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APIARIST'S ADVOCATE



News, Views & Promotions - for Beekeepers - by Beekeepers



Riding the Wave of Honey Prices

A MAJOR PACKER EXPLAINS
THE UPS AND DOWNS
OF THE HONEY MARKET



Out of our Control



When few packers were buying non-manuka honey last season, Airborne Honey was willing and able to purchase from beekeepers. Some took the cash, while many reneged, saying the Canterbury-based buyer's prices were opportunistic and didn't respect the true value of their product. Managing director Peter Bray says Airborne Honey's long-standing philosophy has put them in a unique position to capitalise on a glut of honey, but suggests that the prices offered are not of their making and New Zealand must clear a backlog of honey to take back control.



*Peter Bray,
managing director
of Airborne Honey*

"Our philosophy is, you have to be able to act in the market place with integrity and you have to be able to do that when everybody else around you is making millions," Bray says.

He is not a believer in the homeopathic qualities of manuka honey. Whether that scepticism has been shaped by his business's philosophy or shaped it, it has seen the Airborne brand maintain a diverse stable of monofloral honeys, when others turned all attention to the manuka honey gold rush and mined the profits.

That meant Airborne "didn't have a warehouse full of stuff that was being called manuka" last summer and so they had space in their shed and room on their books to accommodate new suppliers.

Bray says they manage their stocks well and understand their annual requirements, meaning in 2020 they will be buyers once again. However, the purchase price is out of their control, whether beekeepers like it or not.

THE AIRBORNE PHILOSOPHY

Established in 1910 by William Bray, who kept hives and sold honey domestically, Airborne has seen many changes in their 109-year existence. Among them was a move away from hive ownership in the 1990s to focus on its processing and packing operation.

"We sell food on the basis of great taste and it is what it says it is and we have the back story to back that up," Bray says of the business his grandfather established and he now heads.

Since the 1980s they have exported honey, while maintaining an iconic local brand. Also during that decade, Airborne set up an in-

house laboratory at their Leeston site and marketed their first monofloral varieties. Clover, manuka and rata were followed by vipers bugloss, kamahi and nodding thistle, then shortly thereafter tawari, rewarewa, thyme and honeydew were added to the portfolio.

The lab helps Airborne provide high quality and well-presented honeys by testing to and meeting the internationally-recognised Codex standard, while also ensuring traceability and consistency of product, Bray says.

The 109-year-old business holds a database of over 40,000 honey samples to measure their varieties against, while attaining the Codex standards of organoleptic, physicochemical and microscopic properties further ensures consistency of product.

"It is the leading world standard for honey and in essence says it has to look like a duck, walk like a duck, have webbed feet and feathers to be a duck," explains Bray.

That means Airborne puts no stock in UMF or MGO ratings and the managing director says while many have benefitted by selling honey as manuka despite it not meeting the Codex definition for a monofloral honey, his business has not wavered from a guiding philosophy of providing honest, undamaged and traceable honey.

NO MGO NO PROBLEM

Bray doesn't pull his punches when he outlines the manuka honey trading that went on prior to the introduction of the most-recent standard by the Ministry for Primary Industries (MPI).

"It wasn't manuka colour, wasn't manuka microscopically, it didn't taste like manuka or smell like manuka, and yet many, many beekeepers were getting an activity reading based on a singular measurement and selling their honey. We think that was a rot and a disgrace for the honey industry."

Despite the new standard, Bray believes the rot is not yet over, saying there is still a lot of product which is able to be sold under the manuka label, which "wouldn't normally be manuka".

Any manuka honey coming from Airborne will meet both Codex and MPI's definition of monofloral and multifloral manuka, while other packers just try to meet the MPI definition, he says.

"We don't put an MGO claim on our labels and we don't put a UMF claim on. That is because we do not think those substances are of any value and in fact are likely to be injurious.

"Strategically, we as a company don't believe it is a path we should pursue."

THE ROAD TAKEN

Airborne still sell their honey both domestically and internationally, but international monofloral markets, which were hard-earned prior to the manuka honey boom, have been all but lost since.

