

Ranking Member Mike Braun

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U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON AGING

# FEEDING THE FUTURE

Farmers are America's oldest workforce.  
How are we preparing for the next  
generation?



# AGING FARMERS AT A *GLANCE*

**58** is the median age of farmers, the **oldest** workforce in America

You are more likely to meet a farmer in America over **65** than under **44**

**40%** of the nation's farmland is owned by farmers **65 and older**.

As these farmers retire over the next 20 years, it is expected that around **350 million acres** of farmland will change hands.

It is estimated that the global population will increase by over **two billion by 2050**, meaning farmers will need to produce **70%** more food to meet demand.

At a Senate Aging hearing in Indiana, **Ranking Member Braun heard directly from farmers** about how many are reaching retirement, but the next generation is not following in their footsteps.

To ensure **America's future in agriculture**, Congress and the federal government must adopt policies that address the following challenges:

1. the need to **attract and retain farmers**
2. the **demand for increased agriculture innovation**
3. the need to **streamline regulations and protect domestic agriculture**

## **American farmers are aging**

Farmers are the oldest workforce in the country. According to the last United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Census of Agriculture, the median age of a farmer is 57.5 years.[1] This is more than two years older than any other job.[2] Farming for generations was considered a family calling, but today one-third of farmers and ranchers are over the age of 65 and their children are less likely to continue the tradition.[3]

From growing food and medicine to raw material for clothing and textiles, farming is vital. Today two million farms are spread across rural America, a loss of 200,000 since 2007.[4] Similarly, farmland has been declining. Since 2002, the United States lost more than 40 million acres of farmland, fertile ground that has been repurposed for commercial buildings, housing, and other purposes.[5] As we grapple with these ongoing trends, a relatively new phenomenon is now taking us by storm: foreign adversaries strategically targeting the nation's fertile farm ground. Family farmers are left struggling just to survive as they face this along with everyday economic stressors and ever-growing industry overregulation. These factors drive the next generation away from farming entirely.

The aging of farmers on top of regulatory, economic, and foreign pressures puts the future of the nation and world's food supply in peril. It is estimated that the global population will increase by over two billion by 2050, meaning farmers will need to produce 70 percent more food to meet demand.[6] American farms are incredibly productive, and people all over the world rely on American farmers for sustenance. One American farm feeds 166 people each year at home and abroad.[7] In 2021, America's farms contributed \$164.7 billion to gross domestic product.[8] Farms directly employ 2.6 million people and open the door to nearly 10 times this number of jobs in other agricultural and food-related sectors.[9] With one out of three farmers preparing to retire in the next decade, we need a plan to feed the future.

As Ranking Member of the United States Senate Special Committee on Aging, Senator Mike Braun is leading the charge to support the nearly 300,000 farmers, ranchers, and agricultural managers who are over the age of 65 and make farming more appealing for new generations.[10] America cannot afford to stand back and watch as the nation's agricultural industry reaches a tipping point, and the future of the nation's food supply chain looms in jeopardy. Congress and the federal government must act proactively to retain and attract new farmers, invest in researching agricultural innovations to increase per acre yields, and prioritize domestic agricultural production before the nation becomes dependent on foreign markets for its food supply.

## Challenge 1: Attracting and Retaining Farmers

Today, you are more likely to meet a farmer over the age of 65 than under the age of 44. [11] Most farmers have been in the industry for more than a decade, and over 60 percent of them work another job in addition to farming.[12] Demand for agricultural products and farmers is expected to grow over the next decade. It is estimated that there will be 85,600 openings for farmers, ranchers, and other agricultural managers by 2031.[13] Despite this demand, operators of small farms are expected to continue to exit the sector and the next generation is not filling the gap. Among the many factors contributing to this are reduced earning potential due to inflation and increased input costs, access to healthcare, a lack of pathways into the sector, and punitive laws that make transferring the family farm to the next generation difficult.

