

Saving the Okefenokee, Saving Sovereignty

Saving the OKEFENOKEE SWAMP From UNESCO



Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

Candidate Matt Day

GA-D1

Saving the Okefenokee, Saving Sovereignty

Dear Citizens of Georgia's 1st Congressional District,

The Okefenokee Swamp is more than a national treasure — it is a living emblem of Georgia's natural heritage and the self-reliance of our people. As your candidate for Congress, I share your pride in this extraordinary ecosystem and your determination to protect it wisely and locally.

Recently, a proposal has been advanced to nominate the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge as a **UNESCO World Heritage Site**. On the surface, such recognition may sound honorable. Yet many Georgians, along with citizens across the nation, have voiced legitimate concerns — including through a growing **petition calling for the withdrawal of the nomination**. These concerns deserve to be heard and taken seriously.

While UNESCO status might bring prestige, it can also bring **international oversight, increased bureaucracy, and potential environmental pressures**.

- Our U.S. agencies already manage the refuge with world-class standards.
- UNESCO involvement could complicate local decision-making and introduce obligations that fall outside American control.
- The Okefenokee's fragile ecosystem can only sustain limited tourism without risking harm to its wildlife, waters, and wilderness character.

America has a long and thoughtful history with UNESCO — joining, leaving, and re-evaluating our participation whenever it ceased to serve our national interests. This is not about rejecting cooperation; it is about ensuring that stewardship of our land remains the responsibility of the people and agencies directly accountable to you — the citizens of Georgia and the United States.

I support keeping the Okefenokee under **U.S. protection, U.S. management, and U.S. values**. Together, we can safeguard this magnificent landscape without ceding authority to international bodies or risking unintended consequences.

Thank you for standing with me to preserve both the sovereignty of our nation and the serenity of the Okefenokee Swamp for generations to come.

Sincerely,

Matt Day

Candidate, U.S. House of Representatives

Georgia's 1st Congressional District

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Report on Withdrawing the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge from UNESCO World Heritage Nomination

By Matt Day

Candidate for U.S. House of Representatives, Georgia's 1st Congressional District

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Author's Note

This report is dedicated to the people of Georgia's 1st Congressional District and all who believe that the stewardship of America's natural treasures should remain in American hands. The Okefenokee is more than a landscape—it is a living symbol of independence, resilience, and responsible conservation.

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Section A: Cons of UNESCO World Heritage Designation

The prospect of adding the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge to the UNESCO World Heritage List may appear attractive at first glance. However, a closer examination reveals significant drawbacks that outweigh any symbolic prestige such a designation might offer. These concerns fall into six primary categories: sovereignty and local control, administrative and financial burden, political and ideological controversy, environmental strain, economic imbalance, and limited legal benefit.

1. Sovereignty and Local Control

UNESCO does not take legal ownership of U.S. lands, yet its oversight can influence how sites are managed and evaluated. Designation invites periodic monitoring and international commentary that may pressure local or federal agencies to conform to external expectations. Communities surrounding the Okefenokee deserve to retain direct control of conservation decisions without the risk of international interference or bureaucratic review from abroad.

2. Administrative and Financial Burden

World Heritage Sites must comply with strict reporting requirements, management plans, and conservation assessments. While UNESCO provides limited technical support, funding is minimal. Most of the cost falls on American taxpayers through increased administrative staffing, documentation, and compliance efforts. These resources could be better directed toward existing U.S. programs that already protect the refuge.

3. Political and Ideological Controversy

UNESCO has repeatedly been criticized for politicization and ideological bias, including resolutions that conflict with long-standing U.S. policy positions. Such controversies led to U.S. withdrawals under Presidents Reagan (1984) and Trump (2025). Inserting a local conservation area into that arena risks exposing Georgia's natural heritage to global political debates that have little to do with protecting the swamp.

