

Date of Hearing: June 30, 2026

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON WATER, PARKS, AND WILDLIFE

Diane Papan, Chair

SB 1108 (Caballero) – As Amended April 7, 2026

SENATE VOTE: 37-1

SUBJECT: Grassland Ecological Area Conservancy

SUMMARY: Establishes the Grassland Ecological Area Conservancy (GEAC) as a state agency within the Natural Resources Agency (CNRA). Specifically, **this bill:**

- 1) Defines two areas and requires maps of the areas to be publicly posted by CNRA on its website:
 - a) “Grassland Ecological Area” (GEA) as the portion of the County of Merced containing the Grasslands Wildlife Management Area, Grassland Water District, Grassland Resource Conservation District, Los Banos Wildlife Area, Volta Wildlife Area, Great Valley Grasslands State Park, San Luis National Wildlife Refuge, and Merced National Wildlife Refuge, designated on, and specifically set forth in, the map called “Grassland Ecological Area Conservancy,” dated _____ 2026, and placed on file with the Secretary of State.
 - b) “Grassland Focus Area” (GFA) as the area of land surrounding the Grassland Ecological Area that is recognized as a buffer of agricultural and other working landscapes that are compatible with wetland habitats and functions, designated on, and specifically set forth in, the map called “Grassland Ecological Area Conservancy,” dated _____ 2026, and placed on file with the Secretary of State.
- 2) Establishes GEAC as a state agency within CNRA to work in collaboration and cooperation with local governments and interested parties to fulfill all of the following purposes:
 - a) Protect, conserve, and restore the physical, cultural, archaeological, historical, and living resources of GEA and GFA, including migratory birds on the Pacific Flyway and other wildlife;
 - b) Provide increased opportunities for tourism and recreation;
 - c) Aid in the preservation of working landscapes;
 - d) Reduce the risk of natural disasters, such as wildfires;
 - e) Protect and improve water and air quality;
 - f) Assist the regional economy through the operation of GEAC’s efforts;
 - g) Identify the highest priority projects and initiatives for which funding is needed;
 - h) Undertake efforts to enhance public and educational use and enjoyment of lands owned by the public;

- i) Support efforts that advance both environmental preservation and the economic well-being of the region's residents in a complementary manner; and
 - j) Support efforts that advance climate resilience and equity.
- 3) Provides for the composition of the board of GEAC:
- a) Specifies nine voting members:
 - i) The Secretary of CNRA, or their designee;
 - ii) The Director of the Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW), or their designee;
 - iii) One public member, who is not an elected official, appointed by the Speaker of the Assembly;
 - iv) One public member, who is not an elected official, appointed by the Senate Committee on Rules;
 - v) The General Manager of the Grassland Water District, or their designee;
 - vi) A supervisor of the Board of Supervisors of the County of Merced, appointed by the Board of Supervisors, or their designee, and a resident of the County of Merced;
 - vii) One member appointed by the Governor who is a landowner in GEA and owns the land exclusively for the purpose of habitat protection;
 - viii) One member appointed by the Governor who is a landowner in GEA and owns or operates an agricultural operation; and
 - ix) One member appointed by the Governor who is an employee of a nongovernmental organization that is an active member of the Central Valley Joint Venture.
 - b) Specifies two nonvoting liaison advisors:
 - i) The Regional Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) Region 8, or their designee; and
 - ii) The Executive Director of the Wildlife Conservation Board, or their designee.
 - c) Requires that appointing powers seek to include individuals from a breadth of backgrounds.
- 4) Requires that two members of the Senate, appointed by the Senate Committee on Rules, and two members of the Assembly, appointed by the Speaker of the Assembly, meet with GEAC and participate in its activities to the extent that such participation is not incompatible with their respective positions as Members of the Legislature.
- a) One appointee from each house of the Legislature must represent a district partially or wholly within the GEA and GFA.