Bray says they "have hung on by their fingertips" in a number of countries, but when they were having to pay upwards of \$12 a kilogram for New Zealand monofloral varieties to secure supply, it was uneconomic and it put years of marketing work in jeopardy.

"If you don't do it right because you can't get supply because everyone is selling their honey as manuka, and the sales drop off, you are back to square one."

His company is well on the way back in though, and therefore beekeepers who offer monofloral honeys will likely fetch a premium from Airborne, in the range of \$6-7 a kilogram, as compared to about \$4 for polyfloral honey. However, the market is volatile and still has potential downside, Bray warns.

Further to that warning, Bray believes many beekeepers brought up through boom years lack the skills to manage their hives to attain monofloral varieties or do not have appropriate hive sites. This is only adding to a non-manuka backlog which is growing bigger every season and which needs to be cleared, he says.

CLEAR THE DECKS

Re-establishing international monofloral honey markets will help somewhat, but Bray believes much of New Zealand's honey stocks will need to be sold on the international bulk honey market to clear stocks

"There is not a magical panacea. You might see a jar of honey at Harrods for extortionate prices, but that is not going to sell 30,000 tonnes of New Zealand honey."

New Zealand produces an average surplus of about 12,000 tonnes of honey a year — after international and domestic sales are subtracted from supply. With stocks having built up since 2012, the result is a 30,000 tonne backlog in Bray's well-informed opinion.

"That surplus is predominantly polyfloral, nondescript honey. It is going to be ranked alongside all the other polyfloral honey from Mexico, Argentina, Ukraine, India and so on.

"It is not going to be sold at some wonderful price. We have had this manuka bubble. It has been, it is gone and the regulations in place mean it is not going to go back there anytime soon.

"The historical average is \$4 a kilo and at the moment the world average is under that, \$3 a kilo. Those are the facts."

New Zealand currently exports little to no lower-priced bulk honey to the markets whose price Bray is quoting, but he feels it is into that pool in which the New Zealand backlog of honey will need to be cleared.

Two of Airborne Honey's wide range of product.



"You can say, 'it is worth more than that', but actually it is worth what someone is willing to pay. Airborne didn't create the situation, it is a situation of our own making by chasing the manuka dollar.

"When it was going the other way, people were buying and cheating and believing there was forever going to be a gravy train. People were joining the industry looking for a gold rush, we were getting screwed and they were getting rich quick. Now it has gone the other way and we are the big bad boys."

But Bray says that neither they, nor any of the other major honey packers, control the situation.

WHO'S AT THE WHEEL?

"We follow prices up and we follow prices down. Nobody is in control.

"People respond to market signals and the market signals in this industry have been, you can take your honey, call it manuka, sell it for an extortionate price, bank the profits and build more beehives.

"So we now have 900,000 hives where we used to sustain 300,000."

Bray knows many of the beekeepers to those hives have overcapitalised and he says Airborne has a role to help get beekeepers through the current tough times, but they can only help so much.

"What we can do as a company is buy their honey from them. Our role in the industry is to market honey, pay the producer and compete against other companies that do the same thing.

"Our role is not to hold everyone's hand and make sure they survive. We are free with our information and make sure we offer advice, but often that commentary is dismissed because it does not fit with how people think the market should work."

Regardless of what others are thinking, Airborne Honey will continue to follow their philosophy and, despite that making them an outlier, they still don't control the prices offered, Bray adds.

"Often the sentiment you come across is, people think we are in control. We are absolutely not in control, we simply ride the wave like everyone else." 

A Battle Plan in the North



Varroa is becoming a growing concern for beekeepers around the country. In the north, Manuka Health is forming a year-round strategy as they seek to beekeep to the conditions and win the war against the pesky mite. Signs are good so far this season, but the plan must evolve as the enemy grows in strength.

With Northland's manuka trees flowering as early as August, Manuka Health's regional apiculture manager for the north needs to have hives "production ready" coming out of winter.

"We have a short period to get it right," says Keegan Blignaut of the northern-most collection of Manuka Health's more than 20,000 hives distributed around the North Island.

"We don't have a lot of nectar flows to help fix the bees. A lot of the issues from varroa you can treat, but unless you get a natural nectar flow they will stand still, even on syrup."

