

# Food Policy Forum Meeting Summary

WASHINGTON STATE  
FOOD POLICY FORUM

**Thursday, February 5, 2026 • 1:00–4:00 PM**

## Key Takeaways

- Forum topical teams are making measurable progress on 2025-2027 priorities by refining topics and actions and applying the Forum's Equity Filter to proposed actions.
- Participants discussed the Forum's alignment with legislative priorities and named legislative bills relevant to the Forum's work.
- Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA) provided an update on their recent agricultural viability study which confirms significant, growing pressures on Washington producers and highlights opportunities for strategic investment.

## Welcome & Opening Remarks

Chris Elder, King County Natural Resources and Parks (KCNRP), Forum Administrative Chair, opened the meeting by welcoming Forum members and acknowledged the Forum's commitment to engage the legislature, emphasized by the recent [Statewide Food Security Strategy letter](#) demonstrating alignment between [House Bill 2238](#) and the Forum's 2019-2025 recommendations. Petra Vallila-Buchman, Ross Strategic facilitator, provided an overview of the meeting agenda and objectives.

## Updates & Announcements

Laura Raymond, Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA), shared a status update on the Forum membership changes below:

- The appointment representing the Initiative for Rural Innovation & Stewardship (IRIS) is now vacant following the departure of Brooklyn Holton.
- Anna Nepomuceno has been designated as the alternate representative for Northwest Harvest.
- KayDee Gilkey, transitioned from alternate to full member, representing the Washington Association of Wheat Growers (WAWG).
- Dan Wood has retired from the Washington State Dairy Federation (WSDF). The Forum is awaiting confirmation of the organization's next representative. Laura acknowledged his longstanding advocacy on behalf of Washington's farmers, along with the thoughtful perspective and humor he brought to the Forum.

Petra Vallila-Buchman, Ross Strategic facilitator, reminded Forum members to vote on the draft Water Recommendations Cover Letter which was developed by the Impacts of Climate Change Team by February 17.

## Progress Toward Forum 2025-2027 Priorities

Petra Vallila-Buchman, Ross Strategic facilitator, provided an overview of the Forum’s path towards identifying the Forum’s five topical team’s priorities for the 2025-27 biennium. A multi-phase work planning process between April through October 2025 allowed teams to identify and prioritize food system topics for focused action over the next two years and for inclusion in the Forum’s 2025 Report to the Legislature. This process reaffirmed the continued relevance of the Forum’s five long-standing food system components and introduced a few refinements, such as broadening the Small/Mid-Scale Market Access topic to explicitly include *Farm Viability* and emphasizing *Institutional Procurement* for Regional Food Infrastructure and Economic Development (see Figure 1 below). Team rosters and priority topics are available in Appendix A and B, respectively.

Petra emphasized that teams are at different stages. Some are ready to move quickly to elevate existing recommendations, while others are conducting foundational research and applying the Forum’s Equity Filter to guide their next steps. She noted that this variation is expected and appropriate, given the Forum’s two-year work planning cycle.

Each topical team had an opportunity to share progress, surface clarifying questions, and gather insights from attendees. Topical team report-outs, along with full group discussions that followed, are summarized in the sections below.