- b) One appointee from each house of the Legislature must represent a district outside the GEA and GFA.
- 5) Requires GEAC to use the Governor's Tribal Advisor and the Native American Heritage Commission to identify and consult with California Indian tribes that may be affected by GEAC's activities, in a manner that allows a reasonable opportunity for tribes to comment and participate.
- 6) Provides that the members of the board appointed by the Speaker of the Assembly and the Senate Committee on Rules serve at the pleasure of the appointing power, and the other members, other than the Secretary of CNRA and Director of CDFW, serve terms of four years and may be reappointed, except that no member of the board whose appointment was contingent upon meeting a condition of eligibility may serve beyond the time when the member ceases to meet that condition.
- 7) Provides that the voting members of the board who are not state employees shall be compensated \$100 per scheduled meeting day and that all members of the board shall be reimbursed for their actual and necessary expenses, including travel expenses, incurred in attending meetings of GEAC and carrying out their duties.
- 8) Requires the voting members of the board to elect a chairperson and vice chairperson from among their membership every two years and authorizes the voting members to appoint other officers as necessary. Provides that if the office of chairperson or vice chairperson becomes vacant, a new officer will be elected by the voting members to serve for the remainder of the term.
- 9) Provides that five voting members constitute a quorum, that the board may not transact business without a quorum, that a decision requires an affirmative vote of five members, and that votes are binding with respect to all matters acted on by GEAC.
- 10) Requires the board to adopt rules, regulations, and procedures for the conduct of business by GEAC.
- 11) Provides that the voting members and nonvoting liaison advisors of the board have the right to attend all meetings of the board, including closed sessions.
- 12) Authorizes the board to establish advisory boards or committees, hold community meetings, and engage in public outreach using advanced forms of technology, in order to facilitate the decision making process, and authorizes members of advisory boards or committees to be reimbursed for their actual and necessary expenses incurred in attending regular meetings of the advisory board or committee of which they are a member.
- 13) Requires the board to establish and maintain a headquarters office within the region.
- 14) Authorizes GEAC to rent or own real and personal property and equipment pursuant to applicable statutes and regulations.
- 15) Requires the board to determine the qualifications of, and appoint, an executive officer of GEAC, who shall be exempt from civil service.

- 16) Authorizes the board to appoint other staff as necessary to execute the powers and functions provided to GEAC.
- 17) Authorizes the board to enter into contracts with private entities and public agencies to procure consulting and other necessary services.
- 18) Provides that GEAC's expenses for support and administration may be paid from GEAC's operating budget and any other funding sources available to GEAC.
- 19) Requires the board to conduct business in accordance with the Bagley-Keene Open Meeting Act (Government Code § 11120 *et seq.*).
- 20) Requires the board to hold its regular meetings within or near the region.
- 21) Requires the board to post agendas for each board meeting on CNRA's website.
- 22) Limits GEAC's jurisdiction to GEA and GFA.
- 23) Requires GEAC to carry out projects and activities throughout GEA and GFA.
- 24) Authorizes GEAC to make grants or loans to public agencies, nonprofit organizations, and tribal organizations, including grants or loans provided to acquire an interest in real property.
 - a) Provides that grant or loan funds shall be disbursed only after the recipient entity has entered into an agreement with GEAC on the terms and conditions specified by GEAC.
 - b) Authorizes GEAC to require repayment of grant or loan funds on the terms and conditions it deems appropriate.
- 25) Authorizes GEAC to provide technical information, expertise, and other nonfinancial assistance to public agencies, nonprofit organizations, and tribal organizations to support planning, project development, and implementation.
- 26) Authorizes GEAC to apply for and receive grants.
- 27) Provides that GEAC may sue and be sued in its name.
- 28) Authorizes GEAC to acquire an interest in real property from willing sellers or transferors.
- 29) Requires GEAC to take whatever actions are reasonably necessary and incidental to the management of lands or interests in lands under its ownership or control and authorizes GEAC to make agreements for the management of those lands or interests.
- 30) Authorizes GEAC to improve, restore, or enhance lands for the purpose of protecting wildlife habitat, conserving natural resources, improving public access or enjoyment of public lands, or otherwise meeting the objectives of this bill.
- 31) Authorizes GEAC to enter into agreements for the construction, management, or maintenance of facilities authorized by GEAC.
- 32) Prohibits GEAC from exercising the power of eminent domain.

