In March 2009 Canada enacted the most significant reform of its cartel regime since the introduction of the original Combinations in Restraint of Trade Act of 1889. Drawing upon three private studies commissioned by the Competition Bureau (“Bureau”) in 2001, and subsequent proposals from the federal government, the new cartel regime employs a two-track system featuring a per se illegal criminal offense for so-called “naked restraints” agreements and a civil “reviewable practice” for other horizontal agreements between actual or potential competitors. Backing up the new cartel offence are significantly increased penalties, with possible prison terms of up to 14 years for convicted individuals and fines of up to C$25 million (per count charged) for individuals and corporations. Canada has thus, at least on paper, adopted the most stringent anti-cartel regime in the world, combining a broad per se regime with severe criminal penalties. Proponents of the reforms had argued that Canada needed to replace its “undue lessening of competition” test with a per se cartel offense to keep up with its major trading partners in the US and EU, although this observation ignored the fact that US law has been moving away from a rigid “per se”/“rule of reason” dichotomy since the late 1970s, and that EC law neither condemns horizontal agreements on a per se basis nor imposes penal sanctions, much less combine the two.

I. Overview of the New Cartel Offence

The amendments, which entered into force on March 12, 2010, substantially raise the stakes for cartel participants. The new cartel offense provides that:

45. (1) Every person commits an offence who, with a competitor of that person with respect to a product, conspires, agrees or arranges

(a) to fix, maintain, increase or control the price for the supply of the product;

(b) to allocate sales, territories, customers or markets for the production or supply of the product; or

(c) to fix, maintain, control, prevent, lessen or eliminate the production or supply of the product.

This list of practices covers the three most demonstrably “hard-core” types of cartel conduct among “competitors” (which is defined to include potential competitors) — price-fixing, market/customer allocation, and output restriction. Notably, the new offense does not contain any reference to group boycotts, which had been one of the more controversial aspects of the original Private Member’s Bill that initiated the reform process (in 2000) and the federal government’s follow-up Discussion Paper (in 2003). The Competition Act maintains its separate, pre-existing per se offenses for bid-rigging and implementing a foreign-directed conspiracy in Canada. Horizontal agreements that fall outside these per se offenses are treated under the new civil “reviewable practice” if they are “likely to prevent or lessen competition substantially”.

The new cartel provision also provides for the following
defense – which must be established by the accused on the balance of probabilities – relating to ancillary agreements:

(4) No person shall be convicted of an offence under subsection (1) in respect of a conspiracy, agreement or arrangement that would otherwise contravene that subsection if

(a) that person establishes, on a balance of probabilities, that

(i) it is ancillary to a broader or separate agreement or arrangement that includes the same parties, and

(ii) it is directly related to, and reasonably necessary for giving effect to, the objective of that broader or separate agreement or arrangement; and

(b) the broader or separate agreement or arrangement, considered alone, does not contravene that subsection.

This defense is clearly modeled upon the “ancillary restraints” doctrine which originates from US antitrust law and has been adopted, inter alia, in the European Community. While there is substantial US case law, and some EC case law, that may serve as persuasive (if non-binding) point of reference, it remains to be seen how a Canadian court will interpret this provision. The Bureau has made some positive statements concerning its interpretation of the defense, including that “[t]here is no requirement under subsection 45(4) of the Act that the challenged restraint be the least restrictive alternative” and that it “will not ‘second guess’ the parties with reference to some other restraint that may have been less restrictive in some insignificant way.”

These comments offer some comfort to potential joint venturers and would-be participants in other forms of legitimate horizontal collaborations. However, where there are “significantly less restrictive alternatives” available, the parties must demonstrate that these options were “inadequate or impractical” in order to meet the “reasonably necessary” test in s. 45(4)(a)(ii).

II. An Overbroad Definition of “Competitor”

An essential aspect of the new cartel offense, and one which will undoubtedly require interpretation and clarification from the judiciary, is the definition of “competitor” in new section 45(8) of the Act:

“competitor” includes a person who it is reasonable to believe would be likely to compete with respect to a product in the absence of a conspiracy, agreement or arrangement to do anything referred to in paragraphs 1(a) to (c).

