

# sheep connect

Connecting people in the sheep business

tasmania

autumn 2011

## What's new

### A word from the coordinators

With Warren Hunt's departure to the north *SheepConnect* Tasmania recently appointed a shared coordinator role with Andrew Bailey and Catriona Nicholls working together to deliver the latest information to Tasmania's sheep producers.

#### **Andrew Bailey B. Sc (Agric) Grad Dip Ed MSc (Animal Science)**

Just over 12 months ago Andrew was seconded to TIAR after 15 years with the DPIWE's Wool section. As well as sharing the SheepConnect role with Cat he is coordinator for the Meat and Livestock Australia (MLA)- funded Making More from Sheep program. These shared positions have a lot of synergies as many elements for both programs have developed jointly between AWI and MLA.

Previously Andrew has worked closely with the 8x5 Wool Profit program as the chief researcher/coordinator of the Lifetime Wool project based at the Cressy Research Station site. It's been an exciting time as his role has expanded to take on not just wool but also prime lamb issues. It's also been a time of linking-in with a range of associated projects including grazing trials, breed societies and productivity groups.

Andrew's background was strongly influenced by a number of years in the live sheep trade and now with breeding stud sheep on his own property.

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#### **Catriona Nicholls (Cat) B. App Sci (Agric) Grad Dip Ed**

After 15 years working as a researcher, writer and editor with Australia's largest farmer-driven research and publishing organisation — Kondinin Group. Cat has decided to bring her communication skills back to a local level working with SheepConnect Tasmania alongside Andrew Bailey.

Cat has a background in ag science and passion for extending research outcomes to producers in a practical, relevant and easy-to-understand way.

Based at 'Brooklyn' in the Fingal Valley, Cat will dedicate two days a week to supporting Andrew and Tasmania's sheep producers by ensuring the latest information is always at your fingertips. 🐏

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## AWI growers' forum

On March 23 and 24 AWI held two Woolgrower consultation days. Andrew McShane, Stocklands attended on March 24 and shared his experiences...

"This is the second forum I have attended, with this forum focussing on AWI explaining the investment plans and constraints during the next 12 months," Andrew said.

"Perhaps the greatest personal benefit of attending such forums is the ability to get a whole-of-industry perspective by networking with other wool growers from across Australia."

"However it is also useful to get a better understanding of the R&D strategy AWI has in place for the next 12 months and the constraints they face."

The framework which was determined by the outcome from WoolPoll means AWI are now locked into 70:30 approach to investment — with 70% spent off-farm in product development, market development and marketing and 30% is spent on-farm."

"What we need to understand on-farm is that one year of high wool prices and high levies cannot translate to an effective one-year on-farm R&D investment," Andrew explained.

"On-farm R&D requires a much longer time from initiation to outcomes — in this sense the system has a distinct lack of flexibility to react to short-term market outcomes."

AWI's On-Farm R,D&E team works with the existing distribution of funding determined at WoolPoll 2009. With strong direct links to shareholders AWI understand the ebb and flow of income due to changes in prices and sheep numbers.

Meanwhile off-farm fibre research and targeted marketing investments at AWI are working to influence demand for wool in key markets across the world.

Presentations from the two-day forum are available at:

[www.wool.com/AWI-News\\_2011-Young-Woolgrower-Forum.htm](http://www.wool.com/AWI-News_2011-Young-Woolgrower-Forum.htm) 🐏

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## Maximising reproduction opportunities

With both wool and sheep meat looking bright, sheep producers across the country are endeavouring to maximise conception rates this autumn.

At two recent workshops in the midlands we revisited a few key points to remember for flock fertility and heard how, after a devastating loss of 60% of their lambs to campylobacter during spring 2009, Kirsty and Nathan Anderson, *Benham Tasmania* successfully used their maiden ewes (7–8 months at joining) to start rebuilding their crossbred flock.

The productive season across the State this summer should see most ewes and rams in good condition going into joining. For those producers still waiting to put their rams out it is worth remembering:

- Check rams for soundness before joining
- Consider spike feeding rams with lupins for increased fertility
- Aim to have all ewes in condition score 3 or better at joining.
- Maiden merino ewes need to be at least 75–80% of their mature weight at joining.