- 33) Authorizes GEAC to, notwithstanding any other law, lease, rent, sell, exchange, or otherwise transfer an interest, option, or contractual right in real property acquired under the provisions of this bill, subject to terms and conditions in furtherance of the purposes of this bill.
- 34) Provides that proceeds from a lease, rental, sale, exchange, or transfer of an interest or option in real property, and all other income, shall be deposited in the GEAC Fund.
- 35) Requires GEAC to cooperate and consult with the city or county where a grant is proposed or an interest in real property is proposed to be acquired, and, as necessary or appropriate, to coordinate its efforts with other state agencies and to cooperate and consult with public water and irrigation districts, groundwater sustainability agencies, and other relevant entities.
- 36) Provides that GEAC does not have the following powers:
- a) The power of a city or county to regulate land use;
 - b) Authority to regulate activities on land, except as the owner of an interest in land or pursuant to an agreement with, or a license or grant of management authority from, the owner of an interest in land; or
 - c) Authority over water rights held by others.
- 37) Provides that this bill does not affect the jurisdiction of any other state conservancy.
- 38) Creates the GEAC Fund in the State Treasury and provides that moneys in the GEAC Fund, upon appropriation by the Legislature, are available only for the purposes of this bill.
- 39) Provides that all funds or income received by GEAC, including proceeds from donations or a lease, rental, sale, exchange, or transfer of an interest or option in real property, shall be deposited in the GEAC Fund.
- 40) Requires GEAC to submit an annual report to the Legislature and the Secretary of CNRA regarding the activities of GEAC, including expenditures, land management costs, and administrative costs, and requires GEAC to make the report publicly available, including by posting the report on its website.
- 41) Provides that if the Commission on State Mandates determines that this bill contains costs mandated by the state, reimbursement to local agencies and school districts for those costs shall be made pursuant to Government Code § 17500 *et seq.*
- 42) Makes various findings and declarations relating to the statewide and international significance of the wetlands within GEA.

EXISTING LAW:

- 1) Establishes 11 state conservancies in various regions of the state: Baldwin Hills and Urban Watersheds [Public Resources Code (PRC) § 32550 *et seq.*], California Tahoe (Government Code § 66905 *et seq.*), Coachella Valley Mountains (PRC § 33500 *et seq.*), Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta (PRC § 32300 *et seq.*), Salton Sea (PRC § 33810 *et seq.*), San Diego River (PRC § 32630 *et seq.*), San Gabriel and Lower Los Angeles Rivers and Mountains (PRC § 32600 *et seq.*), San Joaquin River (PRC § 32500 *et seq.*), Santa Monica Mountains (PRC

§ 33000 *et seq.*), Sierra Nevada (PRC § 33300 *et seq.*), and State Coastal (PRC § 31000 *et seq.*).

- 2) Establishes CNRA and specifies the departments, boards, commissions, and conservancies within it (Government Code § 12805).
- 3) Allocates a total of 800,000 acre-feet of federal Central Valley Project water for fish, wildlife, and habitat restoration purposes, and directs the U.S. Secretary of the Interior to provide firm water supplies to maintain and improve wetland habitat areas, including areas within GEA (Public Law 102-575, Title 34).

FISCAL EFFECT: Unknown. This bill is keyed fiscal.

COMMENTS:

- 1) **Purpose of this bill.** According to the author, “[GEA,] located in Merced County within the Central Valley, is the single largest wetland, grassland and working land complex west of the Mississippi. It provides critical habitat for migratory bird species and essential local opportunities for education and recreation. Yet as climate, water, pollution, and development risks increase, there is a need to ensure coordinated efforts among public agencies, [nongovernmental organizations], landowners and working lands to preserve this vital habitat.” The author states that GEAC will preserve wetland habitat by operating incentive based and voluntary programs, and contends that GEAC will equip landowners and communities with the tools and resources to preserve the GEA wetland complex for generations to come.
- 2) **Background.** Until the arrival of Europeans, the Central Valley was covered in millions of acres of permanent and seasonal wetlands, providing habitat for a wide variety of plants and wildlife, including huge numbers of migratory waterfowl. These birds travelled along an immense migratory bird corridor known as the Pacific Flyway, which extends from Alaska to Patagonia. Over the past 200 years, engineering projects have diverted water, drained wetlands, and developed the Central Valley into one of the most productive agricultural regions in the world. Now, over 90% of the Central Valley’s historic wetlands have been lost, with most of the remaining wetlands occurring in a network of wildlife refuges which help to maintain the Pacific Flyway.

