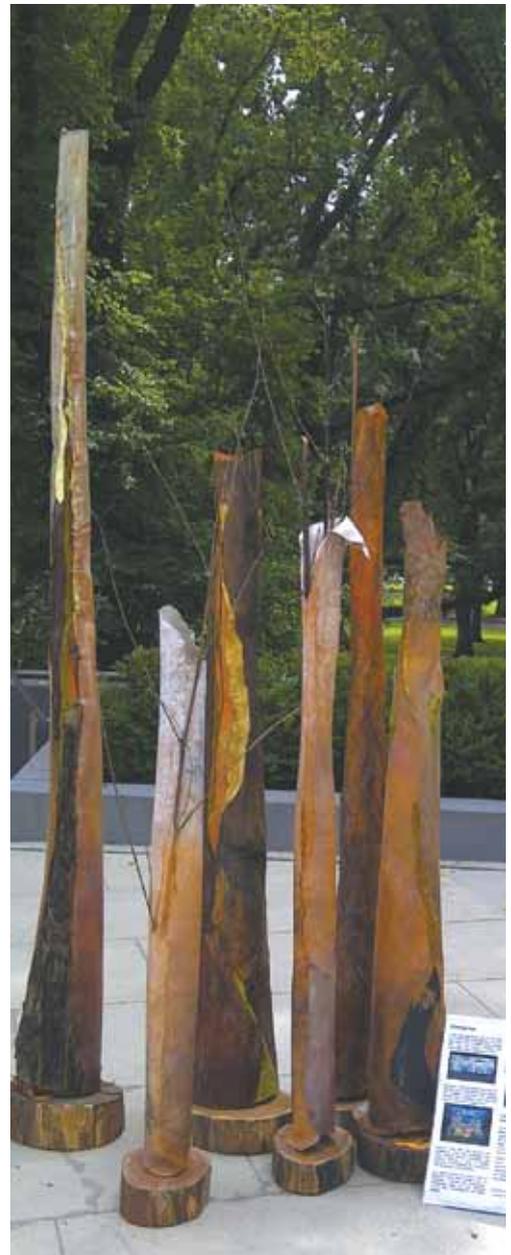




VICTORIAN BUSHFIRE RECOVERY FIVE YEAR REPORT

February 2014



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Front cover (clockwise): Whittlesea Community Garden; From the Forest by Catherine Blakey on display at Melbourne Museum February 2013; Wandong Skate Park; Kyneton Memorial Mosaic; Dederang Primary School students with the Alpine Community Quilt Project.

Contents page

New Life by Bruno Torfs, Marysville; Blacksmith's Tree – Leaves and flowers.

Back cover

Grey Fantail on Lyrebird sculpture – Tarra Valley Road, Gippsland.

PREMIER'S FOREWORD



7 February 2009 is a day that will forever be etched in the hearts and minds of all Victorians and, indeed, all Australians for the deep heartache, sadness and despair of losing 173 Victorians and seeing many Victorian communities ravaged by the horror of the Black Saturday bushfires.

This day deeply affected families, especially those who lost loved ones and their homes; and it continues to do so. Similarly, communities were devastated by the tragic loss of valuable community members, which will be everlasting.

We all remember the suffocating heat of that day, the ominous winds, and hearing of the tragedy that was unfolding across our State.

With this unfolding tragedy, we witnessed the heroic efforts of emergency services personnel – our CFA, DEPI and MFB firefighters, police, paramedics, health workers and SES members.

It was a day like no other where Victorians came together to support each other – to fight for lives and homes.

It was a day when all Victorians stood shoulder to shoulder with affected families and communities to begin the task of rebuilding and to support those families who had suffered the worst losses imaginable.

Like all Victorians I am proud of the way State, Commonwealth and local governments worked alongside communities and local organisations to provide support and to rebuild in the wake of the tragedy.

The thoughts and prayers of all Victorians remain as strong today, as they were five years ago, for the lives lost and for the lives that changed forever because of Black Saturday.

But, importantly, much has also been achieved and learnt.

This Report provides a summary of the recovery process over the past five years, including a final progress report on the actions outlined in the October 2009 Rebuilding Together Plan.