### Keep up the feed

Managing ewe nutrition is the key to ensuring optimum conception.

Condition scoring is a quick and reliable tool to manage ewes to meet production targets and enable timely decisions to optimise reproduction rates.

The actual condition score of the ewes is the most important determinant of ovulation rate.

Minimum condition score 3 is the target for ewes at joining.

The target condition score is a balance between reproductive performance, stocking rate and supplementary feeding costs. The response to reproductive rate in Merinos is linear between ewes in condition score 1.5 to 4.5 (see Figure 1).

*The Lifetime Wool project shows an increase of about 20% extra lambs for each rise in condition score at joining.*

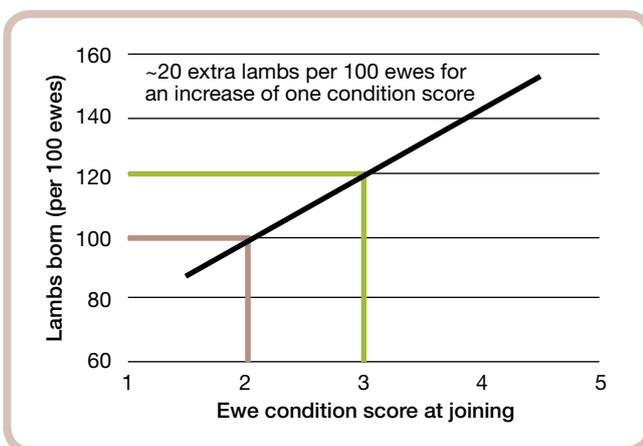


Figure 1. Ewe condition score vs lambing rates

This response varies from 7% to 36%, depending on genetics and time of lambing, with later lambing likely to be more responsive.

To a large degree the horse has already bolted this season, nevertheless it is worth keeping in mind the key strategies to manage ewes for higher condition score at joining:

- Wean lambs at 14 weeks after the start of lambing to ensure ewes can gain weight on green pasture before next joining.
- Condition score ewes at weaning and draft those below score 3 into a separate management group for preferential grazing on pasture, or if pasture quality is low, feeding a supplement to increase liveweight. Pasture is usually the only economic option for increasing ewe condition score after weaning. The target is to get all ewes up to or above score 3 by joining.
- It is important to determine the relative benefit of supplementary feeding to wean more lambs. Recent research suggests short-term feeding on high-quality pasture can boost conception rates more cost-effectively than supplementary feed.

### Length of joining

Join rams with ewes for two 17-day cycles or five weeks. If your joining paddocks are large, join ewes for six to seven weeks, or five weeks if teasers are used.

Most ewes get pregnant in two cycles.

### Joining management checklist

- Join maiden ewes and adults separately as they have different ram requirements.
- Join rams at 1% plus one extra ram for mature ewes (at least five rams for a mob of 400 ewes), at least 1.5% for maiden ewes and 2% for ewe lambs.
- If rams need to increase condition score feed a high-quality feed such as lupins for 50 days before joining to ensure maximum testes size and sperm output.
- Ewe health is extremely important. Any health issue such as worm burdens, liver fluke or footrot will slow weight gain or cause weight loss resulting in lower reproductive rates.
- Avoid joining ewes within two weeks of shearing as shearing can disrupt cycling activity for two weeks.
- Avoid joining ewes with full wool as mating can be physically more difficult.
- Avoid joining ewes on potentially-toxic pastures, such as high endophyte perennial ryegrass pastures, as they can lower conception rates and lambing performance by as much as 20%, even without visible ryegrass staggers.
- Avoid severe stress (such as more than 1kg liveweight loss per week or extreme variation in feed quality) when joining ewes, as embryo loss may be higher.