Most farms operate akin to small businesses and are often family enterprises. The demands of tending the land, marketing and selling your crop, purchasing inputs for the next season, and maintaining your equipment require time and skill that typically result in at least two members of the family needing to be on the farm full-time during the planting and harvesting seasons. Ranking Member Braun has heard from Hoosier farmers that consistently employing two family members to work full-time on the farm presents a challenge though, as at least one adult member of the family usually needs to work “off-farm” to secure healthcare and retirement benefits. While the median annual wage for farmers, ranchers, and other agricultural managers is estimated to be \$75,760, incomes vary each year due to fluctuations in product prices and input costs.[14]

Historic inflation has ravaged the economy fueled by President Biden’s reckless spending spree. Farmers and ranchers have felt this through soaring input costs: seed costs, labor, insurance, taxes, land values, cash rents, fertilizer, fuel, chemical, animal feed, machinery, and interest expenses. From 2020 to 2023 the total cost to raise crops and livestock increased more than \$100 billion, to an all-time high of \$460 billion.[15] In USDA’s first 2024 cost-of-production forecast, it is estimated that input costs will remain elevated into next year’s growing season and that several field crops could have prices below breakeven levels this year and into next.[16] Farmers need Congress and the Biden Administration to stop the cycle of reckless policies and spending that are fueling inflation and destabilizing input costs. Ranking Member Braun’s *Fight Inflation Through Balanced Budgets Act (S.575)* would block Congress from adopting budgets that are not balanced and prevent spending above amounts authorized by Congress. The *Reduce Exacerbated Inflation Negatively Impacting the Nation Act (S.715)* would require the administration to publish the inflationary impact of executive actions before enacting them. With uncertainty caused by soaring input costs comes income uncertainty. It should come as no surprise that prospective farmers and ranchers are deterred from entering the industry. However, there are steps Congress can take to ensure young people have the skills necessary to navigate this uncertainty and run a successful farm.

At a Senate Special Committee on Aging field hearing, Ranking Member Braun questioned Tom McKinney, Owner of McKinney Farms in Indiana, about what the future of farming looks like when the average age of a farmer is older than any other profession and it is hard to get new farmers interested in farming due to costs. Tom highlighted how more needs to be done to teach young men and women who are interested in farming, but have no opportunity to learn the craft. He explained how his operation has adopted an apprentice program where he teaches and helps the younger generation get started in farming. Without these types of programs where the older generation of farmers pass their skills to the next generation, Tom fears that family farms will continue to decline.



Sen. Braun visits students taking a CDL training course at West Washington High School (04/2023)



Sen. Braun tours a brand new greenhouse and aquaponics unit at Tipton High School that boosts interest in agriculture among students and provides hands-on experience (01/2023)

While some potential farmers and ranchers turn to associate or bachelor's degrees to gain the skills needed to run a farm, most gain experience growing up on a family farm or working as an agricultural worker before running a farm.[17] Congress can do more to create career pathways into the agriculture sector by promoting apprenticeships, commercial driver's license (CDL) programs, diesel service technology, welding, or agricultural science certificates for middle and high schoolers with the same ferocity as it currently emphasizes four-year degrees. This will open doors for non-traditional students to enter agriculture and equip them with the skills necessary for a rewarding career.

Earlier this year, Senator Braun and Senator Kaine introduced the *Jumpstarting Our Businesses by Supporting Students (JOBS) Act* (S.161), which would expand Pell Grant eligibility to high quality, short-term job training programs like agriculture certificate programs, welding, diesel mechanics, and CDL training.

Additionally, Senator Braun's *Training America's Workforce Act* (S.1213), introduced with Senators Thune, Tim Scott, and Tuberville, would make it easier for businesses and organizations to provide employees industry-specific credentialing through industry-recognized apprenticeship programs. Through these experiences and programs, the next generation of farmers can learn the valuable skills of farm management, including factors such as risk management, marketing, diversification, and production efficiency, while avoiding the debt that comes with a four-year degree.[18] These farm management skills will also help increase income for farmers and ranchers.