Warmer winters have resulted in colonies with brood year-round, providing potential for varroa to reproduce continually. Also aiding the enemy mite are the economic struggles of the industry, which means more beekeepers are falling behind with hive inspections and treatments, Blignaut says.

The growing challenge has seen Manuka Health carry out almost 3000 sugar shake tests in the last 18 months in an attempt to gather data on mite loadings, while also changing their management regime to include winter treatments.

"In New Zealand there is no rule of thumb as to at what level of impact to treat or when a colony is in a low return state. So, we have been shaking as many hives as we can late in winter and early spring to develop a data set. That way we can say, if you are seeing shakes of 100 or 50 [mites per 100 bees], what needs to be done to address or resolve that circumstance?"

When late summer testing in the Waikato and further north uncovered high mite loadings, the Manuka Health apiarists decided on a winter Apivar treatment and the results were pleasing, Blignaut says.

"Those bees came out of winter amazing.

"More than 65% of the hives we tested and treated through the winter period achieved our production ready target, because they were so well protected. Any hives that were not treated, and had a varroa shake of more than 10 to 15 in late summer, then we saw an impact on the hive development and other related issues, such as PMS, in the spring time."

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One of almost 3000 sugar shake tests carried out by Manuka Health beekeepers in the last 18 months as they seek to control varroa in their hives. Photo: Manuka Health.

They define production ready as at least seven frames of brood and bees up, filling a three-quarter super, Blignaut says.

Shake tests confirmed the beekeepers' eye-tests, with September and October shakes resulting in 95 percent of hives registering no mites and the remaining five percent just one mite per 100 bees.

"Those bees developed like nobody's business, healthy as, taking down their pollen patty and syrup. There were no issues with fixing hives and switching around brood frames, no trouble with queen acceptance," says Blignaut.

Prior to the winter treatment system, Manuka Health had used synthetic strips in spring and autumn, with oxalic strips used through the summer to stay on top of mite numbers.

However, this season's earlier than usual use of Apivar has had a flow-on effect to varroa management later in the season, with Blignaut saying they could end up with some form of treatment in hives year-round.

Oxalic acid strips, followed by Bayvarol, has been used this spring. The plan for January, when hives come out of their main production period, has not been set in stone. However, Blignaut can see the need for another oxalic treatment to bridge the gap until the successful winter Apivar treatment is repeated in 2020.

Numerous factors come in to play when designing a plan to combat varroa, Blignaut explains.

"It depends how many hives get left in Northland, how much splitting we end up doing, are we using cells? All those factors change the dynamic of the varroa. If I split everything using cells then obviously the varroa will be much less because I will be

halving the brood and then probably treating with oxalic."

Results are not left to chance though and the large team of Manuka Health beekeepers will be undertaking more shake tests in January to help determine the battle plan going forward, with Blignaut optimistic as to what the tests will return.

"I expect to find an average of three to 10 mites. There will be outliers of 50 or 60, but my expectation is an average of no more than 10."

The regional apiculture manager for Manuka Health's north is not over confident though, saying in New Zealand "the varroa problem is just going to get worse and we need stay on it to keep in control".

For now, close monitoring and swift action are going a long way to winning the early-season battle for Manuka Health, but the war will wage on. 🐝



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Alternate Treatment Rules Reinforced



Beekeepers have been reminded of the rules around the use and sale of unregistered hive treatments by the Ministry for Primary Industries (MPI) through the release of a guidance document.

The Advertising and own use guidance for compounds for management of disease in beehives document was released on November 5, intended to offer beekeepers further guidance to the rules defined in the Agricultural Compounds and Veterinary Medicines (ACVM) Act 1997.

The growing threat of the varroa mite has seen beekeepers seek alternate treatments to those that are registered under the ACVM Act.

"We are aware of recent situations where products being offered for sale appeared to be out of step with legal requirements," explains Karen Booth of MPI's ACVM Programmes & Appraisals, Assurance, New Zealand Food Safety.

"MPI's experience is that the vast majority of people want to comply with the law, and the guidelines will help inform beekeepers of their legal responsibilities."