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4. Environmental Strain and Over-Tourism

The Okefenokee's value lies in its fragile ecological balance. UNESCO recognition almost always brings heightened visibility and tourism traffic. Increased visitation would place pressure on the refuge's limited infrastructure, disturb sensitive wildlife habitats, and degrade water quality through greater human presence. Once a wetland's equilibrium is disrupted, recovery can take decades. Preservation, not promotion, must remain the guiding principle.

5. Economic Imbalance and Commercialization

Tourism growth following UNESCO inscription can inflate property values, attract outside investors, and shift the local economy away from its traditional base. The result can be gentrification of gateway communities and a loss of authentic local culture. Revenue often flows to national or international tour operators rather than to residents who have lived beside the swamp for generations.

6. Limited Legal Protection

Despite popular belief, UNESCO status confers no additional legal authority within the United States. All binding protection still derives from federal law—the Refuge System Administration Act, the Wilderness Act, and related statutes. The World Heritage label is largely symbolic; it can create a false sense of security while diverting attention from enforcement of existing domestic protections.

Conclusion

The Okefenokee Swamp has thrived under American stewardship for nearly a century. Introducing an international designation would add bureaucracy, invite outside influence, and threaten the delicate ecological and cultural balance of the region. Georgia's heritage and environment are best safeguarded through continued local management under U.S. law—free from the constraints and controversies that often accompany UNESCO recognition.

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Section B: History of the Okefenokee Swamp

1. Geological and Environmental Origins

The Okefenokee Swamp is one of the largest and most intact freshwater wetlands in North America, encompassing roughly 700 square miles across southeastern Georgia and extending slightly into northern Florida. The basin that forms the swamp developed millions of years ago when the region was part of an ancient coastal plain. As the sea receded, layers of sand and sediment trapped rainwater in a shallow depression. Over thousands of years, decaying vegetation accumulated to form thick peat deposits, creating the distinctive floating “trembling earth” that inspired the Creek-derived name *Okefenokee*, meaning “Land of the Trembling Earth.”

The swamp’s waters are characteristically dark due to tannins leached from cypress and bay trees, forming a “blackwater” ecosystem of remarkable biological complexity. It supports more than 850 plant species and hundreds of wildlife species—including American alligators, sandhill cranes, wood storks, black bears, and numerous migratory birds.

2. Early Human Presence and Indigenous Heritage

Archaeological findings suggest that Native American communities occupied and traversed the Okefenokee area for thousands of years. Tribes such as the Oconi and later the Creek peoples used the swamp as a seasonal hunting and fishing ground. They adapted skillfully to its wetlands, establishing trails and elevated camp areas along the high ridges and prairies that border the swamp. Artifacts from the region illustrate an enduring relationship between Indigenous cultures and the swamp’s resources long before European settlement.

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3. Settlement, Conflict, and Early Exploration

During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the Okefenokee remained largely unexplored wilderness. Its dense vegetation, remoteness, and difficult terrain made it a natural refuge for displaced Native Americans, escaped slaves, and outlaws.

In the 1830s, military activity during the Second Seminole War brought surveyors and soldiers into the area, marking the beginning of organized exploration. The swamp's remoteness and mysterious reputation entered Southern folklore through early travelers' journals and local legends.

4. Industrial Exploitation and Failed Drainage Efforts

By the late 1800s, the Okefenokee faced aggressive commercial exploitation. The Suwannee Canal Company purchased large portions of the swamp with plans to drain it for agriculture and timber. A canal was dug from the swamp's eastern edge toward the Suwannee River, but the project failed financially and ecologically. Logging companies later extracted vast amounts of cypress and pine—millions of board feet of timber—between the 1890s and 1920s, altering some areas but never conquering the swamp's resilient hydrology.

5. Federal Protection and the Establishment of the Refuge

Public awareness of the swamp's unique ecological value grew during the early twentieth century. In 1937, President Franklin D. Roosevelt established the **Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge** by executive order, transferring ownership from private industry to the federal government for permanent protection.