While these bills will help train the next generation, more needs to be done to retain current family farming operations. The current federal estate tax is particularly punitive towards family farms and ranches. This is a tax on property transferred from deceased persons to their heirs, which can lead to some families being forced to sell land, equipment, or even the entire farm due to the death of a family member.[19] While the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017 increased the estate and gift tax exclusion to \$12.92 million per person or \$25.84 million per married couple in 2023, this provision expires at the end of 2025.[20] This adds additional uncertainty and costs for farms and ranches. Ranking Member Braun joined Senator Thune to introduce the *Death Tax Repeal Act* (S.1108), which would permanently repeal the federal estate tax and ensure family farms can be passed down to the next generation.[21]

*"One of the greatest problems that flew under the radar was the discussion about eliminating stepped-up basis when a parent dies. That would be an unmitigated disaster for our entire nation, because you cannot reinvent the American farmer... If you take away stepped-up basis, you can forget about having family farms."*

*-Tom Mckinney, Owner of McKinney Farms on Stepped-Up Basis*

Unfortunately, President Biden and Democrats have pushed to increase taxes on farmers and ranchers. In President Biden's Fiscal Year 2024 budget, he proposed \$77 billion in estate tax increases and to eliminate "stepped-up basis".[22] Under current law, when a family farm is passed down to the next generation, a capital gains tax is not imposed on the farm or its new owners.[23] Instead, the tax basis in the farm is "stepped-up" to fair market value. This prevents a large capital gains tax bill on the growth in the farm's value. If this were eliminated many farms and ranches would be forced to pay tax on appreciated gains, including inflation, despite not receiving any actual gains.[24] In a letter to President Biden opposing this proposal, Ranking Member Braun and the entire Senate Republican caucus highlighted how Texas A&M found that "98 percent of the representative farms in its 30-state database would be impacted by a proposal to eliminate the benefit of the step-up in basis, with average additional tax liabilities totaling \$726,104 per farm." [25] Congress must continue to push back against any proposals to increase the estate tax or eliminate "stepped-up basis". These proposals would be disastrous at a time when farms and ranches are increasingly changing hands and being passed down to the next generation.

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO ATTRACT AND RETAIN FARMERS

To increase financial certainty for farmers by reducing inflation and input costs, Congress should:

- Pass the *Fight Inflation Through Balanced Budgets Act* (S.575), which would require Congress to follow balanced-budget rules.
- Pass the *Reduce Exacerbated Inflation Negatively Impacting the Nation Act* (S.715), which would require the administration to publish the inflationary impact of executive actions before enacting them.

To train the next generation of farmers, Congress should

- Pass the *Jumpstarting Our Businesses by Supporting Students (JOBS) Act* (S.161), which would expand Pell Grant eligibility to high quality, short-term job training programs like agriculture certificate programs.
- Pass the *Training America's Workforce Act* (S.1213), which would make it easier for the agriculture industry to provide employees industry-specific credentialing through industry-recognized apprenticeship programs.

To ensure that family farms pass to the next generation of farmers, Congress should:

- Pass the *Death Tax Repeal Act* (S.1108), which would permanently repeal the federal estate tax.
- Fight the Biden Administration's proposals to increase the estate tax and eliminate "stepped-up basis".

## Challenge 2: Increasing Agricultural Innovation

The nation has faced changing land use priorities for decades, as the number of acres of farmland has dwindled. According to USDA [26], in 2022, farms accounted for 893 million acres of land, down from 915 million acres just ten years earlier.[i] The country has been losing farmland to commercial, residential, and industrial development, trends that are expected to continue due to record housing shortages and stifling economic circumstances. The aging of farmers puts a further strain on the system, as farmers 65 and older own approximately 40 percent of the country's farmland.[27] As these farmers retire over the next 20 years, it is expected that around 350 million acres of farmland will change hands, possibly for other purposes.[28]

The loss of American farmland coupled with increasing input costs puts a strain on farmers' bottom lines and tests the limits of the nation's food supply chain. Tasked to produce more with less, we must invest in agricultural innovation to meet the challenge ahead. Agriscience research and development has helped to increase per acre yields, improve conservation efforts, and expand markets. Ranking Member Braun has championed policies to jumpstart innovation in organic crop management, new agricultural markets, conservation, and plant biostimulants.