The guidance document reinforces that a product must be authorised under the ACVM Act before it can be advertised or any claims as to efficacy, including testimonials, are made.

"This is to provide assurances on matters including product safety and efficacy, food residues, public health, animal welfare, and trade requirements," Booth says.

The guidance document lists varroa, nosema, viruses and bacteria, as examples of pathogens which a product might claim to control, but would need registration to do so legally.

"Anyone trading or advertising unauthorised products could face action under the ACVM Act. They might also face penalties under the Food Act 2014 and the Hazardous Substances and New Organisms Act 1996," Booth warns.

The MPI publication states that even if a product is not being sold, but is used in a beekeeper's own hives, it must still be fit for purpose as per the ACVM. The elements of this "fitness" which are most relevant to beekeepers are outlined, stating that it should not reduce the efficacy of medicines used on humans, result in residues that exceed prescribed limits, be toxic to animals to a point of causing unreasonable or unnecessary distress, or transmit disease or pests.

"We know that many beekeepers like to prepare their own compounds to manage diseases or pests affecting their own bees. They do this for a range of reasons, and it is permitted in certain situations," Booth says.

The document states that beekeepers are responsible for managing the risks associated with compounds they have prepared for use in their own hives, giving examples of oxalic and formic acid being used to control varroa. 

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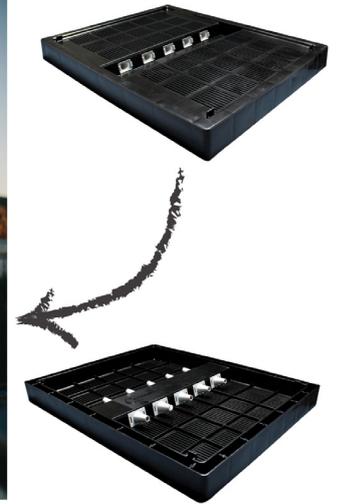
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What is Your Perfect Bee?



If you could call up someone and say, 'I want the perfect bee for my business', what would that look like?

That is the question the FutureBees team is asking and they want New Zealand beekeepers to respond, through an online survey.

FutureBees is a five-year research project with the aim of improving honeybee performance in New Zealand by developing and applying tools which assist breeding programs. It is funded by the Ministry for Business, Innovation and Employment and led by Professor Peter Dearden, bringing together various commercial laboratories and beekeepers.

Since the project launched in 2017, they have used honey production, temperament and wintering ability as key traits. This is because they are measurable and widely desirable, says Gertje Petersen who coordinates the FutureBees' field work through her role at AbacusBio.

However, Petersen says they need much more feedback, from beekeepers all over New Zealand, as to what characteristics they seek in their bees.

"We need to understand if there are different groups of users. Different beekeepers from around the country, do they have different requirements in terms of bee characteristics because they are using them for different things?

"It is all about making sure the bees fit the production system. In order to do that, we need to understand what the differences in production systems are."

Once the FutureBees team understands that, they can more appropriately shape their systems and tools to cater to industry. To help gather beekeepers' preferences, an online survey has been launched on the FuturesBees website. Petersen says they want

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at least 100 beekeepers to complete it so they can gauge a wide range of opinions.

The primary use of hives, be they for commercial honey production, pollination services or as part of a wider breeding program, can drive a desire towards certain characteristics of the bees, while location can also play a big part.

"One of the main issues people have with bee breeding in general is, how do you make sure queens bred in one area are appropriate to another beekeeper who might be buying them in another area?" Petersen says.

"For example, if we ship queens from Otago up to Northland, there is currently no way for the guys in Northland to provide feedback and say, 'your queens couldn't cope with the humidity', or 'they were awesome, please send us more.' There is no network for this."

Providing such a network could be an outcome of their project, but for now a better understanding of regional requirements is needed.

"Our goal is to have a breeding value for every queen. The thing is though, that value might just have to be dynamic because

the same queen is not going to be worth the same to someone in Canterbury as in Northland. That is why we are running the survey," Petersen explains.