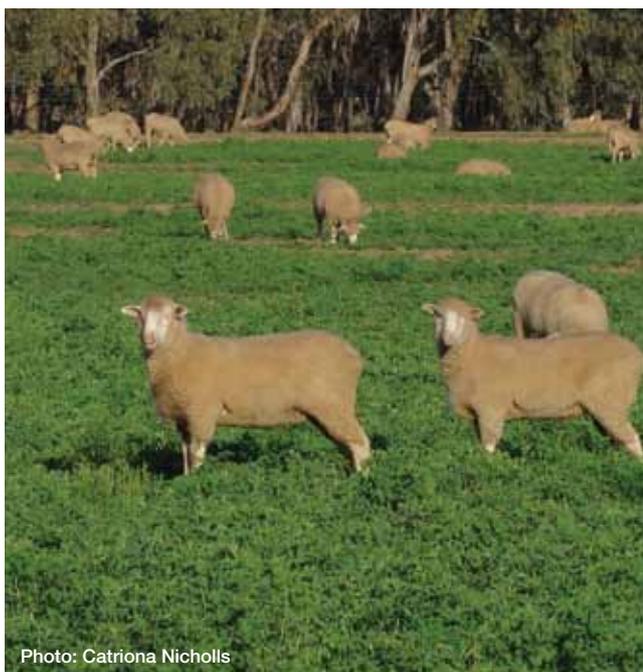


Photo: Catriona Nicholls

*High-quality summer-active pastures, such as lucerne, can offer a more cost-effective option than supplementary feeding to boost ewe conception rates.*

On more intensively-run farms, extending the joining for longer periods is not recommended because the 2-4% of extra lambs holds up completion of important management events such as marking and weaning.

Delaying weaning for a few late lambs can result in serious worm burdens, leading to weight loss in both ewes and lambs. In winter-lambing Merino flocks, the late lambs generally have poor survival rates because they have a lower bodyweight during summer.

## Benham Tasmania — case study

After a crippling loss of lambs during spring 2009, **Benham Tasmania** Livestock manager Nathan Anderson and his wife Kirstie were keen to do whatever it took to get their flock-building program back on track.

Since arriving at **Benham** from northern New South Wales about four years ago, the Andersons have worked alongside property owner Rob O'Connor to drive change in the property's sheep enterprise from a focus on superfine Merinos, with a strong wether component, to a dual-enterprise flock containing fine-wool Merinos and a prime lamb component.

"It is not only the flock structure that has changed," Nathan explained. "We have also moved away from a traditional set stocking approach on native pastures alone, to a rotational grazing system that takes advantage of crop stubbles and forage crops, which complements Rob's expanding irrigated cropping enterprises on the property."

"Nothing ever stays the same, and we have a strong business commitment to a resilient sheep enterprise that is flexible and can take advantage of market opportunities — like those we currently are seeing in both the wool and sheepmeat markets."

### Joining maiden ewes (ewe lambs)

Joining ewe lambs (7–8 months of age) can provide additional lambs this spring with relatively little increased input (see *Benham Tasmania* case study in this newsletter).

Bodyweight is the critical factor. Management practices such as regular monitoring of bodyweight and condition score are essential for a successful joining and a higher percentage of lambs weaned to ewes joined.

Maiden Merino ewes need to be at least at 75–80% of mature liveweight for successful joining. Maiden crossbred ewes can be successfully joined at 7–9 months at a minimum of 45kg bodyweight at joining, provided they have access to good quality feed during pregnancy to ensure they are condition score 3 at lambing. Do not attempt joining at 7–9 months if adequate feed cannot be provided.

Consider an extended joining period for ewe lambs (nine weeks) to allow ewes to start cycling effectively, ensuring maximum conception rates. Select rams of a suitable size and conformation for ewe lambs.

### What if ewes fail to get in lamb?

When joining in the peak breeding season, at least 90% of Merino ewes and up to 95% of crossbred ewes get pregnant in the first two cycles. Pregnancy rates can be 10% lower if joined outside the normal season.

If more than 15% of ewes are not pregnant in the target mating time an investigation to determine the reason for ewes failing to conceive is necessary.

Both ewe and ram problems can contribute to poor results. Consider pasture toxicities, including syndromes such as perennial rye grass or oestrogenic clover infertility. Consult your animal health adviser to investigate problems.

Nathan describes the ideal ewe in their system as a medium-framed ewe with a low maintenance requirement, selected for fertility, fecundity (ability to produce multiple lambs) and strong mothering skills.

"We are also looking to maintain our fleece quality, with a fibre diameter of 17–18 micron, and an adult greasy fleece weigh of 5–6 kilograms," he said.