As small farmers struggle to stay afloat, areas where there has been substantial growth in demand is for organic crops and industrial hemp.[29] These markets offer new profit avenues for small farmers and are an area of untapped potential for researchers. Ranking Member Braun and Senator John Fetterman are working proactively to capitalize on this opportunity with the *Streamlining Organic Research Act* (S.2756), which would direct the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to renew its research into organic farming and consider the market opportunities that organic produce offers farmers. In 2021, 697 USDA certified organic farms in Indiana earned \$1.9 million and the market for organic crops only continues to grow.[30]

Another growing area for research is conservation, which can increase profitability and improve resilience. Ranking Member Braun's bipartisan Growing Climate Solutions Act, which was passed into law in 2022, reduces barriers for farmers that want to voluntarily enter markets that have credits for greenhouse gas emission reductions, allowing them to profit from carbon sequestration on their land. This Congress, Ranking Member Braun is leading the *Increased TSP Access Act* (S.1400) with Senators Bennet and Marshall. Currently, there is a shortage in Technical Service Providers (TSPs) that help farmers access and implement USDA conservation programs. This in turn helps improve the farmer's operation. This bill would help address the TSP shortage by streamlining the TSP certification process and ensuring TSPs are paid the fair market rate. Farmers are the nation's oldest conservationists, and they appreciate every opportunity to learn and improve their farming practices to protect and enrich their land.

Many farmers are also looking for opportunities to expand into new agricultural markets that have high demand due to recent innovations or even changes in laws. One major export market that many small farmers haven't been able to access is industrial hemp, which was legalized for commercial production in the 2018 Farm Bill. This crop can be used for creating everything from textile fiber and biodegradable mulch to paper products or homebuilding materials. The barrier to entry for many is a decades old Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) regulation. Ranking Member Braun's Industrial Hemp Act (S.980) would exempt grain and fiber hemp producers from THC regulations and background checks, making it easier for small farmers to expand into this market.

Finally, the demand for traditional produce remains ever-present, but with fewer acres of farmland in the U.S., rising property taxes, and increasing input costs, it's more critical than ever that farmers have good crop years. Just a little too much rain before good root structures have developed can wash out a whole field of soybeans for the season. Or a snap freeze in late spring may kill half the corn crop, substantially decreasing per acre yields and possibly forcing a farmer to rely on crop insurance to make ends meet that year.

Plant biostimulants, microorganisms applied to plants to enhance nutrition efficiency or stress tolerance, can help protect crops. They offer a variety of benefits to crops, including increased yield, resistance to abiotic stress factors like freeze or drought, improved root structure, and increased nutrient uptake and use efficiency. However, biostimulants don't fit neatly into existing regulatory frameworks. Consequently, plant biostimulants are being regulated under frameworks created for other products, such as pesticides, which do not align with their use of function.

To fix this dilemma that slows biostimulants from getting to farmers, Ranking Member Braun and Representative Jim Baird introduced the bipartisan Plant Biostimulant Act (S.802). This bill would direct the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to adopt a clear definition for plant biostimulants and ensure they are not mistakenly regulated by EPA under frameworks for other products. Clarifying the definition and framework for plant biostimulants will provide guidance to companies and universities interested in pursuing additional research and development. Too often existing regulatory frameworks act as a barrier to innovation; Congress and the Biden Administration must do more to reduce these hurdles.

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO INCREASE AGRICULTURAL INNOVATION

To open new profit avenues for farmers, Congress should:

- Pass the *Streamlining Organic Research Act* (S.2756), which would direct USDA to renew its research into organic farming and consider the market opportunities that organic produce offers farmers.
- Pass the *Industrial Hemp Act* (S.980), which would exempt grain and fiber hemp producers from THC regulations and background checks, making it easier for small farmers to expand into this market.

To remove barriers and assist in innovation, Congress should:

- Pass the *Increased TSP Access Act* (S.1400), which would help farmers improve their operations by increasing access and implementation of USDA conservation programs through Technical Service Providers (TSP).
- Pass the *Plant Biostimulant Act* (S.802), which would direct EPA to adopt a clear definition for plant biostimulants that increase yields, and ensure they are not mistakenly regulated by EPA under frameworks for other products.

## Challenge 3: Streamlining Regulations and Protecting Domestic Agriculture

While preparing a new workforce and investing in innovation will help secure the agricultural supply chain into the future, neither will meet the immediate needs of farmers or consumers. Today's farmers are overburdened by a federal regulatory system that often relies on questionable science, lacks coordination between agencies, doesn't accurately take into consideration costs and benefits, and lacks transparency. As a result, productivity and yield can be harmed, and domestic agricultural supply chains suffer. Congress and the Biden Administration must stop overregulating the industry and start prioritizing domestic agricultural production.