Wetlands in the Central Valley today. Most of the existing wetlands in the Central Valley are in a network of 19 habitat areas provided with water by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation) and USFWS in the Refuge Water Supply Program (RWSP) under Section 3406 (d) of the Central Valley Project Improvement Act (CVPIA). To implement RWSP, Reclamation delivers up to 555,515 acre-feet per year of water for wetland habitat areas in the Central Valley. These habitat areas extend throughout the entire Central Valley, with units in each of the Central Valley’s three major basins. Of the 19 CVPIA habitat areas, 12 are USFWS-managed national wildlife refuges,¹ six are CDFW-managed state wildlife areas,² and one is the predominantly privately-owned wetlands complex of the Grassland

¹ Sacramento, Delevan, Colusa, Sutter, Merced, Kern, and Pixley National Wildlife Refuges; San Luis, West Bear Creek, East Bear Creek, Kesterson, and Freitas Units of the San Luis National Wildlife Refuge Complex.

² Gray Lodge, Los Banos, Mendota, and Volta Wildlife Areas; China Island and Salt Slough Units of the North Grasslands Wildlife Area.

Resource Conservation District (GRCD). This bill creates a state conservancy centered on the private GRCD wetlands and adjoining public lands, known as GEA.

GEA refuge complex. GEA, as defined in this bill, is composed of the Grassland Water District (GWD), GRCD (mostly composed of about 160 private duck clubs), the mostly privately-owned (under perpetual conservation easement) lands of the USFWS Grasslands Wildlife Management Area, and adjoining state and federal lands.³ Together, GEA comprises about 240,000 acres of wetland habitat in Merced County (some of the above designations may overlap). This large wetland area in the predominantly agricultural Central Valley is a critical stopover for migratory birds and protects vital wetland habitat—as recognized by GEA’s designation as a Ramsar site, signifying its international significance.⁴

Because the natural hydrology of the area has been destroyed, these wetlands rely entirely on imported water. According to a recent interview with the general manager of GWD, a California Water District that delivers Central Valley Project water to GEA wetlands, the main ongoing challenge for wetland managers is securing enough water to maintain wetland health.⁵ Another key challenge facing GEA wetlands is a lack of perpetual protection for some wetlands, especially those in the eastern portion of GEA (where fewer lands are state- or federally-owned or covered by perpetual conservation easements).

GFA buffer lands. Buffer zones, regions of intermediate protection surrounding sensitive areas, are an important conservation best practice. Buffer zones range from narrow ecological buffers of a few hundred feet surrounding riparian habitats to vast protected areas (such as a national forest surrounding a national park). GEA wetlands are surrounded by working lands used for agriculture. In addition to their potential use to buffer GEA wetlands from higher-intensity activities, these working lands face challenges including fallowing or retirement for water conservation and flooding. This bill defines a buffer of “wildlife friendly” working lands, called GFA, surrounding the GEA wetlands. Both GEA and GFA lands are in the jurisdiction of the new GEAC.

State conservancies. The Legislature has established 11 state conservancies charged with the protection and preservation of the lands within their statutorily specified jurisdictions, which may overlap. The conservancies also work to provide recreational opportunities, facilitate climate adaptation, connect people to regional landscapes, and bring state investment to the region (including by issuing grants to eligible organizations). The areas served by these conservancies vary considerably, from the nearly 43,000 square mile Sierra Nevada Conservancy to the 17 square mile San Joaquin River Conservancy; GEAC would cover approximately 500 square miles. Most state conservancies are in Southern California, and GEAC, in the Central Valley, would serve a region of the state that is not currently covered by a state conservancy.

- 3) **Proposed committee amendments.** The jurisdiction of GEAC is not explicitly defined in this bill; instead, the jurisdiction of the proposed state agency would be as delineated on a

³ Los Banos Wildlife Area, Volta Wildlife Area, Great Valley Grasslands State Park, San Luis National Wildlife Refuge, and Merced National Wildlife Refuge.

⁴ “The List of Wetlands of International Importance,” *Secretariat of the Convention on Wetlands*, June 5, 2026.

