REPORT ON THE COPENHAGEN INTERCESSIONAL MEETING ON THE DRAFT STRATEGIC PLAN OF THE BASEL CONVENTION

Prepared by the Basel Action Network (BAN)
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The Basel Action Network (BAN) reports on the concerns of environmental NGOs and in particular those issues especially of interest with respect to BAN’s mission and campaigns. We do not attempt to cover all meeting business but only those areas that BAN believes are of significance in this regard. BAN attempts to not only to report on what transpires in the meeting, but also provide a healthy critique of the proceedings as well. The views and opinions of the meeting expressed in this report are those of the BAN secretariat only. Any criticism or praise of individual delegations has only to do with how these delegations in our view helped improve the state of the world environment and are by no means intended to be of a political or personal nature.

Introduction

On April 8-10, a small intercessional meeting of the Basel Convention was held in the Danish Environmental Ministry, in Copenhagen. The small group in attendance met with the mandate of improving the draft Strategic Plan of the Basel Convention - the road map ordaining the direction the Convention will take in the next 10 years.

What was expected to be an unassuming gathering at the start, turned out to be a contentious and crucial fight over the determination of the goal and priorities of the Convention for the next 5-10 years. At the outset, the meeting appeared to be a simple matter of taking the Convention forward. What transpired however, surprised many in attendance when a small minority of delegations attempted to use the meeting and the Strategic Planning exercise as a vehicle to bend the Convention in a direction away from many of its original goals. Canada, Germany and Switzerland joined at this meeting to attempt to impose a unique and controversial agenda of transforming the Basel Convention from a treaty that progressively seeks to minimize transboundary movement (TBM) and generation of hazardous waste, to a treaty that only seeks to work to manage wastes already produced and de-emphasizes or ignores the dual goals of minimization of hazardous waste generation and transboundary movement.
In short, the new regressive movement sponsored by these countries appears to be working very hard to turn the Basel Convention from a Waste Prevention Convention to a Convention that ignores the goals of waste and TBM minimization and appears rather as an instrument to promote the waste management and transport industry.

Fortunately, the collective efforts of the rest of the participating delegations on the last day of the 3-day meeting helped neutralize what could have been a de facto amendment of the Basel Convention. The new document coming out of the intercessional meeting remains flawed, but is a marked improvement from the document pushed upon the meeting at the outset by Canada, Germany and Switzerland.

Much of the struggle was over the goal of the Strategic Plan. The resulting goal is an expression largely achieved due to the solidarity among the regional representatives of the developed countries on the last day of the meeting. The resulting product is far from perfect, as it contains an absurd, and incongruous emphasis on “disposal” which does not reflect the existent goals of the Basel Convention, nor what was agreed at the last COP of the Basel Declaration. It was insisted upon by the German delegate who was there presumably to help represent the Western Europe and Others Region.

It is our hope that the Parties work to remove this offensive “emphasis on disposal” which turns the internationally accepted waste management hierarchy on its head and runs counter to the goals of the Basel Convention and the COP5 Basel Declaration. If that can be done at the May 2002 meetings, then the hard work in Copenhagen will have been worthwhile in truly propelling the Convention forward into the next decade rather than allowing it to take a major step backwards.

**The Road that Led to Copenhagen**

The development of the 10-year Strategic Plan (Plan) was unfortunately a closed process initiated by the Expanded Bureau in June 2001. Very few Parties and stakeholders had a chance to work on its development; rather it was released to the Parties and stakeholders just prior to the January 2002 subsidiary meetings.

The allotted time to make a thorough and educated analysis of the Plan before the January 2002 meetings was far too short. At the January meetings, BAN intervened with regard to this unfortunate situation and reminded the Parties that a stated assertion of the drafted Plan was as follows:

“It is essential that the Strategic Plan is developed through a process which is open and transparent, aimed at involving the greatest possible number of
Parties and other stakeholders and arriving at the widest possible consensus.”

Despite this assertion the draft was put together without such open consultation at all. BAN protested this fact, and stated that this problem could be rectified if indeed the entire document remains open and that the draft would be adjustable at the proposed intercessional meeting.