The FutureBees team aims to put an economic value on each trait they identify as valuable to beekeepers. This has been achievable with the three traits used to date, but the survey could throw up some preferred characteristics which are difficult to put an economic measure on and therefore difficult to balance against each other. However, Petersen says the outcomes from the project, which is funded until 2022, need to be applicable to industry and therefore they want to establish a measure of the financial value specific characteristics will bring to beekeeping operations.

For now though, it is a matter of getting a wide base of information from beekeepers.

"We know a few things, from talking to beekeepers. They tell us anecdotal things, but we need to understand if there is a pattern there.

"If beekeepers feel they have specific needs, a specific challenge in their area, or they are targeting particular environments, then the only way they can make sure their needs are taken into account is by completing the survey," Petersen adds.

For more information on the FutureBees program and to complete their survey, go to www.futurebeesnz.wordpress.com 



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All Systems Go for Telford Apiculture



Telford will re-format its New Zealand Certificate in Apiculture in 2020, as the Southern Institute of Technology (SIT) seeks to re-establish student's confidence in the rural educator's programs.

Registrations for the 2020 intake opened in November, but the course itself will not begin until August next year — so as to coincide with the beekeeping calendar.

"All systems are go and we have had some very good interest," says SIT head of faculty Terri McClelland.

SIT took up management of Telford in February of this year, taking over from receivers after previous owner Taratahi, and prior to that Lincoln University, failed to form a sustainable business model for the Balclutha-based rural educator. In August of this year the government announced it would back SIT and Telford to the tune of \$4.7 million in 2020 and 2021, finally offering some stability to a training institute which had been on shaky ground for a number of years.

"Enrolment numbers for next year are looking better than they have been this year. So we are hoping we have rebuilt people's confidence," says McClelland.

The Certificate in Apiculture course will begin in August and finish in July 2021. It will be offered as "blended" delivery, meaning students will complete the majority of work via distance learning, but also be expected to attend some block courses on Telford campus.

It is a model which Taratahi used and, with the stability of management under SIT until at least 2021 confirmed, it is a model they can confidentially now offer, McClelland says,

Apiculture training was offered solely via correspondence in 2019.

McClelland says SIT and Telford currently have no arrangements in place with employers in apiculture, but she is happy to work with industry.

"We are always happy to work with employers because they are obviously looking for staff. Anything which makes the course better we are open to."

Students enrolled in the New Zealand Certificate in Apiculture would be eligible for SIT's Zero Fees Scheme, meaning the only major costs will be in buying course materials.

McClelland expects good interest in the course.

"From speaking to a lot of beekeepers, their passion for their bees really comes through. People are not doing it just for a job, they love what they are doing. To be a part of something like that is fantastic." 



Practical Beekeeping in New Zealand (5th Ed.)



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For more than 25 years *Practical Beekeeping in New Zealand* has been the bible for New Zealand beekeepers. The only comprehensive guide to keeping bees in New Zealand, it provides both amateur and professional beekeepers with details on honey bee management throughout the year, advice on handling hive products and information about many other beekeeping subjects.

Each month *Apiarist's Advocate* will run a small extract, tailored to the beekeeping calendar. This month we have selected a section regarding when to harvest, from chapter 14: *Harvesting Honey*. For further reading, the full Definitive Guide can be purchased from Exisle Publishing.

As a beekeeper you are privileged to be able to enjoy fresh honey produced by your own bees. Taking the honey off the hives can be hot and back-breaking work, but is one of beekeeping's greatest satisfactions.

WHEN TO HARVEST

Honey can be harvested as the season progresses, or all at once when honey production stops. If you choose the latter option you will need to set up and clean an extraction plant only once each season, and you will need to visit your apiaries less often.

However, as a general rule progressive honey harvesting is a much better beekeeping practice because:

- fewer supers are needed, as you can use them more than once during the honey flow
- putting freshly extracted supers onto a hive during the honey flow seems to stimulate the bees to store more honey
- honey is easier to extract from the comb in warmer weather and while still warm from the hive
- there is less likelihood of robbing when honey is harvested during the honey flow

- the workload of extracting is spread out, leaving you more time in late summer/autumn for such things as queen rearing and varroa control
- distinct honey types can be kept separate
- you can meet consumer demand for fresh, new season's honey.