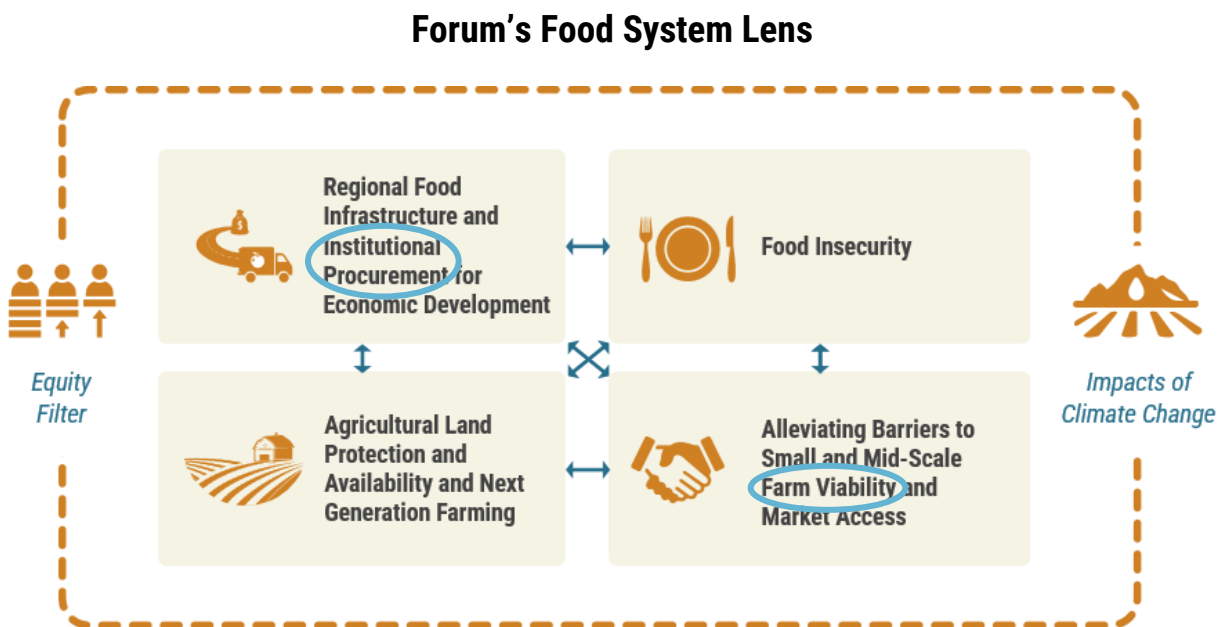


Figure 1. Forum’s Food System Lens

### Impacts of Climate Change Team

Jon DeVaney, Washington State Tree Fruit Association (WSTFA), shared the team’s focus on elevating and advancing two interconnected priorities, water supply for agriculture and food production and climate resilience for agriculture and food production. These priorities stem from the Forum’s existing 2025 recommendations and the team aims to keep them visible to agencies and legislators. Recent discussions highlighted the urgency of improved water forecasting, long-term water capture and storage strategies, and the favorable policy environment created by ongoing drought and flooding.

**Next steps:** Resubmit the 2025 recommendations with a cover letter to ensure legislators repeatedly see and engage with the recommendations. At the March topical team meeting, the team will continue applying the Forum's Equity Filter by answering the remaining questions. Longer term, the team will explore requesting and hosting a legislative policy work session.

### *Discussion*

One member inquired whether additional recommendations were being considered to address critical water-supply challenges in Eastern Washington, since the current set largely emphasized Western Washington and one statewide-focused policy. Another participant asked when the Forum's equity filter would be applied in the process, particularly regarding water access for smaller and newer farmers and whether those considerations would be integrated before presenting recommendations to the legislature. These questions led to broader reflections on lessons learned from Eastern Washington's past water-management efforts, how those approaches could inform work in Western Washington, and how equity considerations would be incorporated during future implementation planning.

### **Food Insecurity Team**

Aaron Czyzewski, Food Lifeline, highlighted the team's topic to strengthen coordination for food security, and noted the significant milestone of submitting the [Statewide Food Security Strategy letter](#) to the legislature which named the alignment between the Forum's consensus recommendations around hunger and food security more broadly and House Bill 2238. The letter helped establish a formal relationship with key committees and built on the Forum's earlier presentations to the House Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee. As the legislative session continues, the team plans to review which policy proposals remain viable after cutoff and to continue developing concepts from those that do not advance.

**Next steps:** Evaluate how the legislative outcomes affect the Forum's recommendations and understand where progress advanced, stalled, or reversed. Stay engaged at both the state and federal levels to build new partnerships and prepare for ongoing policy opportunities, including future legislative sessions. The team will apply the Equity Filter to this action in March.

### *Discussion*

One member noted the significant amount of work underway at Washington State Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) to prepare for major upcoming changes to SNAP eligibility and program administration, especially given new federal rules that make it harder for people to remain on the benefit. It was suggested that the team focus on ensuring that everyone who needs SNAP can maintain access.