The Plan was taken up in the agenda during the January 2002 meetings for review, and an informal working group was immediately created to discuss how to take the Plan forward. The informal working group concluded that an intercessional working group was needed to review and improve the Plan before the May 2002 meeting, where it would hopefully be finalized and ultimately submitted for approval for the COP6 in December 2002.

Denmark volunteered to host a three-day intercessional meeting in early April in Copenhagen. It was further agreed that the intercessional meeting be made up of representational experts -- three representatives from each region, one NGO (represented by BAN) representative, and one industry representative (failed to attend), two representatives from the regional centers, a representative for non-Parties, and representation from the Presidency and Secretariat, and that the meeting would be held in early April.

**Copenhagen Day One: Agenda Ignored**

Canada, was pre-designated Chair of the meeting and came to the meeting with a mandate from the January meeting.

1. Look at the Strategic Plan and improve it.
2. Work on how to implement it.
   A. Prioritization
   B. Resource Allocation/Mobilization
   C. Timeline/Set Targets
   D. Monitoring Mechanism
   E. Distinguish between Regional v. National Actions

However, for some unknown reason, this agenda, which was arrived at by consensus of the informal working group in January, was simply forgotten. Instead of working immediately on the draft Plan, the chair recommended that the draft be set aside, and the first day was used to allow each delegate to air out his or her priorities for the Plan. None of the delegates opposed the Chair’s proposal despite the fact that the normal procedure, and what was set in the above agenda, was to first set what it is you want to do and then prioritize those items.
The Chair’s shift toward immediate prioritization served to divert attention away from the existing draft document – which caused confusion as to whether that document was being dropped or was considered a finished document. However neither of these scenarios was consistent with what had been agreed in January – that the document was wide open and indeed the very first thing that needed to be done was to finalize it and then prioritize.

At the end of the first day, most of the delegates felt optimistic that their concerns and priorities were heard. Prevention and minimization of the generation of hazardous wastes, reduction in transboundary movement, promotion of cleaner production and technologies, capacity building, utilization and strengthening of the Regional Training Centers, promoting the Ban Amendment, were by-words all throughout the day.

Before closing the meeting, the delegates agreed that a short paper compiling and reflecting the priorities discussed that day would be drafted and presented to the delegates the following day. This paper drafted by the chairs and secretariat drew in large part from an earlier paper that was brought to the meeting but never formally introduced, by Canada, Germany and Switzerland. This paper was to be the obstacle that almost derailed the meeting in Copenhagen.

**Day Two: Steering the group away from its Mandate**

The paper that was presented the succeeding day was best characterized by Georgia’s intervention after reviewing the document, “We cannot find our priorities.”

Indeed, the paper was supposed to reflect the priorities of the regions and stakeholders, as expressed by their representatives. But what came out were primarily the goals, priorities and interests of the paper brought to the meeting by Canada, Germany and Switzerland largely reflecting, what could be assumed to be their priorities and interests. For example, the “alleged” synthesized goal was reduced to capacity building for environmentally sound management – a fact not agreed upon at all by the delegates. Reduction in transboundary movement and promotion of the Basel Ban were conveniently omitted from the list of priorities, while the promotion of core elements of ESM for wastes was suddenly prioritized.

Even more disturbing than finding certain priorities missing and certain “non-priorities" becoming priorities, was the fact of how the report was transformed from being more than a simple report to the Copenhagen delegates for their use the next day, to becoming the controlling document trumping the draft Strategic Plan.

Upon presenting the report to the delegates the morning of the second day, the Chair declared that the report would now be an operative document that
synthesizes the priorities of all the delegates in the Copenhagen meeting. As such, the report will be presented to the Parties during the May 2002 meeting. The draft Strategic Plan was not mentioned at all and its status left undefined. And the opportunity to work to improve upon it, which was what all of the delegates came prepared to do, was ignored and set aside.

BAN inquired about the relationship of the two documents, and the status of the draft Strategic Plan. The Chair rebuffed the inquiry by saying that this process was discussed and agreed upon by all the delegates the day before, implying that the inquiry was a day too late. El Salvador raised the same issue, and also the Eastern European representative. Switzerland intervened to suggest that the “Synthesized Priority” Report is an extract of the draft Strategic Plan, and thus the two documents are “almost the same”.