Since Ranking Member Braun's election to the Senate, Waters of the United States (WOTUS) regulations have been the most consistent concern raised by Hoosier farmers. While President Trump offered temporary relief with the Navigable Waters Protection Rule (NWPR), President Biden has since repealed that rule in favor of Obama-era policies. Under the Obama-Biden WOTUS rules, farmers often do not know whether their land is regulated as a WOTUS until they are penalized by the federal government.

The request from farmers is clear. They want a rule they can understand without a team of lawyers, and that won't change with every new administration. Ranking Member Braun's *Define WOTUS Act* (S.1022), would codify a definition for WOTUS that clearly outlines what is and is not a federally regulated waterway. Furthermore, the impact of current WOTUS rules on farmers and ranchers is unclear as the Biden Administration didn't solicit feedback from farmers when drafting their rules, so Ranking Member Braun introduced the *Farmer-Informed WOTUS Act* (S.1023), which would create a panel at USDA comprised of farmers and ranchers representing different commodity and livestock associations. The panel would study the impact of WOTUS regulations on farmers and ranchers, and would be tasked with writing a report and briefing the EPA Administrator and key White House officials on its findings.

Unfortunately, WOTUS is not the only regulatory issue putting farmers at odds with the Biden Administration. Under President Biden's direction, the EPA has taken extreme steps to remove widely used pesticides and herbicides from the market. In November 2021, EPA issued new, restrictive biological evaluations under the Endangered Species Act for three herbicides.<sup>[31]</sup> These evaluations, which did not reflect crop production or soil management data, came out after many farmers had already purchased herbicides for their growing season, leaving them out of the cost for inputs they could no longer use.<sup>[32]</sup> In the current inflationary economy, purchasing products you cannot use is a cost family farms cannot afford. Moving forward, the Biden Administration should instruct the EPA to consider agronomic data and allow appropriate periods for implementation when drafting new rules.

Like the situation with the EPA, President Biden’s Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) has proposed a climate disclosure rule which would require publicly traded companies to share information about greenhouse gas (GHG) emission footprints—including GHG emissions resulting from their supply chains. If implemented this rule would force farmers—who are not within the SEC’s jurisdiction—to adopt expensive GHG monitoring and recordkeeping practices. While President Biden’s Climate Czar, John Kerry, has attacked farmers and food producers over GHG emissions, the reality is that America’s agriculture accounts for just over one percent of global emissions.[33] Overbearing emissions mandates result in deleterious consequences for farmers and agriculture. In August 2023, the Aging Committee held a field hearing in Indiana and heard firsthand from farmers about the impact of the emissions mandate.



Sen. Braun speaks at the Senate Special Committee on Aging field hearing in Indianapolis (08/2023)

In response to an outpouring of concern from the farming community about the impact the SEC emissions rule may have, Ranking Member Braun teamed up with Ranking Member of the Senate Agriculture Committee Senator Boozman to introduce the *Protect Farmers from the SEC Act* (S.391).

This bill would prohibit the SEC from requiring companies to disclose GHG emissions related to the production of agricultural products. However, efforts to prevent the Biden Administration from overburdening farmers are not enough.

There are simple common-sense solutions Congress can pass now to increase the purchase of domestic agriculture and help bring farmers through this costly period of inflation. For example, the national school lunch program should be supporting American farmers—not shipping in food from China. Ranking Member Braun’s *American Food for American Schools Act* (S.2301) would provide robust structure to the National School Lunch Program’s (NSLP) Buy America language. It would codify limited exceptions to the requirement and ensure the nation’s students are receiving safer, healthier food that supports the American economy.

This concept of ensuring American tax dollars are spent on American goods should extend to international food assistance programs, which is why Ranking Member Braun introduced the *American Farmers Feed the World Act* (S. 2862). This bill would require the USDA Food for Peace (FFP) program to reserve at least half of its budget to purchase American grown commodities.