### **Regional Food Infrastructure and Institutional Procurement for Economic Development Team**

Laura Raymond, WSDA, emphasized the challenge of narrowing the team's focus within a broad and highly interconnected set of previous recommendations. Ultimately the team decided to center their work on understanding how public-private partnerships function in food-system infrastructure development. When applying the Forum's Equity Filter, potential inequities were revealed relating to scale, siting impacts, and access to resources, reinforcing the need for early, built-in technical assistance to help small, mid-scale, and historically underserved producers and operators participate effectively in infrastructure opportunities.

**Next steps:** Clarify and refine the team's proposal, using an iterative process to revisit the equity filter as their focus becomes more defined. Study how public-private partnerships function in food-system infrastructure by documenting both successful and struggling examples, while also identifying key barriers such as limited capital, regulatory challenges, and gaps in technical assistance.

### *Discussion*

One member raised a key question about how to define “food systems infrastructure” in this context, prompting exploration of whether it should include only physical facilities or also the organizational, technological, and relational components often described as “soft” infrastructure. The conversation also prompted questions about which parts of the supply chain the team is implicitly prioritizing, particularly mid-supply-chain value-added activities like processing, and whether the group should explicitly distinguish between infrastructure users and operators.

### **Agricultural Land Protection and Availability and Next Generation Farming Team**

Addie Candib, American Farmland Trust (AFT), emphasized the team’s focus on succession planning and incentives with actions to compile existing research on successful transition tools and models used in other states and to share findings through a learning session with the Forum. The team’s work will involve examining who benefits or is left out of current succession systems, recognizing gaps between familial and non-familial transitions including employee ownership, and considering the unique needs for farms of different sizes. Addie also identified the need to improve access to succession-planning resources, understand who currently lacks access, and incorporate perspectives from land trusts, land-linking programs, and others already working in this space.

**Next steps:** Analyze existing research, identify gaps, determine who will lead specific research components, and prepare materials for a future forum session.

### *Discussion*

One member asked whether the group had considered the growing trend of private equity and corporate entities purchasing farmland in addition to family and non-family transitions; the response clarified that the team’s current focus is on supporting small and mid-scale farms in transitioning across generations rather than corporate ownership. Participants also asked whether the team’s analysis should emphasize statewide policies or look more broadly at on-the-ground succession models already working in different parts of the state. Addie indicated that both scales are relevant ranging from state-level programs to innovative farm-level approaches such as employee ownership. Additional questions focused on challenges facing small acreage farms, especially where conservation easements are not a good fit, and whether alternative tools such as property-tax incentives, technical assistance, or models used in other states, could better support their preservation and transition. The group further discussed how tax structures, financing tools, and mediation or facilitation services might play a role in helping farms navigate complex succession conversations, especially when interpersonal dynamics are at play.

### **Alleviating Barriers to Small and Mid-Scale Farm Viability and Market Access Team**

Melissa Spear, Tilth Alliance, highlighted how this is the Forum’s first team specifically focused on small and mid-scale farms, presenting an opportunity to explore solutions tailored to the challenges these farmers face. Team discussions have centered on Washington’s continued loss of farms, whether through consolidation or inability sustain viable commercial enterprises, and current pressures including labor access and cost, rising input costs, market volatility, changes in federal programs, reduced resources, and disaster impacts. The team continues to weigh whether to focus on recent urgent issues or take a longer-term view to focus on persistent challenges, which has directed their focus on technical assistance, particularly the limited availability of more complex assistance for mid-scale farms moving into wholesale and retail markets where production methods and regulatory environment are more demanding.

The team acknowledged that while the Forum does not deliver technical assistance or direct services, it can play a critical role in clearly framing the issue for legislators and the public. This includes education on the impacts of underinvestment, gaps in resources for farms beyond startup, and external pressures such as market shifts, disasters, and shrinking state support.

**Next steps:** Develop a clear, compelling problem statement supported by data, examples, and farmer stories. This framing will help convey the importance of supporting small and mid-scale farms, for both rural communities and Washington's broader agricultural economy, and prepare policymakers for future targeted recommendations. The team will apply the Equity Filter to this action in March.

### *Discussion*

There was no follow-up discussion for this team.