The Chair quelled any further questions on the status of the papers by passing on to the Secretariat the responsibility of addressing the issue. The Secretariat safely replied that both documents are still subject to review and that neither of the documents is final. A crucial point that was not stated, however, was that by coming up with a “Synthesized Priority” report, the draft Strategic Plan was effectively pushed aside. Since the “Synthesized Priority” report allegedly reflected the priorities of the draft Strategic Plan, there apparently was no reason for Parties to look at the draft Strategic Plan anymore, even though the second paper was not at all drawn from the draft Strategic plan that the delegates were meant to work from and the delegates had not yet had an opportunity to amend or adjust the original plan.

As a lull and some unease then hovered above the discussion, the Chair called for a break, and recommended that the small Copenhagen assembly be further sub-divided into three smaller groups to discuss and review portions of the short “Synthesized Priority” report. The Chair appointed the Danish representative to head the first group to discuss the portion on the “table of action”; El Salvador and Egypt were designated as co-chairs for the second subdivision discussing the role of the Regional Training Centers.

By breaking the group to smaller units, the tactic effectively weakened and divided the opposition on what was clearly the most contentious issue - the goal and priorities of the “Synthesized Report” - undertaken by the third subdivision, chaired by Antigua & Barbuda, and to which Germany and Canada and BAN attended.

“Re-Writing” The Convention via the Strategic Plan

At the third subdivision, Canada and Germany could not agree when BAN proposed language re-instating the emphasis on waste prevention and minimization derived from the COP5 Declaration on Environmentally Sound Management. It remains BAN’s assertion that the Convention cannot afford to
backslide from its progressive positions taken earlier. This is particularly unacceptable at a time when hazardous waste generation continues to rise and efforts at minimization are not taken seriously enough by governments or industry. Lebanon and Chile also sided with BAN in this debate over the goal. The disagreement was heated and contentious. In the course of the debate Canada and Germany made clear their stance regarding the Basel Convention:

_The Basel Convention is about promoting waste disposal technology around the world. It is not about preventing or minimizing the transboundary movement of waste or its generation._

While BAN and Lebanon and Chile proposed that the goal of the “Synthesized Priority” document be further clarified to emphasize prevention and minimization of hazardous waste, and the reduction of transboundary movement to better reflect Basel Declaration V/33, Germany countered with unbelievably strong opposition to this pre-agreed emphasis. In the case of “prevention and minimization”, Germany contended, there are no such things. He mentioned before that the Convention has talked about these concepts for more than a decade and there is still nothing on them. Prevention and minimization is outside the scope of the Convention, Germany argued! Yet as Germany was meant to attend the meeting as a representative of the Western Europe and Others Region, it was unclear as to whether he felt this was a common position of that region or was it the German national position, or simply a personal one.

What Germany supported was that Basel only become involved in the need to further environmentally sound management (ESM), which to him meant recycling and disposal, while doing nothing to minimize hazardous waste generation. In this regressive view, the bottom (least desirable) options of the waste management hierarchy should be emphasized and not the top. Waste disposal technologies must be given priority and developing country Parties must have access to these technologies rather than waste minimization technologies and processes.

In other words, the OECD’s wastefulness and high levels of pollution generation is to be perpetuated and in fact replicated in the developing world. Rather than attempting to solve the problem at the source, core performance elements must be established to create a level playing field — but a level playing field of increased waste generation rather than reductions. Once such a level playing field is in place then transboundary movements of waste can presumably be perpetuated as well. Earlier in the second day, Germany stated that it wants an ESM Convention, and to just drop the transboundary aspects of Basel. Thus, the revolutionary environmental justice issues that worked to create the Basel Ban Amendment should be forgotten, as well as the goals of national self-sufficiency in hazardous waste management.
These statements are such a radical departure from the Basel Convention’s goals that they are great cause for alarm coming from an important EU country such as Germany.

The German delegate (who again was supposed to be representing the Western European and Others region) stated spitefully that if BAN insists on referring to the COP5 Declaration language emphasizing waste prevention and minimization, then Germany would counter by insisting on emphasizing everything, including disposal.

Of course with its arguments, Germany appears to have never read the Convention, as this view of the Convention ignores the fact that prevention and minimization, not to mention reduction in transboundary movement are not just platitudes to be uttered, but are well-defined existing international obligations under the Basel Convention in clear unequivocal language. For a review of what the Basel Convention has to say about waste minimization see preambular paragraphs 2, 3, 17, and General Obligation Article 4, paragraph 2 (a)).