This plan was developed with significant contributions from 33 Community Recovery Committees, whose members have played a leading role in successfully delivering these recovery initiatives.

I am pleased to report that 68 out of 70 actions are now complete and the remaining two are on track to be completed.

In addition, the Victorian Coalition Government is actively implementing all of the recommendations of the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission.

The Victorian Government has also supported additional initiatives, such as the establishment of the Fire Recovery Unit and the Bushfire Buy-back Scheme, which are summarised in this Report.

We will never forget what happened on Black Saturday. We will continue to cherish the memories of loved ones lost, we will continue to build and grow affected communities and support those who are still suffering.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Denis Napthine". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

The Hon Dr Denis Napthine MP
Premier of Victoria

PROGRESS ON RECOVERY ACTIONS

INTRODUCTION

The 2009 Victorian bushfires caused loss of life and destruction on a scale that required an extensive relief and recovery response across all levels of government.

In recognition of this impact, the Victorian and Commonwealth Governments established the Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority (VBRRA) on 10 February 2009 to coordinate the relief and recovery effort.

VBRRA, in partnership with many other responsible government and non-government organisations, delivered early assistance to fire-affected people and communities, including immediate financial assistance, temporary housing, property clean-up, case management services, community service hubs, re-instatement of essential services, business relief and support to farmers.

The devastation of the bushfires inspired overwhelming generosity from donors around the world. In response, the Victorian Bushfire Appeal Fund (VBAF) was established on 8 February 2009 by the Australian Red Cross in partnership with the Victorian and Commonwealth Governments to raise funds to support the individuals and communities affected.

When the Appeal officially closed on 17 April 2009, \$379 million had been raised. With interest, that figure now stands at over \$400 million. Around 80 per cent of this funding has been allocated to individuals and families impacted by the fires, with the remaining 20 per cent dedicated to funding an array of community projects.

In October 2009, VBRRA released the Rebuilding Together Plan (the Plan), which set out further steps for recovery and rebuilding with funding from the State and Federal Governments as well as VBAF. The Plan outlined a series of initiatives identified by local communities to assist in their social and economic recovery.

VBRRA provided regular reports on recovery progress during its operation, including progress on the Plan, and issued a Legacy Report in June 2011.

The following information builds on these earlier VBRRA reports to provide a final progress report against the Plan. It also includes additional recovery activities undertaken by Government, VBAF and non-government agencies.

PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES

The Plan identified a number of initiatives to provide health and wellbeing support, temporary housing assistance and support for the re-establishment of community infrastructure.

People and Communities Rebuilding Together Initiatives Agreed	People and Communities Rebuilding Together Initiatives Delivered
17	17

Achievements from Rebuilding Together – People and Communities

Community Project Initiative (CPI)

In 2009, VBAF allocated \$43 million towards the delivery of projects identified as part of the locally developed community recovery plans.

Projects supported included community and recreation facilities, community strengthening activities and capacity building initiatives.

CPI projects funded	CPI projects completed to date
223	194

Red Cross Outreach Program

Through the Red Cross Personal Support Outreach program, volunteers have visited 5,948 properties, speaking to 2,678 people and connecting 417 to a variety of support services.

Red Cross volunteers have also provided personal support at a range of community events including anniversaries, Family Fun Days and community forums, offering a listening ear, information and links to other services where needed.

Additional Support – People and Communities

Fire Recovery Unit (FRU)

The FRU was established within Regional Development Victoria in July 2011 following the closure of VBRRA to continue to support people and communities impacted by the fires.

The FRU:

- provides information and connection to services for bushfire-affected people;
- supports communities to access and manage medium term VBAF funding; and
- supports key events and milestones.

VBAF Medium to Long Term Projects

In 2012, VBAF committed \$21 million to support medium and long-term recovery. This included additional community projects, the commencement and continuation of state-wide psychological support services and the Community On-Ground Assistance Program (COGA).

VBAF has also supported the establishment of community foundations in the Alpine/Indigo and Mitchell Shires, the Kinglake Ranges, Marysville, and a community trust in Strathewen to continue local support for up to ten years.

RECONSTRUCTION

The Plan identified a number of priority projects to restore or rebuild assets and facilities identified by communities as being essential to their recovery.