⁵ Sarah Bardeen, “A Network of Wetlands Thrives in the Heart of the San Joaquin Valley,” *Public Policy Institute of California* (2026).

map submitted to the Secretary of State, without specifying what entity may submit a map. The other state conservancies have defined boundaries in statute. In addition, this bill refers to the “region” of GEAC, without defining that term. Further, this bill requires the Governor to appoint a landowner in GEA who owns or operates an agricultural operation to the board of GEAC; however, agricultural operations are concentrated in GFA, an area without specific representation on the board. Finally, this bill proposes GEAC to be a state agency within CNRA but does not add GEAC to the list of state agencies within CNRA. *The Committee may wish to adopt the following amendments to address the four issues raised above:*

Amendment 1 – define the boundary of GEAC in statute

PRC § 33232 (d). “Grassland Ecological Area” means the portion of the County of Merced *as described and mapped in the Merced County 2030 General Plan under the same name. The Grassland Ecological Area includes* ~~containing~~ the Grasslands Wildlife Management Area, Grassland Water District, Grassland Resource Conservation District, Los Banos Wildlife Area, Volta Wildlife Area, Great Valley Grasslands State Park, San Luis National Wildlife Refuge, and Merced National Wildlife Refuge, ~~designated on, and specifically set forth in, the map called “Grassland Ecological Area Conservancy,” dated _____ 2026, and placed on file with the Secretary of State. The map shall be publicly posted by the Natural Resources Agency on its internet website.~~

PRC § 33232 (e). “Grassland Focus Area” means the area of land surrounding the Grassland Ecological Area that is recognized as a buffer of agricultural and other working landscapes that are compatible with wetland habitats and functions, *as described and mapped in the Merced County 2030 General Plan, excluding any lands lying outside of Merced County. The Grassland Focus Area additionally includes certain lands east of State Highway 99, and described as follows: Beginning at the intersection of State Highway 99 and Le Grand Road, said point lying on the eastern boundary of the Grassland Focus Area, the Grassland Focus Area boundary extending easterly along Le Grand Road for 6 miles; thence southerly along Minturn Road for 1 mile; thence easterly along Wade Avenue for 3 miles; thence northerly along Clausen Road for 5 miles; thence easterly along East Childs Avenue for 1.6 miles to its intersection with the eastern boundary of Merced County; thence, southerly exactly along the eastern boundary of Merced County to the southeastern corner of Merced County; thence westerly along the Merced County southern boundary for 12.25 circuitous miles to the point having geographic coordinates Latitude 37°9'22.42" North, Longitude 120°15'30.45" West; thence northwesterly on a bearing of N 30°30'00" W for 0.75 miles to the point having geographic coordinates Latitude 37°9'55.93" North, Longitude 120°15'55.31" West; thence northerly for 0.37 miles to the intersection of Harvey Pettit Road; thence westerly along Harvey Pettit Road for 2.4 miles to the intersection of State Highway 99, where said boundary fully rejoins the alignment of the Grassland Focus Area.* ~~designated on, and specifically set forth in, the map called “Grassland Ecological Area Conservancy,” dated _____ 2026, and placed on file with the Secretary of State. The map shall be publicly posted by the Natural Resources Agency on its internet website.~~

PRC § 33233.5. *The Grassland Ecological Area and Grassland Focus Area as defined in this division shall be precisely delineated on an official map of the conservancy, to be produced and maintained by the conservancy board. The map shall be publicly posted by the Natural Resources Agency on its internet website.*

Amendment 2 – define “region”

PRC § 33240. The board shall establish and maintain a headquarters office within the *County of Merced* ~~region~~. The conservancy may rent or own real and personal property and equipment pursuant to applicable statutes and regulations.

PRC § 33245. The board shall hold its regular meetings within, or near, the *County of Merced* ~~region~~.

Amendment 3 – clarify criteria for landowner member of GEAC board

PRC § 33234 (a)(1)(E)(iv). One member appointed by the Governor who is a landowner in the Grassland *Focus Ecological* Area and owns or operates an agricultural operation.