While we work to ensure that federal programs support American grown commodities, we must also do more to protect fertile land from foreign intrusion. Foreign entities own more than 40 million acres of agriculture land in the United States—China holds 384,000 acres of farming land.[34] Chinese ownership of American farmland increased more than 20-fold in the past decade. To end this practice, Ranking Member Braun led a group of bipartisan Senators in introducing the *Protecting America's Agricultural Land from Foreign Harm Act of 2023* (S.926). This bill would prohibit foreign adversaries, such as China, Russia, Iran and North Korea from leasing or purchasing both public and private agricultural land on U.S. soil. Foreign intrusion will increasingly be an issue as aging farmers retire and their farmland changes hands. This legislation would go a long way to prevent top foreign adversaries from buying up American farmland.



**FOX NEWS channel**

## **Bipartisan group of senators pushes to ban China from buying U.S. farmland**

**A group of senators led by Sen. Mike Braun, R-Ind., on Wednesday introduced legislation to prevent people associated with the governments of America's foreign adversaries from buying agricultural land in the United States.**

From regulations related to water and emissions to pesticides and the environment, U.S. regulations in agriculture should protect Americans. Regulations should protect American farmers, American grown food, and American land. Both Republicans and Democrats have come together to call on the Biden Administration to cease its efforts to overregulate agriculture. Both sides of the aisle have also come together to protect American grown commodities and American farmland. Congress should act quickly to take these common-sense steps to protect small to medium sized farms and agricultural supply chains overall.

# RECOMMENDATIONS TO STREAMLINE REGULATIONS AND PROTECT DOMESTIC AGRICULTURE

To reduce the overall burden of the regulatory system, the Biden Administration should:

- Rely on science and feedback from farmers, coordinate between agencies, consider costs and benefits, and increase transparency.

To protect farmers from two of the Biden Administration's most harmful regulations, Congress should:

- Pass the *Define WOTUS Act* (S.1022), which would codify a definition for WOTUS that clearly outlines what is and is not a federally regulated waterway.
- Pass the *Farmer-Informed WOTUS Act* (S.1023), which would create a panel at USDA to study the impact of WOTUS comprised of farmers and ranchers representing different commodity and livestock associations.
- Pass the *Protect Farmers from the SEC Act* (S.391), which would prohibit the SEC from requiring companies to disclose greenhouse gas emissions related to the production of agricultural products.

To protect domestic agriculture and support American farmers, Congress should:

- Pass the *American Food for American Schools Act* (S.2301), which would ensure the National School Lunch Program's (NSLP) is purchasing safer and healthier food from American farmers instead of China.
- Pass the *American Farmers Feed the World Act* (S.2862), which would require the USDA Food for Peace (FFP) program to reserve at least half of its budget to purchase American grown commodities.
- Pass the *Protecting America's Agricultural Land from Foreign Harm Act* (S.926), which would prohibit foreign adversaries, such as China, Russia, Iran and North Korea from leasing or purchasing both public and private agricultural land on U.S. soil.

## Conclusion

American farmers have always been known for their work ethic, often on the fields from dawn to dusk, and for their resiliency, never failing to give up in the face of an ever-growing mountain of challenges. Farmers face major challenges every day such as drought, floods, pests, plant disease and more. Regulations and other policies should make it easier for farmers to survive. Instead, reckless spending and regulations have increased costs, introduced complex webs of hard-to-follow rules, and made farming an increasingly unwelcoming occupation just as the greatest generation of farmers are set to retire.

Despite the hostile regulatory environment in agriculture, American farmers are adapting. They are embracing new research and technologies to meet growing demands. Plant biostimulants, organic farming, and farmer-led conservation efforts offer promising paths to increase innovation in agriculture. Congress and the Biden Administration should take steps to advance such policy that would help, rather than hinder food production.

Federal policy that supports farmers will help to retain farmers and make the profession attractive to young people. The prohibitive cost of healthcare represents a barrier to entry for new people, and a burden for farming families who are forced to work second jobs just to obtain healthcare. With one out of three farmers over the age of 65, we must do more to support the healthcare needs of these farmers and reduce healthcare costs overall to make farming a viable profession for those who want to enter.

In addition to addressing healthcare costs, we must do more to support apprenticeships and train the next generation of farmers. The food supply, select manufacturing industries, and even national security hinge on the future of farming. In the face of a mountain of challenges, one thing is clear: the American farmer is resilient. It is time for federal policy to reflect the American spirit and support farmers today as well as generations to come.

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