Reconstruction Rebuilding Together Initiatives Agreed	Reconstruction Rebuilding Together Initiatives Delivered
37	36 ¹

Achievements from Rebuilding Together – Reconstruction

Marysville Police Station

The Marysville police station was re-opened in July 2012 on the existing Murchison Street site.

The new station incorporates a range of environmentally sustainable design initiatives, including rainwater harvesting facilities and a photovoltaic solar energy system which contributes to the station’s electricity needs.

¹ The outstanding project is the Kinglake Ranges, Flowerdale and Toolangi Plan and Design Framework. The Framework was completed in December 2013 and is currently with Murrindindi Shire Council for consideration and adoption.

Callignee Community Centre

Since opening in January 2011, the multi-purpose Callignee Community Centre has become a well patronised community facility providing a home for local groups to meet, including the Country Women’s Association, playgroup, the gardening club and a stitch and chat group.

The facility has also become a venue for social events like engagements, weddings and Christmas parties and is used by local government agencies and businesses for training events and forums.

Additional support – Reconstruction

Bushfire Recovery Community Infrastructure Program

The Bendigo and Adelaide Bank Community Enterprise Foundation and Regional Development Victoria came together in April 2009 to establish the \$4 million Bushfire Recovery Community Infrastructure Program.

A total of 20 projects have been supported since the establishment of the fund, including the Kinglake Arts History Walk and the Strzelecki Walking Track.

LOCAL ECONOMIES

The Plan recognised that supporting business and economic development was critical for rebuilding local economies.

Local Economies Rebuilding Together Initiatives Agreed	Local Economies Rebuilding Together Initiatives Delivered
11	11

Achievements from Rebuilding Together – Local Economies

Small Business Mentoring Service

Small Business Mentors began working with fire-affected businesses soon after the fires, assisting them to access support and get their businesses operating.

Free mentoring services continued to be available until mid-2012 and were provided to more than 630 businesses.

Restoring National Parks

National Parks are important economic assets for regional communities. Since the Plan was released iconic sites in the Kinglake National Park have been reopened, including the Jehosaphat Gully Picnic Ground and Masons Falls.

The Bowden Spur mountain bike trail, completed in June 2012, has added a new attraction to the Park to draw visitors to the Kinglake Ranges.

Additional support – Local Economies

Marysville Economic Recovery

In July 2011, the Government allocated almost \$7 million to the Marysville and Triangle Economic Recovery Package and the Marysville Surrounds Tourism & Events Program.

To date these initiatives have supported:

- 35 promotional events;
- 14 applications for interest rate subsidies for new business investment;
- a tripling of visitors to the Visitor Information Centre between 2011 and 2013; and
- the launch of the Visit Marysville App.

Construction of the new \$28 million Vibe Hotel and Conference Centre, a key initiative in the economic recovery of Marysville, remains on track for completion in Spring 2014.

ENVIRONMENT

The Plan included initiatives to address environmental problems caused by the fires and support farmers and landholders.

Environment Rebuilding Together Initiatives Agreed	Environment Rebuilding Together Initiatives Delivered
5	4 ²

2 The Plan committed funding to stabilisation works in parks and forests to allow them to re-open. Statutory planning approvals are currently being sought for works at Toorourrong Reservoir Park, with work expected to commence in the second half of 2014. Works at all other sites under this initiative have been completed.

Achievements from Rebuilding Together – Environment

Regenerating Burnt Forest

More than 4,600 hectares of Victoria’s bushfire-affected forests were re-seeded with 3,500 kilograms of seed and 100,000 seedlings, part of VicForest’s and the Department of Sustainability and Environment’s (now the Department of Environment and Primary Industries) Fire Rehabilitation and Recovery Program.

The growing seedlings helped to prevent soil and ash from being washed into creeks and rivers.



Construction of the Vibe Hotel and Conference Centre in Marysville.

HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Supporting the psychosocial recovery of individuals and communities has been a collaborative effort across three levels of government, the not-for-profit sector, community groups and VBAF. Since 2009, a range of responses have been delivered, recognising that recovery is a complex and individual process.