"Our prime lamb enterprise has a Merino base, but we are using Coopworth rams to increase mothering ability in our first-cross ewes, which are then mated to a terminal sire — achieving healthy weight gains and desirable carcass characteristics in our prime lambs."

### Monitoring

Kirstie is quick to emphasise the role of monitoring in the Benham approach.

"We pregnancy scan all our girls to monitor fertility and fecundity and so we can determine where any losses are creeping in," she said.

## Benham Tasmania — case study (continued)



Photo: Supplied by Benham Tasmania

*Property owner Robbie O'Connor and Livestock manager Nathan Anderson are driving the change to a dual-purpose flock that can meet market demands.*

"We monitor fleece production through mid-side sampling and separating fleeces into wool lines at shearing."

"Perhaps the greatest advance we've recently made is the foray into electronic identification tags in our sheep."

"These have made monitoring both incredibly efficient and accurate."

"We record results as value-per-ewe based on income from both fleece and lambs."

### Prime lamb production

With the prime lamb enterprise in a growth stage, the loss of 60% of their lambs during 2009 to campylobacter was a significant set-back. But after participating in a *Making More from Sheep* performance weaner program during 2010, Nathan and Kirstie toyed with the idea of joining their 680 2009-drop cross-bred ewe lambs at 7–8 months of age during 2010 as a way of getting an additional drop of lambs into the enterprise quickly. This would not only boost ewe lamb numbers it would allow the business to take advantage of high prime lamb prices for the wether lambs.

"Essentially we wean our lambs relatively early, at 12–14 weeks, we had plenty of available feed during summer 2009–10, the girls were making good weight gains post weaning and we reckoned we could get them up to that recommended 40kg by joining," Kirstie said.

"If we could get a reasonable number of them pregnant then we felt it would be like getting lambs on the ground in spring for free."

"I need to point out that we were only talking about our Merino x Coopworth lambs — it's not something we were trying to achieve in our pure Merino flock."

"The literature suggested we could expect a pregnancy rate of about 46% out of a Coopworth joining and we thought we would give it a go."

For the first few weeks of joining things didn't look great.

"We popped in 12 rams for the 680 ewe lambs and for the first few weeks there wasn't a lot of action," Nathan said.

"The original plan was for a six-week joining but at the end of the six weeks, I just had a gut feeling that things were just starting to warm up in the paddock, so we extended the joining period out to nine weeks."

According to Nathan and Kirstie, the longer joining period has made all the difference — and the results speak for themselves.

"We achieved 84% scanned in lamb in our ewe lambs, and weaned 106% from those pregnant maiden ewes — you can't argue with that."

Nathan also points out that these results compare very favourably with a local producer who tried an identical program — except for joining length.

"His pregnancy rates were about half ours and the only thing we can put it down to is length of joining — that was the only identifiable difference."

### This year's approach

With a successful lambing during 2010, the Andersons have been managing their 2009 drop ewes and 2010 drop ewe lambs to get them up to a conditions score 3 ready for this season's joining.

"The girls are all looking magnificent," Kirstie said, "and following the same management principles of maintaining condition score throughout the year we are looking forward to seeing what we can achieve a second time round." 🐑

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Photo: Catriona Nicholls

*Getting ewes back into condition post lambing is the key to high conceptions rates.*



## Special offer — *Making More from Sheep* manual sale

The MMfS manual is being offered at a special sale price of \$50 including GST at [www.makingmorefromsheep.com.au](http://www.makingmorefromsheep.com.au) or contact Andrew Bailey on (03) 6336 5385. 📧

## Lifetime ewe management program — sharpen your skills

The Lifetime ewe management program focuses on helping producers better understand the influences of ewe nutrition on the performance of the ewe and her lambs.

Through the program you will gain the skills and confidence to manage the reproduction cycle to increase profitability of your sheep enterprise.

### How does it work?

The program is run over six meetings spread across the 12-month weaning to weaning cycle. The timing of each meeting is linked to critical stages of the ewe's reproductive cycle.

The program is delivered to small groups (four to six participants) on farm, with a focus on:

- condition scoring
- pasture assessment
- feed budgeting.

All sessions involve a visit to each participant's farm. This hands-on approach ensures the outcomes are practical and applicable to your business.