Subsequent decades saw continued conservation progress: the refuge was expanded, and in 1974 Congress designated more than 350,000 acres as federally protected **wilderness**

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under the Wilderness Act. These measures secured the Okefenokee as a living laboratory for ecological research, environmental education, and responsible recreation.

6. Modern Significance

Today the Okefenokee Swamp represents a rare success story in American conservation. Managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, it remains one of the most pristine wetlands on the continent and a cornerstone of Georgia's natural identity.

Its management plan emphasizes preservation of wilderness character, sustainable tourism, and respect for the swamp's ecological limits. The area attracts scientists, photographers, and visitors from across the nation—but under carefully controlled conditions that balance public access with environmental integrity.

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Section C: What Makes the Okefenokee Swamp Special & Vulnerable

The Okefenokee Swamp stands as one of the most extraordinary wetland ecosystems in the United States—an emblem of Georgia’s natural heritage and a model of successful conservation. Its vast wilderness, intricate hydrology, and unique cultural story make it a landscape of global importance. Yet, these very characteristics also render it exceptionally fragile. Understanding both its strengths and vulnerabilities is essential for any future policy or management decision.

I. What Makes the Okefenokee Swamp Special

1. **Largest Blackwater Swamp in North America**

Covering more than 438,000 acres (approximately 700 square miles), the Okefenokee is the largest intact blackwater swamp on the continent—a mosaic of prairies, forests, and cypress domes interconnected by natural waterways.

2. **Unique Rain-Fed Hydrology**

Unlike river-fed wetlands, the Okefenokee depends entirely on rainfall and groundwater seepage. Its slow outflows form the headwaters of both the Suwannee and St. Marys Rivers, linking two major watersheds.

3. **Exceptional Biodiversity**

The swamp sustains more than 850 plant species and hundreds of animal species, including amphibians, reptiles, mammals, and migratory birds. It is one of the most biodiverse inland wetlands in the southeastern United States.

4. **Habitat for Threatened and Endangered Species**

Wood storks, red-cockaded woodpeckers, indigo snakes, gopher tortoises, and other vulnerable species rely on the Okefenokee’s undisturbed habitat for breeding and foraging.

5. **Powerful Carbon Sink**

The swamp’s deep peat soils store millions of tons of carbon, making it a vital

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natural buffer against greenhouse-gas accumulation and a living record of thousands of years of ecological history.

6. **Deep Cultural and Historical Roots**

The name “Okefenokee” derives from a Creek term meaning “Land of the Trembling Earth.” The swamp holds centuries of Indigenous, pioneer, and folkloric heritage that remain part of Georgia’s cultural identity.

7. **Extensive Federally Designated Wilderness**

Over 90 percent of the refuge—more than 350,000 acres—is officially classified as wilderness, preserving its solitude and natural conditions under the highest level of federal land protection.

8. **Educational and Recreational Resource**

The refuge offers carefully managed boating, fishing, and interpretive trails that allow visitors to experience wilderness firsthand while supporting environmental education and research.

9. **Critical Water Resource for the Region**

The swamp regulates local groundwater recharge, filters impurities, and influences water quality far beyond its borders, sustaining ecosystems and communities across south Georgia and north Florida.

10. **Scientific Significance**

Ecologists regard the Okefenokee as a benchmark for studying wetland hydrology, peat accumulation, fire ecology, and wildlife dynamics. Its largely undisturbed character allows long-term monitoring of natural processes rarely observable elsewhere.

II. What Makes the Okefenokee Swamp Vulnerable

1. **Delicate Water Balance**

Because the swamp is shallow and rain-fed, small changes in precipitation,

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drainage, or groundwater extraction can drastically alter water levels and ecosystem stability.

2. **Fire Sensitivity of Peat Layers**

During droughts, peat can ignite and burn underground for months, releasing stored carbon and permanently altering soil structure and vegetation.