Further, the Parties themselves, as recently as COP5, reiterated and in fact reinforced this goal by calling for an emphasis on prevention and minimization in Declaration V/33. In paragraph 1(a) of Declaration V/33, where the heading enumerates several activities, namely: prevention, minimization, recycling, recovery and disposal of hazardous waste, the Ministers at COP5 took pains in mentioning in the body of that paragraph the need for an elaboration of a concept and programme for ESM that emphasizes prevention and minimization of waste.

The Parties reflecting the importance placed in waste reduction and minimization in the Convention itself made the emphasis. Further, the omission of the other activities in the body of the paragraph gives credence to the emphasis demanded by the Parties. These points were raised and were rebuffed by Germany while they petulantly persisted in insisting that everything be emphasized or nothing at all.

Canada, then acting as a delegate (also presumably representing Western Europe and Others) refuted the proposal of including reduction in TBM in the goal, but did not adamantly oppose prevention and minimization. Canada’s position was stunning. They stated that Canada accepts hazardous wastes from the US, and if reduction in TBM were emphasized in the goal, then this would affect the existing trade between the two neighbors. This statement is incredibly revealing in that it shows that Canada and the United States have no intention of following the mandate of the Basel Convention to minimize transboundary movements of waste. The mere fact that this waste is being traded between nations does not mean that every effort should not be made to curtail this trade in accordance with their Basel obligations.
Canada and Germany conveniently forget that TBM reduction and self-sufficiency in wastes are not negotiable points, but clear international obligations under Basel. And yet it appears that Canada and Germany are fundamentally opposed to these basic obligations of the Basel Convention even though they are both Parties to it. Rather than attempting to amend the Convention, or withdraw from it, they appear to be intent on “re-writing” the Convention via the Strategic Plan. They hope to accomplish this goal via re-prioritization of the actual work plans of the Convention. And what is of particular concern is that they are choosing this regressive route – hoping to steer Basel Backwards rather than forwards, at a time when hazardous waste generation continues to increase and the impacts from chemical pollution become more frightening with each new scientific study.

It is hard to believe however that these radical views held now by Canada, Germany and Switzerland are shared by their own populace or the people of their region. Rather they seem to be a simply a behind the scenes promotion for those industries disinterested in waste reduction but very interested in proliferating very costly end-of-pipe technologies (such as hazardous waste incinerators) in the guise of “capacity building”.

Pragmatic means Recycling, Recovery, and Disposal

Switzerland, Germany and Canada contended repeatedly during the course of the meeting, that the only way to get money from governments or financial institutions is to promote pragmatic solutions. This makes sense, but what does not make sense is the assumption that “pragmatic” means only downstream “solutions”. Likewise it does not follow that funders frown upon upstream solutions. In fact, it is the upstream, preventative solutions, which have been demonstrated time and again to make the most economic sense when compared to the end-of-pipe approaches of disposal and recycling that have led developed countries to create some of the highest levels of dioxins emissions and exposures and the most toxic waste sites awaiting massively expensive clean-up. They fail to remember that most countries cannot afford to build billion dollar incinerators that can via very costly filtration technologies prevent most of the dioxin outputs from waste burning. Nor can they afford “Superfund”-like hazardous waste cleanup costs.

As a case in point, it is worth recalling the pragmatic manner in which the US and Canadian governments addressed the massive waste pollution in the Great Lakes (bordering both US and Canada). This was not accomplished through the installation of various end-of-pipe technologies, such as filters that controlled the effluent spewed by the polluting industries located in the area of the Great Lakes, but only through the radical abatement and removal of the polluting industries around the Great Lakes area. What can be more pragmatic and efficient in
addressing the hazardous waste problem than to take the toxics out of the product/process in the first place?

The real reason that is often unspoken, that more progress has not been made on hazardous use reductions is that corporate business interests will vociferously fight attempts by governments to dictate how their products should be made (e.g. phasing out use of toxic inputs). Let it be recalled that in the completion of the Plastics Waste Guidelines, it was these same countries that argued most vociferously to remove even mention of preventative strategies from the guidelines despite a requirement to include these. Switzerland, Germany, Canada, and the United States, are the home of the largest chemical and electronics manufacturing companies in the world. It is hardly a surprise that these governments are the ones seeking to “re-write” the Basel Convention to move in directions away from “toxics use reductions” which is lies at the heart of cleaner production.