Amendment 4 – update list of state conservancies

Government Code § 12805 (a). The Resources Agency is hereby renamed the Natural Resources Agency. The Natural Resources Agency consists of the departments of Forestry and Fire Protection, Conservation, Fish and Wildlife, Parks and Recreation, and Water Resources; the State Lands Commission; the Colorado River Board; the San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission; the Central Valley Flood Protection Board; the Energy Resources Conservation and Development Commission; the Wildlife Conservation Board; the Delta Protection Commission; Exposition Park; the California Science Center; the California African American Museum; the Native American Heritage Commission; the California Conservation Corps; the California Coastal Commission; the State Coastal Conservancy; the California Tahoe Conservancy; the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy; the Coachella Valley Mountains Conservancy; the San Joaquin River Conservancy; the San Gabriel and Lower Los Angeles Rivers and Mountains Conservancy; the Baldwin Hills *and Urban Watersheds* Conservancy; the San Diego River Conservancy; ~~and~~ the Sierra Nevada Conservancy; *the Salton Sea Conservancy; and the Grassland Ecological Area Conservancy.*

- 4) **Arguments in support.** GWD, the sponsor of this bill, writes that “despite international recognition and federal/state investments in conservation easements, significant land benefiting wildlife is outside of the Grassland Wildlife Management Area, the [USFWS] conservation easement acquisition boundary. Additional pressures are resulting in land conversion or fallowing due to groundwater pumping restrictions and economic pressures. . . . [GEAC] would provide critical planning, restoration, and easement resources to GEA and surrounding GFA, and create a sustainable investment in wildlife connectivity corridors between the Central Coast Range and Sierra Nevada Foothills.”
- 5) **Double referral.** This bill was also referred to the Assembly Natural Resources Committee where it passed by a vote of 14-0 on June 22, 2026.
- 6) **Related legislation.** AB 2216 (Aguiar-Curry) of the current legislative session renames the Delta Conservancy the Valley, Lake, and Delta Conservancy and extends the conservancy’s jurisdiction. AB 2216 is pending in the Senate Appropriations Committee.

AB 2566 (Soria) of the current legislative session would have created the Huron Hawk Conservancy. AB 2566 was held in the Assembly Appropriations Committee.

AB 721 (Soria) of 2025 would have created the Huron Hawk Conservancy. AB 721 was held in the Assembly Appropriations Committee.

SB 287 (Arreguin) of 2025 would have created the California Trails Conservancy Program within CNRA. SB 287 was held in the Senate Appropriations Committee.

AB 3147 (Garcia) of 2024 would have created the California Trails Conservancy Program within CNRA. AB 3147 was held in the Assembly Appropriations Committee.

SB 583 (Padilla), Chapter 771, Statutes of 2024, creates the Salton Sea Conservancy.

SB 1122 (Allen), Chapter 718, Statutes of 2022, extends the San Gabriel and Lower Los Angeles Rivers and Mountains Conservancy's jurisdiction.

SB 1052 (Kamlager), Chapter 714, Statutes of 2022, renames the Baldwin Hills Conservancy the Baldwin Hills and Urban Watersheds Conservancy and extends the conservancy's jurisdiction.

SB 208 (Dahle), Chapter 182, Statutes of 2021, extends the Sierra Nevada Conservancy's jurisdiction.

SB 1390 (Correa), Chapter 562, Statutes of 2014, establishes the Santa Ana River Conservancy Program within the State Coastal Conservancy.

SB 1-7x (Simitian), Chapter 5, Statutes of 2009–2010 Seventh Extraordinary Session, creates the Delta Conservancy.

AB 2600 (Leslie), Chapter 726, Statutes of 2004, creates the Sierra Nevada Conservancy.

AB 2156 (Kehoe), Chapter 574, Statutes of 2002, creates the San Diego River Conservancy.

SB 2086 (Johnston) of 2000 would have required the Secretary of the Resources Agency to complete a feasibility study for a Central Valley Conservancy. SB 2086 was vetoed by Governor Gray Davis.

SB 1625 (Murray), Chapter 428, Statutes of 2000, creates the Baldwin Hills Conservancy.

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:

Support

Grassland Water District (sponsor)
Audubon California
Backcountry Hunters and Anglers, California Chapter
California Waterfowl Association
Defenders of Wildlife
Delta Waterfowl
Ducks Unlimited
Environmental Defense Fund
Point Blue Conservation Science
River Partners

San Joaquin Valley Water Collaborative Action Program
The Nature Conservancy

Opposition

None on file

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