Victorian Bushfire Case Management Service (VBCMS)

The VBCMS operated from February 2009 until March 2011. Case managers assisted individuals and families to navigate the recovery services available such as temporary accommodation, financial assistance, material aid and psychological support.

More than 5,500 households accessed the service, which at its peak had 393 case managers working with 4,365 families.

Bushfire Community Support Program (BCSP)

The BCSP was introduced following the closure of the VBCMS. It provided community support, outreach services and a helpline between March 2011 and September 2012. Outcomes of the BCSP include case work support for 546 people, 918 callers supported through the helpline and delivery of 162 community development activities.

Workshops

Workshops with expert disaster psychologist Dr Rob Gordon continued to be well attended in communities throughout the period from 2009–2013, assisting people to understand their psychological and emotional responses to their trauma experiences.

Community Development Officers

Over the period 2009–2013, \$1.75 million was provided for Community Development Officers based in 10 councils to support a range of council and community led recovery projects. These included development of Community Recovery Plans, social and commemorative gatherings, arts and music projects and community facility redevelopment projects.



Butterfly Arts Studio founders at their new facility in Christmas Hills.

VBAF Support

Individual and Community Support

The VBAF Advisory Panel has allocated significant resources to meet the diverse needs of individuals, families and communities in their psychological and social recovery.

7,113 counselling and 12,147 wellness vouchers were issued to provide access to approved therapists for professional psychological and allied health support.

In 2012, VBAF committed to supporting a range of medium-term psychological support services. Specialist individual counselling, outreach services and support, and an online counselling service for young people were made available free of charge across the state.

Bereaved Community Support

Bereavement from a disaster of this scale required specific recovery responses. These were informed by the Bushfire Bereaved Advisory Group, which was established in 2009 and supported by VBAF until mid-2013.

VBAF funded specialised trauma and bereavement counselling programs, which provided valuable support to bereaved individuals and groups. Between 2009 and 2013, 823 clients were supported and 32 groups operated for adults and children with a total of 760 participants.

In addition to providing specialised counselling, VBAF has utilised skilled community agencies to run a program of social gatherings, getaways, grief and loss education workshops and grief education materials as well as a one-day post traumatic growth conference.

REHOUSING

More than 2,000 properties were destroyed in the 2009 Victorian bushfires, including around 1,560 principal places of residence.

Supporting fire-affected individuals and families to transition back into permanent accommodation has been a key focus of Government and VBAF since the fires.

Temporary Accommodation

In the immediate aftermath of the fires, the Government provided temporary housing assistance for people impacted by the fires.

This included the establishment of four temporary villages in Flowerdale, Kinglake, Whittlesea and Marysville, with 254 units housing 314 people at their peak. The villages played an important role in enabling people who lost their homes to continue to live within their community while they considered their permanent housing options.

Temporary Accommodation Assistance	Number of Units Occupied		
	Feb 2010	Feb 2011	Jan 2012
Flowerdale Village	28	10	0
Kinglake Village	64	31	4
Marysville Village	66	44	5
Whittlesea Village	10	5	0
Caravans	124	20	0
Public Housing	118	17	6
Movable Unit (private land)	4	2	0

Victorian Bushfire Appeal Fund (VBAF)

Around 60 per cent of VBAF funding has gone towards housing support, including over 6,677 payments made to those whose homes were destroyed or damaged in the fires.

During 2012, the Further Housing Assistance Gift provided eligible households with further assistance to help them finalise the rebuilding of their home, purchase a new home, or settle into other long-term accommodation arrangements. 235 households are being assisted through this arrangement.

Rebuilding Advisory Service (RAS)

The RAS was established in July 2009 to provide people with information, advice and assistance on rebuilding from qualified building professionals. While originally scheduled to conclude at the end of 2010, the service operated until June 2013, reflecting the longer-term needs of people rebuilding.

Households assisted by RAS	1,184
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Bushfire Planning Provisions

Amendments to the Victorian Planning Provisions have assisted people to rebuild by:

- enabling them to live in temporary accommodation on their fire-affected property while they rebuild; and
- providing fast track planning approvals for the construction of a dwelling to replace one destroyed in the 2009 bushfires.

The provisions remain in place until April 2014.