The anti-Basel arguments used against prevention, minimization, and self-sufficiency, conveniently mask the corporate economic motives that drive the position of some less enlightened developed countries. What serves the corporate agenda is to ban nothing and promote free trade in everything no matter how harmful it may be. At the same time it benefits them to perpetuate higher and higher ESM performance standards to make pollution costly. In that way industry can justify exporting pollution to poorer countries while forcing them to pay exorbitant prices for the less than adequate, end-of-pipe technologies for dealing with it. In this way, developing countries must purchase the waste management technology created by developed countries to process the effluent generated by the developed countries. The developed countries earn from sales of their waste technology, and they also escape the external cost of handling their own waste as they simply pass it on to the poorer countries. Definitely a win-win scenario -- for but a very few.

At the end of the day, due to the insistence by Germany and Canada that prevention was not to be emphasized, the goal was left after the end of the second day as follows:

“The goal of the 5-year Strategic Plan is capacity building for the environmentally sound management of wastes.1”

Day Three: Developing Countries Take Back Control

The last day of the meeting was pivotal. The draft Strategic Plan – the very document that all delegates came to the meeting to work on, had not been touched and, its status was unknown. A new document largely drafted by Canada, Germany and Switzerland was being held up as the decision of the

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1 As defined in the Decision V/33 of the fifth meeting of the Conference of Parties.
Copenhagen group. A number of delegates were puzzled as to what had really transpired and where the meeting was going and whether the meeting would terminate without the group being able to discuss the draft Strategic Plan or the goal and priorities of the new “Synthesized Priority” report.

BAN’s belief at this point in the meeting was that while most of the delegates had come to the meeting in good faith to follow the agenda agreed in January, the process had been forcibly twisted by but a handful of OECD countries – acting not as representatives of their region but as a pre-designed coup to co-opt the process and promote a narrow minority view – in fact an anti-Basel view. Against this backdrop BAN felt that it was left with little choice but to shine a spotlight on the corruption of the process and refuse to be a part of it.

As the Chair opened the meeting and allowed interventions to be made, BAN raised its flag to intervene. The intervention in no uncertain terms underlined the fact that the meeting has been de-railed by certain OECD countries, and the draft Strategic Plan that all had come to work on – most for the first time, had inappropriately been swept aside with the introduction of a new document which bore little resemblance to the original draft or Basel decisions that preceded it such as the Basel Declaration. BAN urged the assembly to re-read and return to its given mandate of improving the draft Strategic Plan starting with the goal, before it proceeded with the “Synthesized Priority” report. BAN stated in the strongest terms that its representative, representing the NGO community at large, “would not support or validate the existing process” which was a clear corruption of the intended process and unless the meeting returned to, and fulfilled the mandate, he would be forced to walk out of the meeting.

A pall of silence hung over the meeting for a minute after the intervention, before Germany raised its flag to state, “I don’t understand what he’s talking about” and Switzerland quickly echoed the reply. But then, El Salvador raised his flag to firmly state that in fact BAN had a point. Chile read the mandate to work to improve the text of the draft Strategic Plan and reminded the delegates that this had not been done. These exchanges started a flurry of reactions from Germany, Switzerland, and Canada primarily disagreeing with BAN’s contention and developing countries, for the most part agreeing to it.

The meeting seemed to be at an impasse when a sudden suggestion from the Egyptian delegate to re-discuss the goal received a chorus of agreement. But before another round of debate could start, the Chair called for a short break.

Immediately after the meeting resumed, Sri Lanka proposed a new goal for the “Synthesized Priority” report:

“To promote environmentally sound management of hazardous wastes, emphasizing prevention, minimization, and reduction in transboundary
movements of such wastes through effective partnership, capacity building and awareness raising."

Germany intervened at once to raise the same arguments against prevention and minimization. The Chilean representative intervened to agree with Sri Lanka, then the Eastern European representative also supported Sri Lanka, El Salvador joined in, and then Egypt and the African region – a clear shifting of the tide. It became clear that the majority view is to hold to a progressive, visionary, and pragmatic goal for the Convention. Denmark agrees with Sri Lanka, then Lebanon, and El Salvador intervenes once more to enter a stronger agreement to what Sri Lanka has recommended.