## **Legislative Session Updates**

Forum Administrative Chair, Chris Elder, KCNRP, and Vice Chair, Jon DeVaney, WSTFA, debriefed the group on their recent presentations at the House Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee work sessions on December 5, 2025, and January 13, 2026, to inform the legislature of the Forum's role and alignment with legislative bills. At the December 5 session, Chris introduced the Forum's purpose, highlighted its broad representation and expertise, and underscored why its recommendations merit legislative attention. He noted that the session sparked additional productive conversations afterward, suggesting strong engagement from legislators. Jon reflected on the January 13 work session which showcased strong legislative interest in the Forum's recommendations, especially around climate change and food security. Jon noted that the crosswalk of recommendations with key legislative focus areas led by Dani Madrone, Washington State Conservation Commission, helped legislators see the relevance of the Forum's work with policymaking, and their encouragement for broader legislative participation was well received (see Figure 2 below).

Laura Raymond, WSDA, noted how use of the Forum's Food System Lens in the crosswalk, helped legislators understand the Forum's approach and highlighted how the Forum's priorities align with policy buckets by overlaying them visually. The central message to legislators was to view the Forum as a resource and partner whose existing work may support their policy efforts. Forum members emphasized how transformative Representative Reeves' leadership has been in elevating food security and Forum-related issues, noting that her proactive education of the committee has created strong credibility and visibility for the Forum's work. They also discussed the legislature's goal to address the complex, interconnected challenges facing agricultural viability, and grouping diverse solutions into a single strategy helps them acknowledge that no single fix exists, mirroring the Forum's multifaceted approach.

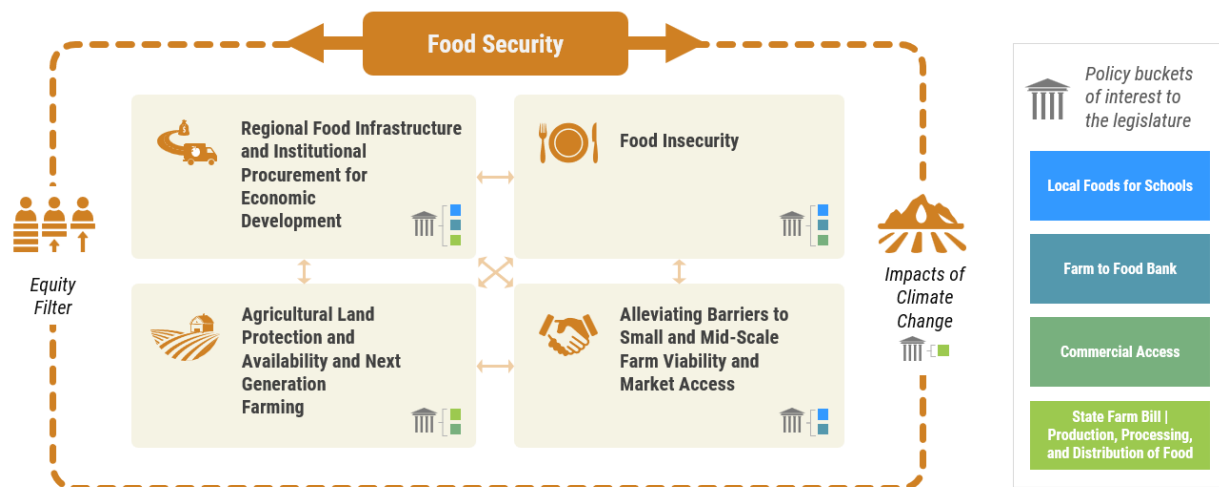


Figure 2. Alignment Between Forum Recommendations and Legislative Policy Buckets

## Food Security Related Bills

Claire Lane, Anti-Hunger & Nutrition Coalition, and John DeVaney, WSTFA, provided a status update of the series of bills below that relate to the Forum’s priorities to increase food security:

- **House Bill 2238, Statewide Food Security Strategy:** Bypassed appropriations and went straight to the Rules Committee.
- **House Bill 2297, Commercial Grocery Access:** Scheduled for Executive Session on February 9.
- **House Bill 2369, Farm to School:** Not scheduled for a hearing in appropriations.
- **House Bill 2463, Washington Farmers Feeding Families:** Not scheduled for a hearing in appropriations.
- **House Bill 2616, State Farm Bill:** Referred to the Consumer Protection and Business Committee.
  - The bill bundles a wide range of small, targeted proposals addressing issues across food security, climate and energy costs, market access, workforce development, acreage transition, agricultural labor rules, and more. These measures include harvest-aid funding, institutional purchasing expansion, EPR fixes for perishable crop packaging, climate-related exemptions, refrigeration transition support, multiple studies on tax and market barriers, workforce training initiatives, removal of abandoned crops, overtime flexibility analysis, and even transferring cannabis regulation to WSDA.

