollars to other regions.

MARKETING CAMPAIGNS

PADDLE WV 1-2-3

This campaign would market the Class 1-2-3 streams across all of West Virginia. These are underutilized streams that are often periodic in their availability for boating. However, there is an untapped market. The campaign would create a website and collateral marketing pieces to promote these streams and their communities.

Potential partners: West Virginia Division of Tourism, Mon Forest Towns, West Virginia Department of Natural Resources, US Forest Service, Appalachian Forest Heritage Area.

WV RIVERS ANGLERS CONFERENCE

A conference would be held in the Monongahela Forest Region to bring anglers to a central location and introduce them to WV Rivers Coalition through a weekend of fishing vendors, flyfishing lessons, water and fish biology sessions, and fun (music and food).

Potential partners: Trout Unlimited, West Virginia Department of Natural Resources, US Forest Service, West Virginia Division of Tourism, private businesses.

"This is the most beautiful place on Earth. There are many such places. Every man, every woman, carries in heart and mind the image of the ideal place, the right place, the one true home, known or unknown, actual or visionary."

~ Edward Abbey, Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness



THE WV TROUT TRAIL

Create a Trout Trail website and map that defines the trout streams and local tackle shops across the state.

Potential partners: Trout Unlimited, Division of Natural Resources, Division of Tourism, Mon Forest Towns, Appalachian Forest National Heritage Area.

THE TRAIL MAINTENANCE CLEARINGHOUSE

Create an online platform and manage the dissemination of information about trail workdays. Currently, no forum or organization serves as a clearinghouse for trail maintenance. Throughout the focus groups, participants expressed interest in workdays across the state. However, they find it challenging to locate them.

Potential Partners: Appalachian Forest National Heritage Area, WV TRAILS group, WV Scenic Trails Association, Appalachian Conservation Corps.

THE WV PUBLIC LANDS PODCAST

Create regular podcast that features the issues, people, and policies that shape the Mountain State's vast public landscape. There are several public lands podcasts in the online digital stores, but none that focus on a particular state's lands. Most have a broader context of national public policy. If properly planned, funded, and launched, this could be a persuasive tool to highlight important issues and help drive visitation to the region.

Potential partners: West Virginia Division of Tourism, West Virginia Division of Natural Resources, various non-profit organizations.

NEXT STEPS

These preliminary policy considerations will be further discussed in a second round of focus groups to help frame budgets and timelines and to identify any relevant case studies that may aid WV Rivers as they consider which policies and campaigns to pursue. A final report will be submitted toward the end of the year.



ORGANIZATIONS THAT HAVE PARTICIPATED OR HELPED IN DISSIMENATING INFORMATION:

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| Acorn Hill Strategies | Mon River Trails | WestVirginia Kayak Anglers |
| American Whitewater | Moorefield Examiner | WestVirginia Land Trust |
| Appalachian Forest National Heritage Area | Morgantown Area Paddlers | West Virginia Native Plant Society |
| Capon Springs | National Center for Resource Development | WVU Mountain Hydrology Lab |
| Challenged Athletes of West Virginia | National Park Service New River National Park | WV Access on the Go |
| Charles Town Horsemen’s Benevolent Protec-
tive Association | National Park Service Rivers, Trails, Con. Asst. | WV Chapter of Backcountry Hunters and Ang. |
| Charleston Sled Hockey | National Wild Turkey Federation | WV Land Trust |
| Creek Yakkers | Northern Center for Independent Living | WV On the GO |
| Eastern WV Community and Technical College | Pendleton County CVB | WV Tourism Office |
| Eastern WV Workforce Opp Regional Center | Pendleton County EDA | WV Hospitality Travel Association |
| Elkins-Randolph CVB | Piney Creek Watershed | WVU Extension Service—Forestry Extension |
| Embark Fund | Pocahontas County CVB | WVUWELL |
| Friends of Blackwater | Pocahontas County CVB | WV Scenic Trail Association |
| Grant County Convention and Visitors Bureau | Rails-to-Trails Conservancy | |
| Grant County CVB | Retired Mayor of Lewisburg | |
| Green Rivers | Richwood Chamber of Commerce | |
| Greenbrier County Convention and Visitors
Bureau | South Branch Inn | |
| Grow Ohio Valley | Southern West Virginia Kayak Anglers | |
| Hampshire County Devp. Authority & CVB | Summersville Convention and Visitors Bureau | |
| Hardy County Convention and Visitors Bureau | The Nature Conservancy | |
| Highland Outdoor Magazine | Trout Unlimited | |
| Highlands Trail Foundation | Tucker County CVB | |
| Kayak West Virginia | Tucker County Trail Advocate | |
| Mineral County CVB | US Forest Service | |
| Mon Forest Towns | Webster County CVB | |
| | Wester County High School | |
| | West Virginia Forestry Association | |



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