And yet despite the majority view being clear, the Chair allowed the discussion over the goal to go on for two hours. However, now Canada stayed out of the debate, and Switzerland had to leave to catch an early flight, leaving Germany alone, refusing to relent, and proposing that if prevention was to be emphasized, then “disposal” must also be emphasized. Egypt and Sri Lanka disagreed with Germany’s point as it diluted the emphasis of the goal, however, as the discussion wore on, most of the delegates finally relented to Germany’s will and allowed the term’s inclusion as a compromise.

The goal ended with the “term of compromise” and the discussions proceeded regarding the priority activities. Reduction in transboundary movement was made a priority activity, and the delegates agreed that other activities could be added to the “Synthesized Priority” report to properly reflect the “new” goal.

The goal now reads:

“To promote environmentally sound management of hazardous waste and other wastes, emphasizing prevention, minimization and disposal, and reduction in and monitoring of transboundary movements of such wastes through capacity building, effective partnership and awareness raising.”

At the twilight hour of the meeting, the status of the two documents was finally decided upon. The majority of the delegates agreed that the draft Strategic Plan and the “Synthesized Priority” report would be presented together at the May 2002 meeting, bearing a cover report by the Secretariat reflecting that the “Synthesized Priority Report” was arrived at by a majority of the Copenhagen delegates.

Almost Losing Copenhagen

The small meeting in Copenhagen demonstrates that the very foundations of the Basel Convention are under attack and it is clear who it is that is involved. Canada made it very clear, they cannot agree to the basic obligation of self-sufficiency in hazardous waste, nor can they agree to a reduction in
transboundary movement. Germany appears to not be able to agree with the basic obligation to minimize the generation and transboundary movement, nor the decision made at the last COP to emphasize waste prevention and minimization.

It was more than a decade ago that brute economic interests pushed hazardous waste dumping to poorer countries, and these same economic interests are still pushing, this time by claiming to support Environmentally Sound Management (ESM) – a seemingly benign phrase from the Basel Convention but one that is increasingly being used as a password for business-as-usual and the perpetuation of trade in wastes and trade in end-of-pipe technologies. As Germany pointedly stated it, “reduction of transboundary movement is a theoretical goal rather than reality”, what is needed is an ‘ESM convention’.

For these interests there remains much to be gained by continuing to accept pollution and its migration to poorer countries as a fact of life and one for which much profit is to be gained.

Thanks to their “effort” of these few countries, the Copenhagen meeting was almost turned into a giant step backward in the overall global effort to beat the disease of toxic waste. As it is, we are left a almost no work done on the original strategic plan, with some good priorities and with a goal which is good, yet contains an absurdity – an stated emphasis on minimization and disposal. By emphasizing disposal one not only raises the bottom (least desirable option) of the waste management hierarchy to the top, the two poles work in direct opposition to one another. Thus, emphasizing both is tantamount to trying to lose weight and gain it at the same time. This is because an emphasis on disposal creates further demand and infrastructure for the existence of pollution and its acceptance. It was the emphasis on not being preventative but rather only attempting to solve problems once they were already created that has gotten us into our hazardous waste predicament in the first place. An emphasis on both disposal and prevention means in fact that nothing is emphasized and no direction is given at all.

This “emphasis on disposal” equates to a step backward from what was agreed in the Basel Declaration at COP5 and exists solely due to an extreme minority viewpoint. To avoid the Basel Convention becoming completely irrelevant in this decade, and seen as a dumpers Convention, it is imperative that this absurdity be removed from the 10-year goal of the Basel Convention. The world does not need to embrace toxic waste; it needs to find in the Basel Convention visionary leadership that proclaims that we will have a future without it. It needs a compass that points us toward actually solving the problem of toxic waste at source rather than vainly attempting to mitigate a disaster once produced by peddling end-of-pipe methods.

The upcoming Basel Convention meetings present an opportunity to remove the “term of compromise” from the goal, and ensure that the Basel Convention takes
its destined progressive, inspirational path of prevention, minimization, reduction in transboundary movement, self-sufficiency in waste, and always building the capacity of all countries to accomplish these goals.

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