## Round Robin Legislative Updates

Forum members were invited to share additional legislative bills they are tracking that are relevant to the Forum’s priorities:

- **Addie Candib, AFT,** noted that House Bill 2388, Concerning the siting of distributed energy generation resources on agricultural lands to allow for solar on pivot corners which AFT is helping to craft. Addie also informed Forum members of House Bill 2279, evaluating the use of PFAS chemicals in agriculture. These bills point to an opportunity for the Forum to help provide thought leadership proactively on issues that have a nexus with ag viability.
- **Tom Salzar, Washington Association of Conservation Districts,** informed the Forum of House Bill 2499, which updates the election procedures of Conservation District Board Members. This bill

would remove the landowner or farm-operator requirement to broaden eligibility, while also requiring all board members who are unpaid and lack taxing authority, to file F1 financial disclosure forms. Supporters see the eligibility change as an equity improvement, while opponents warn the disclosure requirement could drive volunteers to resign and reduce critical technical expertise.

- **Anna Nepomuceno, Northwest Harvest**, shared information on [House Bill 2481](#), prohibiting surveillance-based pricing and surge pricing for retail goods. Anna noted the importance of bringing this issue forward, even if the bill doesn't move as surge pricing in grocery stores will raise prices based on trends and how popular an item is. While surveillance-based pricing uses data from grocery store membership tracking to charge customers different prices based on factors like income, purchasing behavior, or time of day, raising major concerns for food affordability and accessibility.

## Preview of WSDA's Agricultural Viability Study

Madi Roy and Kelly McLain, WSDA, reported on WSDA's multi-year effort to better understand and respond to the challenges facing Washington agriculture, accelerated by impacts observed during the pandemic (see slides: [Agricultural Viability in Washington State](#)). This effort culminated in a short, high-level report titled *Washington Agriculture at a Crossroads: A Baseline Assessment of Agricultural Viability* which summarizes the state of Washington agriculture. A forthcoming deeper, sector-specific report will rely heavily on input from producers and partners, including the Forum. Regarding the short report, Madi highlighted Washington agriculture's significant value, diversity, and geographic advantages, while also emphasizing a sharp decline in net farm income, soaring production costs, and escalating pressures related to trade barriers, an aging workforce, shrinking agricultural land, reduced research funding, infrastructure deterioration, and climate-driven risks. These trends, she noted, threaten the long-term viability of Washington farms and warrant coordinated public investment.

Kelly shared opportunities that could strengthen agricultural viability despite tight state budgets such as trade and port infrastructure improvements, targeted investments in food system and processing infrastructure, and alignment of public procurement programs with farmers' needs. Kelly stressed the importance of improving climate resilience through planning, technology adoption, and market-based incentives; expanding mental-health and workforce-development support; and nurturing the next generation of agricultural workers through K-12 STEM and ag-focused education. Kelly also emphasized expanding pathways for surplus food donation, improving land-access tools for new and transitioning farmers, and building a Washington-grown branding or labeling program to increase consumer awareness of local products. Together, their presentation underscored both the urgency and opportunity in developing a coordinated statewide strategy to sustain Washington agriculture.

## Closing Reflections & Next Steps

Petra noted that the same topical teams will reconvene in March to continue advancing their priorities. The Diversifying Voices team is meeting on February 27, and the next full Forum meeting is scheduled for **April 2, 2026**.

Forum Vice Chair, Jon DeVaney, WSTFA, voiced his appreciation for Forum member's commitment to attend and stay engaged in meetings. Jon emphasized that even when updates feel repetitive or draw no questions, they help ensure all members share the same information and can move forward together. He noted the "convoy approach" is what allows the Forum to act quickly and effectively on consensus actions, without needing to revisit foundational questions later.

## Appendix A. Topical Team Rosters

Below is a list of members associated with each topical team.