Victorian Bushfire Buy-back Scheme

Implemented during 2012, the Bushfire Buy-back Scheme provided an alternative option for those who did not wish to rebuild. Under the Scheme, the Government has purchased 116 fire-affected properties. In order to reduce future bushfire risks, purchased properties will no longer be available for residential development.

Rehousing Progress

Conducted in 2012, the Fire Recovery Housing Survey found that 87 per cent of households had rebuilt, purchased a new property, or begun the rebuilding process.

Of those households still in temporary accommodation at the time of the survey, 95 per cent have now been provided with access to assistance through the Further Housing Assistance Gift, RAS and Buy-back initiatives (as described above).

Other key rehousing statistics

Properties cleared under State clean-up contract	3,053
Steel and Concrete recycled	68,000 tonnes
Portable Toilet and Shower Units for households living in temporary accommodation on site	450

VICTORIAN BUSHFIRE APPEAL FUND

VBAF is a charitable fund overseen by an independent Advisory Panel, chaired by the Hon Pat McNamara. All funds raised have supported individuals, families and communities affected by the 2009 Victorian bushfires.

The Advisory Panel continues to oversee the Fund's operation and the allocation of funds. As at December 2013, all funds had been allocated, and 95 per cent of the funds had been distributed.

The following section provides a summary of the key categories of VBAF expenditure. Information regarding individual VBAF programs is also contained throughout the Report.

Early Support for Individuals and Families

In the first 12 months of operation, VBAF allocated \$295 million to assist individuals and families, with \$232 million disbursed in that time.

Early areas of focus for VBAF included:

- emergency and hardship support;
- support for people who lost loved ones;
- rehousing assistance for homeowners with destroyed or damaged homes, renters and boarders;
- psychological support; and
- support for young people, including scholarships and school holiday programs.

More than 22,000 payments were made to individuals and families in the first 12 months.

Medium and Long Term Support for Individuals and Families

Over the past four years, VBAF has continued to support individuals and families by completing, and in some cases extending, initiatives committed to during the first year of operation.

New support has also been developed to meet emerging needs, including:

- additional support for youth outreach, counselling and mentoring;
- assistance for people that suffered severe permanent impairment; and
- Further Housing Assistance for people and families yet to achieve permanent accommodation.



Opening of the Labertouche and District Men's Shed in December 2013.

With the addition of these new initiatives, a total of \$320 million had been made available to assist individuals and families to 31 December 2013, with \$311.5 million disbursed. Over 44,000 payments have been made.

Psychological support, support for the bereaved, and property recovery services will continue during 2014.

Support for Communities

VBAF has committed \$81 million to community initiatives, including community and memorial events, the Community Project Initiative, and Medium to Long Term Projects.

To ensure continued support for communities during the medium and long term, VBAF has assisted with the establishment of community foundations in Alpine/Indigo and Mitchell Shires, the Kinglake Ranges, Marysville and a community trust in Strathewen.

VBAF has also supported the Grants for Resilience & Wellness Program through the Foundation for Rural & Regional Renewal.

VBAF Initiatives as at 31 December 2013

	Commitment \$ million	Disbursement \$ million
Individuals and Families		
Initial Emergency Payments	30.80	30.80
Rehousing and Recovery Payments	179.50	179.35
Personal Support Payments	109.70	101.27
Subtotal Individuals and Families	320.00	311.42
Support for Communities	81.85	71.92
Total – All Payments	401.85	383.34

LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE

The scale of the 2009 Victorian bushfires, the damage caused and the recovery effort required were unprecedented in Australia. Significant lessons were learnt and in many cases have been shared, documented or formalised.

Lessons Shared

Those affected or involved have provided invaluable advice and support to communities subsequently affected by other natural disasters around the country, including the 2010–11 Queensland and Victorian floods and the 2013 Tasmanian bushfires. Through these experiences, connections have been made and comfort has been found in the sharing of stories and lessons.

From a government perspective, experiences during and after the 2009 Victorian bushfires have contributed to a comprehensive reform of Victoria's Emergency Management Framework.

2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission

The 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission (VBRC) was established on 16 February 2009 to investigate the causes and responses to the bushfires. The VBRC delivered its Interim Report on 17 August 2009 and its Final Report on 31 July 2010. The Victorian Government committed to implement all of the 67 recommendations in the Final Report. When the Bushfires Royal Commission Implementation Monitor provided his annual report in July 2013, 47 of the recommendations had been completed, with the remaining 20 scheduled to be completed in 2014.