### Why should you attend?

More than 150 groups and over 750 producers who manage nearly 4,000,000 Merino and crossbred ewes have already participated in Lifetime Ewe Management. These producers have increased stocking rates and weaning percentages to produce 30% more lambs per hectare and have been able to halve rates of ewe mortality.

"By following the data and recommendations, in one season we have been able to lift our performance by an average of 25%, or 4000 lambs."

*Gordon Dickinson, Nareen Station Casterton.*

If you want to know more please contact *SheepConnect* Tasmania coordinator, Catriona Nicholls on:

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**E: [cat.hot.tin.roof@bigpond.com](mailto:cat.hot.tin.roof@bigpond.com)** 📧

## Upcoming events

### OJD rural reseller workshops — June 2

Anyone interested in producer workshops on safer techniques to use OJD vaccine contact Andrew or your local vaccine reseller.

### Cage dipping — June 3–4

Ross Creek Stock Services is coming to the Campbell Town show to demonstrate cage dipping.

They plan to be back during Spring in conjunction with *SheepConnect* workshops on fly and lice control.

**It's Ewe Time** — forums will be occurring across Australia during July and August. If you are out and about in these States consider attending:

<b>WA</b>	Tuesday July 5 — Katanning
	Wednesday July 6 — Northam
	Thursday July 7 — Dandaragan
<b>NSW</b>	Tuesday July 12 — Tamworth
<b>QLD</b>	Friday July 15 — Longreach
<b>Victoria</b>	Tuesday July 26 — Bairnsdale
<b>NSW</b>	Thursday July 28 — Cooma
<b>SA</b>	Tuesday August 23 — Wudinna
	Thursday August 25 — Lameroy

### For more information:

**T: 1800 675 717**

**W: [www.makingmorefromsheep.com.au](http://www.makingmorefromsheep.com.au)**

## Help us help you

The *SheepConnect* team is keen to ensure we deliver the information, workshops and support you need for your sheep business. We are currently formulating our workshop agenda for the coming six to 12 months and would love your input.

Send a quick email to [andrew.bailey@utas.edu.au](mailto:andrew.bailey@utas.edu.au) listing the top five areas you would like to see us run as practical hands-on workshops or come and see us at the Campbell Town show. 📧

## Stay focussed

After joining it is critical to maintain ewe condition for optimal lambing rates. Pregnancy scanning is a personal choice and if you decide to scan your ewes, be sure you know how you will use the results in your management decisions. Anecdotal evidence from recent workshop participants questions the value of managing single and twinning Merino ewes separately.

[www.sheepcrc.org.au/industry-tools-and-information/pregnancy-scanning.php//](http://www.sheepcrc.org.au/industry-tools-and-information/pregnancy-scanning.php//) 📧