3. **Slow Natural Recovery**

Peat and hydrological systems take centuries to regenerate once disturbed; damage from over-drainage or fire may be effectively irreversible within a human lifetime.

4. **Visitor Pressure and Disturbance**

Even moderate increases in boat traffic, footpaths, and noise can disrupt nesting birds, amphibians, and alligators. Over-tourism risks undermining the refuge's wilderness character.

5. **Encroaching Development and Mining Threats**

Activities near the swamp's boundary—including proposed heavy-mineral mining—pose risks to groundwater flow and water quality.

6. **Pollution and Runoff**

Nutrient and chemical runoff from surrounding lands could alter the swamp's naturally acidic, low-nutrient water chemistry, encouraging invasive species and algal growth.

7. **Invasive Flora and Fauna**

Non-native plants like water hyacinth and feral species can spread rapidly, displacing native life and clogging waterways critical to hydrologic function.

8. **Climate Variability**

Increasing heat, erratic rainfall, and sea-level change threaten to intensify drought cycles and fire frequency, further stressing this shallow wetland system.

9. **Resource Limitations in Management**

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service operates with finite staffing and budgets, limiting capacity for visitor regulation, fire control, and scientific monitoring.

10. **Risk of Misguided Promotion**

International branding—such as UNESCO World Heritage recognition—could unintentionally attract surges of visitation and commercial pressure beyond what the swamp's infrastructure and ecology can sustain.

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III. Summary

The Okefenokee Swamp's extraordinary natural and cultural assets are inseparable from its fragility. It is both a national treasure and a system on the edge of balance. Effective stewardship depends on maintaining its wilderness character through disciplined management, restrained development, and decisions made by those who understand its history and live within its reach. Recognition is meaningful—but protection, guided by science and local accountability, is indispensable.

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Section D: How to Withdraw the Okefenokee from UNESCO Candidacy (Step-by-Step)

Objective: Halt the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge’s progression toward UNESCO World Heritage inscription by stopping the U.S. federal nomination and removing (or pausing) the site on the U.S. Tentative List.

Step 1 — Freeze the Federal Nomination Dossier

- **Action:** Urge the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI) and the National Park Service Office of International Affairs (NPS–OIA) to halt work on the nomination file.
- **Deliverables:**
 - Formal letter requesting an immediate **administrative hold** on the dossier.
 - Request written confirmation that **no transmittal to UNESCO** will occur this cycle.

Step 2 — Request Formal Withdrawal/Pause from the U.S. Tentative List

- **Action:** Ask NPS–OIA to **withdraw** (or formally **defer**) Okefenokee from the U.S. Tentative List pending policy review.
- **Deliverables:**
 - Letter to NPS–OIA citing **sovereignty, administrative cost, and environmental-capacity** concerns.
 - Supporting resolutions from state and local bodies (see Step 4).

Step 3 — Secure DOI Policy Direction

- **Action:** Engage the **Secretary of the Interior** and USFWS leadership to issue internal direction that the refuge will **not pursue UNESCO designation** at this time.

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- **Deliverables:**
 - DOI memo of direction;
 - USFWS refuge-level management note placing UNESCO activities **out of scope**.

Step 4 — Build the State & Local Record (Resolutions)

- **Action:** Pass **non-binding resolutions** urging withdrawal at multiple levels to demonstrate broad opposition.
- **Targets:** Georgia **General Assembly**, **Governor's Office**, county commissions (Charlton, Ware, Clinch), municipal councils, Soil & Water Districts.
- **Deliverables:**
 - Model resolution text;
 - Coordinated calendar of votes;
 - Press statements from each body.

Step 5 — Congressional Engagement

- **Action:** Obtain letters from **Georgia's U.S. Senators** and **District 1's U.S. Representative** urging DOI/NPS–OIA to withdraw the candidacy.
- **Options:**
 - **Appropriations report language** directing DOI/NPS to pause World Heritage nominations that lack demonstrated local consent;
 - **Oversight letters/hearings** requesting status updates and justification.
- **Deliverables:**
 - Signed delegation letter;
 - Any supportive language in relevant subcommittee reports.