### **Agricultural Land Protection and Availability and Next Generation Farming Team**

- Addie Candib, American Farmland Trust
- Caleb Gwerder, WA Farm Bureau
- Chris Elder, King County Dept. of Natural Resources and Parks
- Hilary Aten, on behalf of the Director of the WA State Conservation Commission
- Heather Wendt, WA Association of Conservation Districts
- KayDee Gilkey, WA Association of Wheat Growers
- Rep. Mary Dye, WA State Legislature
- Nate Lewis, WA Farmland Trust
- Tom Salzer, WA Association of Conservation Districts

### **Food Insecurity Team**

- Aaron Czyzewski, Food Lifeline
- Anna Nepomuceno, Northwest Harvest
- Brice Montgomery, WA Dept. of Social and Health Services
- Chris Voigt, WA State Potato Commission
- Claire Lane, Anti-Hunger & Nutrition Coalition
- Diane Dempster, Clark County Food System Council
- Jennifer Otten, UW Food Systems, Nutrition, and Health
- Katie Rains, on behalf of the Director of the WA State Dept. of Agriculture
- Kyle Unland, WA Dept. of Health
- Leanne Eko, Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction

### **Impacts of Climate Change Team**

- Caleb Gwerder, WA Farm Bureau
- Chad Kruger, WSU Office of Research
- Chris Voigt, WA State Potato Commission
- Chris Elder, King County Dept. of Natural Resources and Parks
- Hilary Aten, on behalf of the Director of the WA State Conservation Commission
- Jon DeVaney, WA State Tree Fruit Association
- Sen. Judy Warnick, WA State Legislature
- Laura Raymond, on behalf of the Director of the WA State Dept. of Agriculture
- Linda Neunzig, Snohomish County
- Melissa Spear, Tilth Alliance
- Sen. Rebecca Saldaña, WA State Legislature
- Richard Conlin, Conlin Columbia Partnership for Cities

### **Alleviating Barriers to Small and Mid-Scale Farm Viability and Market Access Team**

- Addie Candib, American Farmland Trust

- Anna Nepomuceno, Northwest Harvest
- Brian Estes, LINC Foods
- Caleb Gwerder, WA Farm Bureau
- Diane Dempster, Clark County Food Systems Council
- Jon DeVaney, WA State Tree Fruit Association
- Laura Raymond, on behalf of the Director of the WA State Dept. of Agriculture
- Marcia Ostrom, WSU Food Systems Program
- Melissa Spear, Tilth Alliance
- Nate Lewis, WA Farmland Trust
- P.J. Cawley, Charlie’s Produce

**Regional Food Infrastructure and Institutional Procurement for Economic Development Team**

- Aslan Meade, Thurston Economic Development Council
- Brian Estes, LINC Foods
- Jennifer Otten, UW Food Systems, Nutrition, and Health
- Laura Raymond, on behalf of the Director of the WA State Dept. of Agriculture
- Leanne Eko, Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction
- Linda Neunzig, Snohomish County
- Marie Spiker, UW Food Systems, Nutrition, and Health
- P.J. Cawley, Charlie’s Produce
- Sen. Rebecca Saldaña, WA State Legislature
- Tim Crosby, Thread Fund

**Appendix B. Forum Priorities 2025-27**

Following a multi-phase planning process beginning in April 2025, the Forum established five teams to advance the following priorities for the 2025-27 biennium:

Team Name	2025-27 Topical Priorities
<b>Impacts of Climate Change</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Water Supply for Agriculture and Food Production</li> <li>• Climate Resilience for Agriculture and Food Production</li> </ul>
<b>Agricultural Land Protection and Availability and Next Generation Farming</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Succession Planning and Incentives</li> </ul>
<b>Alleviating Barriers to Small and Mid-Scale Farm Viability and Market Access</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advanced Technical Expertise and Knowledge Transfer</li> </ul>
<b>Regional Food Infrastructure and Institutional Procurement for Economic Development</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Public-Private Partnership Models for Infrastructure Finance</li> <li>• Strategic Infrastructure Planning and Coordination</li> </ul>

<b>Food Insecurity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Food System Coordination for Food Security</li><li>• Eligibility and Access for Food Assistance Program</li></ul>
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