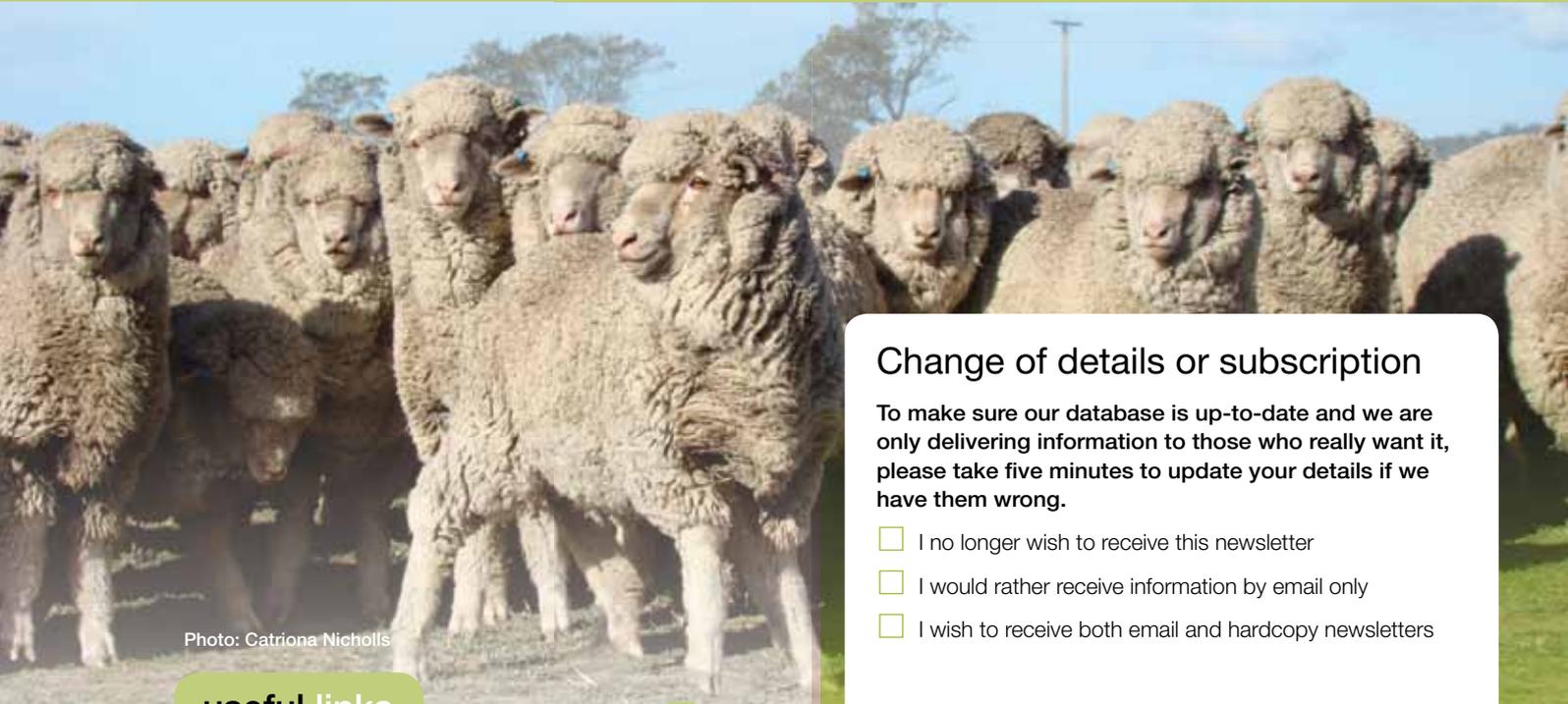


Photo: Catriona Nicholls

### useful links



- Australian Wool Innovation** [www.wool.com](http://www.wool.com)
- Meat and Livestock Australia** [www.mla.gov.au](http://www.mla.gov.au)
- Sheep CRC** [www.sheepcrc.org.au](http://www.sheepcrc.org.au)
- LiceBoss** [www.liceboss.com.au](http://www.liceboss.com.au)
- WormBoss** [www.wormboss.com.au](http://www.wormboss.com.au)
- Making More from Sheep**  
[www.makingmorefromsheep.com.au](http://www.makingmorefromsheep.com.au)
- Sheep Genetics Australia** [www.sheepgenetics.org.au](http://www.sheepgenetics.org.au)
- Australian Merino Superior Sires**  
[www.merinosuperiorsires.com.au](http://www.merinosuperiorsires.com.au)
- Beyond the Bale** [digital.wool.com.au](http://digital.wool.com.au)
- EverGraze** [www.evergraze.com.au](http://www.evergraze.com.au)
- Latest market information** (beef and sheepmeat)  
[www.mla.com.au/Prices-and-markets/Latest-prices-and-indicators](http://www.mla.com.au/Prices-and-markets/Latest-prices-and-indicators)
- Latest market information** (wool) [wool.landmark.com.au/daily-wool-prices-and-sales-roster/](http://wool.landmark.com.au/daily-wool-prices-and-sales-roster/)
- Latest weather** [www.bom.gov.au](http://www.bom.gov.au)
- FarmPoint** [www.farmpoint.tas.gov.au](http://www.farmpoint.tas.gov.au)

### R&D Industry forum

Andrew and Cat recently attended the AWI/MLA R&D industry insights forum. The two-day forum covered sessions on economics, climate adaptation, tools and models for farm enterprises, resilient farming systems, animal health and welfare and genetics and genomics.

The full proceedings from the forum at available at: [wool.com/R&DInsights](http://wool.com/R&DInsights). 📄

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