Step 6 — Tribal & Stakeholder Consultation File

- **Action:** Document positions from **tribal governments**, adjacent **landowners**, **timber/farm/wildlife groups**, and **gateway businesses** showing material concerns.
- **Deliverables:**

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- Stakeholder letters;
- A compiled **community-impact brief** emphasizing ecological carrying capacity and administrative burdens.

Step 7 — Administrative Law Safeguards (If Needed)

- **Action:** If federal agencies move forward despite opposition, prepare an **Administrative Procedure Act (APA)** petition and request review of any procedural steps (e.g., failure to consider local impacts or alternatives).
- **Deliverables:**
 - APA petition draft;
 - Record-keeping plan (comments, resolutions, affidavits).

Step 8 — White House Policy Appeal

- **Action:** Submit a **policy memorandum** to the **White House Domestic Policy Council** and **CEQ** outlining why withdrawal serves national interest (sovereignty, costs, refuge mission, carrying capacity).
- **Deliverables:**
 - 2–3 page memo with executive-level talking points;
 - Endorsements from governors, legislators, industry, and conservation leaders.

Step 9 — Public Communication & Comment Docket

- **Action:** Maintain a respectful, facts-forward communications plan that emphasizes **U.S. stewardship** and **ecological limits**.
- **Deliverables:**
 - Public comment toolkit (op-ed templates, letters to editor, fact sheets);
 - Central repository of resolutions and letters.

Step 10 — Formal Confirmation & Monitoring

- **Action:** Obtain **written confirmation** from NPS–OIA/DOI that the nomination is **withdrawn or deferred** and the site is **removed/paused** on the Tentative List.

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- **Deliverables:**
 - Archivable letters/emails;
 - A follow-up monitoring schedule (quarterly) with agency points of contact.
-

Suggested Timeline (Aggressive 60–90 Days)

- **Weeks 1–2:** Steps 1–2 (freeze dossier, Tentative List request) + initiate Step 4 resolutions.
 - **Weeks 2–4:** Steps 3–5 (DOI memo, congressional letters/appropriations language).
 - **Weeks 4–6:** Steps 6–7 (stakeholder file, APA preparedness).
 - **Weeks 6–8:** Step 8 (White House memo + endorsements).
 - **Weeks 8–12:** Steps 9–10 (public comms, obtain formal withdrawal confirmation).
-

Subsection: Matt Day’s Commitment to Rally Leaders and Elevate the Issue

Purpose: Build a broad, bipartisan coalition to support withdrawal and keep stewardship local.

1) Business & Community Leadership

- Convene a **District 1 Business Roundtable** (ports, logistics, timber, farms, outfitters, hospitality) to sign a joint letter emphasizing:
 - Refuge mission first;
 - Carrying-capacity limits;
 - Administrative/fiscal burden of UNESCO compliance.
- Engage **regional chambers** and **trade associations** (tourism, outdoor recreation, forestry, agriculture) for aligned statements.

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2) Conservation Voices Focused on Capacity

- Partner with conservationists who prioritize **wilderness character** and **quiet-use** values.
- Host a **Scientific Briefing** with hydrologists, fire ecologists, and refuge biologists to present data on peat, drought/fire risk, and visitor thresholds.

3) County-by-County Resolution Drive

- Personally meet with Charlton, Ware, and Clinch county commissions to place resolutions on the agenda.
- Provide a **model resolution** and a 10-minute **slide deck** for public meetings.

4) State-Level Coalition

- Secure statements from the **Governor**, **Lt. Governor**, and **legislative leaders** in both chambers.
- Request a **Joint Legislative Resolution** urging DOI/NPS to withdraw the nomination.