Emergency Management Reform

The Victorian Emergency Management Reform White Paper was released in December 2012. This built on the findings of the VBRC as well as the 2010–11 Victorian Floods Review. It was also informed by extensive public consultation and submissions received in response to the Green Paper, *Towards a More Disaster Resilient and Safer Victoria*, released in September 2011.

The White Paper envisages "a sustainable and efficient emergency management system that minimises the likelihood and consequences of disasters and emergencies on the Victorian community." This vision is underpinned by the three key principles of community, collaboration and capability. These principles capture the intent to move towards a holistic, collaborative approach to all hazards across all levels of government, emergency service organisations, community, business, industry and not-for-profit organisations.

Legislative Reform

The extent of the reforms outlined in the White Paper require significant cultural change as well as legislative change. The first tranche of legislation was introduced in the Victorian Parliament in October 2013, and will be progressively implemented by September 2014. This includes the establishment of Emergency Management Victoria as the overarching body for the coordination of all aspects of emergency management, including preparedness, response, relief and recovery. The legislation also creates the critical statutory roles of Emergency Management Commissioner and Inspector-General for Emergency Management.

CONTINUING SUPPORT

Bushfire-affected people in Victoria can continue to access bushfire-specific services provided through VBAF and not-for-profit agencies as well as general services available to all communities.

2009 Bushfire Recovery Services

Psychological Support Services

Specialist individual counselling, outreach services and support are available free of charge.

Statewide Service

- Children: 1300 773 352
- Young people: (03) 9765 0300
- Adults: 1300 773 352

Gippsland (adults, young people and children):

- (03) 5134 5971

Kids Helpline – all regions:

- 1800 551 800 or visit kidshelp.com.au/teens/bushfire

Salvation Army Bushfire Recovery Program

The Salvation Army's Crossroads and Pathways programs support individuals, families and young people affected by the Victorian bushfires including individual case management, advocacy and linkages to specialised support services.

Community on Ground Assistance (COGA)

The state-wide COGA program provides practical help to eligible people with the clean-up and recovery of their fire affected properties.

To register or for more information:

- Sylvie Thomas on 0407 427 090

Small Grants Program

Bushfire-affected communities can apply to the Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal for funding through the Grants for Resilience and Wellness program to run a wide variety of localised programs and projects that meet the recovery needs of their residents.

For more information call 1800 170 020 or go to frrr.org.au

Community Foundations and Trusts

VBAF has made contributions to several independent, locally run Community Foundations in bushfire-affected communities. The Foundations provide services to the community, make grants and undertake community leadership and partnership activities to address a wide variety of needs in their service areas in the longer term.

VBAF has made contributions to the following Community Foundations and Trusts:

- Into Our Hands Community Foundation (Alpine, Indigo and Wangaratta Shires) – intoourhandsfoundation.com
- Kinglake Ranges Foundation – krfoundation.org.au
- Marysville and Triangle Community Foundation – 0417 138 572
- Mitchell Community Foundation – 0402 757 257
- Strathewen Bushfire Relief Trust – scra@tpg.com.au

General Services

A full range of primary, community and mental health services are available through local health providers.

Further Information

More information on all of these services is available in the *Victorian Bushfire Recovery Services Guide*.

The Guide has three key sections:

1. Specific 2009 bushfire recovery information.
2. General information (including personal, financial and legal, accommodation and business support).
3. Local area guides (additional services located in bushfire-affected communities).

The Guide can be accessed at:

rdv.vic.gov.au/fire-recovery-unit

ACCESSIBILITY

If you would like this publication in an accessible format, such as large print or audio, please phone 13 22 15 (voice calls) or email rdv@rdv.vic.gov.au

This document is also available in an accessible format on the internet at rdv.vic.gov.au



This update was published by the Fire Recovery Unit in the Department of State Development, Business and Innovation.

Contact the Unit on 1800 055 714 or email fire.recovery@rdv.vic.gov.au

Also visit rdv.vic.gov.au/fire-recovery-unit

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