Not all of a honey comb needs to be capped before it is removed and extracted — frames with at least three-quarters of their area capped are ready for harvesting. But you should be careful not to take frames with fresh nectar that can be shaken out of the cells like water. This dilute nectar has a high water content, and if included with the honey at harvest may increase the water content to the point where the honey may start to ferment later. Some honey types are naturally high in moisture even when fully capped, such as manuka, tawari and kamahi, so be more particular with these types not to include too much nectar or partially processed honey.

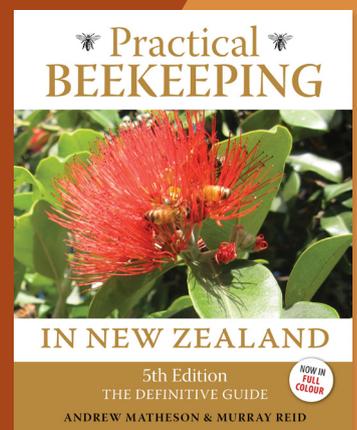
It is best to harvest honey on fine, warm days while most of the foraging bees are away from the hive. Normally all honey from supers above the brood nest is harvested. Honey in the brood nest is left for the bees' winter stores; otherwise the colonies will need more feeding in the spring.

Whether you harvest honey progressively or once at the end of the season, the timing of the final harvest is very important now that varroa is present in New Zealand. Most varroa treatments need to be applied when there are no honey supers on the hives.

If you are keeping beehives in areas where tutu bushes are found you should consider harvesting your honey by the end of December. If you are selling honey from such areas you will need to comply with regulations as described in Chapter 20. 🐝

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Editorial



As beekeepers we can easily get lost in our own world, especially at this time of year when the nectar is flowing and, hopefully, the honey stacking up. We are the first human step in the honey production line and whether you harvest, extract, process, pack, market or sell honey, our lead article this month should be informative.



Peter Bray of Airborne Honey holds a wealth of knowledge on the national and international honey market and by offering his thoughts to us he is helping educate beekeepers on aspects of our industry far beyond the immediate tasks of the hive.

Bray's first priority is his long-standing family business, but, without beekeepers to supply honey to Airborne to process and pack, their model will fail. So, it

is in his interest to clue business owners up on market happenings and what prices they can expect for their honey.

Any light which is shed on the issues pertaining to a beekeeper's business should be welcomed. Despite this, Bray says Airborne's advice is sometimes overlooked because it does not confirm with what beekeepers want to hear. I imagine his recommendation that we need to "clear the decks" of our honey backlog onto the international bulk honey market may fall into that category.

The Airborne managing director estimates a surplus of 30,000 to 35,000 tonnes of honey sits in the sheds of New Zealand while 100% Pure New Zealand Honey CEO Sean Goodwin estimated about 20,000 in June (as covered in the August issue of *Apiarist's Advocate*).

While beekeepers hope the backlog is reducing, Bray contends it is growing. He calls on year-to-date export figures which show that international sales have not picked up in 2019, while an average New Zealand year results in a honey production surplus of around 12,000 tonnes.

Earlier in the year Goodwin claimed that, without a honey producer's levy, most of the work required to build new markets for our honey will not be done any time soon. That only strengthens the likelihood that much of the surplus will enter the international bulk honey market.

Whether beekeepers want to believe what Bray and Goodwin have to say, is up to them. But, we are all better off when armed

with more information on which to build our business decisions. So I thank the Airborne Honey and 100% Pure NZ Honey bosses for being free with their knowledge and I encourage you to go back and read our August issue and a summary of Goodwin's thoughts on the industry if you have not already (it can be found on the back catalogue page at www.apiaristsadvocate.com).

Many of you are likely to have opinions on what has been said, or can recommend someone who you think our readers might like to hear from. On that note, get in touch and give us your feedback at editor@apiadvocate.co.nz.

Merry Christmas and happy honey harvests. 


Neville Marr

Chartered Accountant

An accountant who understands your business!

I'm a Blenheim-based chartered accountant, hobbyist beekeeper, and business partner with all of my clients. What's important to me is understanding my clients' business and bringing that personal touch. Please contact me confidentially and without obligation if you'd like to discuss how I can assist you and your business this year.


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