5) Federal Delegation & Committee Strategy

- Obtain signatures from:
 - **Georgia's U.S. Senators**,
 - **U.S. House members** whose districts touch Okefenokee-linked watersheds.
- Brief key committees (House Natural Resources; Senate ENR; Appropriations Interior subcommittees) on sovereignty and capacity concerns.

6) White House Elevation

- Deliver a **concise policy memo** to the **Domestic Policy Council** and **Council on Environmental Quality** outlining:
 - No added legal protection from UNESCO;
 - Refuge mission conflicts;

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- Risk of over-tourism and management costs;
- Clear local opposition and state/federal backing for withdrawal.
- Request a **principals-level review** and a neutral-policy stance: **no UNESCO nomination without demonstrated local consent and capacity analysis.**

7) Ongoing Accountability

- Publish a public **progress dashboard** (letters secured, resolutions passed, meetings held).
- Commit to **quarterly town halls** on Okefenokee stewardship and to releasing all correspondence with federal agencies.

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LETTER TO THE DEPARTMENT OF INTERIOR

Matt Day

Candidate, U.S. House of Representatives
Georgia's 1st Congressional District

[Date]

The Honorable Doug Burgum

Secretary of the Interior
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240

Subject: Formal Request to Withdraw the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge from UNESCO World Heritage Nomination Process

Dear Secretary,

I am writing as a candidate for Congress from Georgia's 1st Congressional District and as a lifelong advocate for responsible environmental stewardship to respectfully request that the Department of the Interior **withdraw or formally defer the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge from consideration for nomination to the UNESCO World Heritage List.**

The Okefenokee Swamp is one of our nation's greatest natural assets—an American wilderness whose protection has been achieved through decades of thoughtful management under the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. While I appreciate the international prestige that UNESCO recognition can bring, the designation is unnecessary for maintaining protection and may introduce layers of oversight and expectation inconsistent with U.S. law and local management authority.

Specifically, the refuge's candidacy raises three core concerns:

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1. **Sovereignty and Control** – UNESCO’s monitoring and compliance framework, though non-binding, places U.S. lands under periodic review by international committees. The Okefenokee has thrived under American stewardship, and its continued protection should remain wholly domestic.
2. **Environmental Carrying Capacity** – The swamp’s fragile hydrology and peat-based ecosystem cannot withstand substantial increases in tourism or promotion. A surge in visitation following UNESCO inscription would risk damaging the very wilderness values the refuge exists to preserve.
3. **Administrative and Fiscal Burden** – Preparing and maintaining World Heritage documentation requires staff time and funds better directed toward on-the-ground habitat management, wildfire control, and scientific monitoring.

For these reasons, I urge the Department to **pause all nomination activities and remove the Okefenokee from the current U.S. Tentative List** pending further consultation with Georgia’s elected officials, refuge stakeholders, and scientific experts.

The United States has a proud record of protecting its natural heritage without ceding decision-making to international entities. I believe the Okefenokee should continue as a model of that success—managed under U.S. law, guided by local expertise, and preserved for future generations as a distinctly American wilderness.

Thank you for your attention to this matter and for your service to our country’s public lands. I stand ready to provide any information or support necessary to facilitate this withdrawal request.

Respectfully,

Matt Day

Candidate, U.S. House of Representatives
Georgia’s 1st Congressional District

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Statement of Intent from Matt Day

“As your candidate for Congress, I will use every relationship I’ve built in business and public service to assemble a broad, bipartisan coalition—county leaders, state officials, Members of Congress, scientists, and local businesses—to keep stewardship of the Okefenokee in American hands. I will work diligently to elevate this matter to the White House and secure a clear policy decision to withdraw the UNESCO candidacy and reaffirm refuge management under U.S. law. I carry my family fishing 5-7 times a year in the Swamp. This place is Holy Ground to me.”

-Matt Day

Congressional Candidate GA-D1

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