This definition appears to give considerable room for maneuver to the enforcement authorities as it extends beyond actual competitors to include potential new entrants or firms in neighboring markets, to the extent that it is “reasonable to believe” that the firms would be “likely to compete” in the future. It is not clear what standard will be employed to determine reasonable belief. While there may be cases in which proof that the parties were “competitors” would not present a challenge (e.g., two airlines operating on the same city pair route), in a wide variety of instances – especially involving neighboring markets, new entrants, dual-distribution scenarios, or other potential competitors – proving competitor status could be more difficult and may require that questions of product and geographic market definition be addressed.

The Bureau has, in perhaps somewhat cavalier fashion, stated that:

[i]n determining whether parties to an agreement are competitors for the purpose of section 45, the Bureau is of the view that it is not required to engage in a detailed definition of the relevant market(s), in the sense of having to plead and prove the full nature and extent of the market and the participants within it.

However, this assertion remains to be tested; certainly, it is not binding on the courts. As a criminal offense, the Crown (as represented by the Public Prosecutions Service of Canada (“PPSC”)) carries the burden of proof and is required to prove each element of the conspiracy offense beyond a reasonable doubt. It is thus for a court to decide whether or not the PPSC has proved the parties’ “competitor” status to this standard and, in the authors’ view, the Bureau’s stated position seems overly optimistic. The new per se offense has eliminated the need to prove market power, but not necessarily all aspects of market definition.

Interestingly, the Bureau’s task will be assisted by the open-ended drafting, as the definition commences with the verb “includes” (instead of “means”). According to the common law of statutory interpretation, this indicates a Parliamentary intention that the definition is not exhaustive and may extend to parties that do not fall within the “reasonable to believe” test. All of the other definitions in the 2009 amendments to the Act save the definition of “price” in the revised cartel offense and the definition of
Moreover, individuals now face a 250 per cent increase in the maximum fines, up to C$25 million per count charged from the former level of C$10 million.20 Moreover, individuals now face a maximum sentence of up to 14 years’ imprisonment, instead of five years under the prior regime. The possibility of 14-year prison terms for individuals is, on our review, the harshest potential criminal cartel penalty worldwide. (The maximum prison term for cartel violations in the United States, previously the highest, is 10 years.) Combined with the lower per se standard of liability, this provides investigators and prosecutors with increased leverage for negotiating guilty pleas and the ability to streamline evidence gathering efforts to focus on proof of the illegal agreement.

Conspiracy has thus been transformed into something that far surpasses a mere regulatory offense, even though it may once have been viewed as such in Canada and continues to be so treated in many jurisdictions outside North America. Although the Bureau had fought for years for stricter penalties and a per se cartel offense, the law of unintended consequences may have a role to play in future cartel cases. Conspiracy has joined the ranks of the most serious criminal offenses in Canada, as can be seen by comparing the new maximum penalty of 14 years’ imprisonment to other offenses under the Criminal Code.25

- Assault (section 266): maximum five years’ imprisonment
- Assault with a weapon (section 267): maximum 10 years’ imprisonment
- Aggravated assault (section 268): maximum 14 years’ imprisonment
- Torture (section 269.1): maximum 14 years’ imprisonment

As a result of the high potential penalties, the longstanding rule of construction in criminal law that any textual ambiguity in penal legislation be resolved in favor of the accused is likely to become increasingly important.26

As Lamer C.J.C has noted, “the overriding principle governing the interpretation of penal provisions is that any ambiguity should be resolved in a manner most favourable to accused persons.”27 This principle has already been applied to offenses under the Act and it can be assumed that defense counsel will regularly raise this argument in contested cases under the new conspiracy offense. A judiciary that has generally been reluctant to convict white collar crimes, and one that is not well-versed in competition analysis, may continue to hesitate at conviction, with such stringent penalties causing judges to balk as they have done in some past cases.28

Another unintended consequence that may frustrate the Bureau’s enforcement of the Act concerns the availability of conditional sentencing (i.e., prison sentences served in the community). A bill presently before the federal Parliament, introduced by the governing minority Conservative Party as part of its “tough on crime” agenda, would eliminate the ability of judges to impose a conditional sentence on any person convicted of a crime which carries a maximum penalty of 14 years’ imprisonment or more — as the new cartel offense does.29 The result, if the Bill is adopted, would be to guarantee that individuals convicted of a cartel offense will either spend time in a jail cell or receive only a fine as punishment: the halfway house of conditional sentencing will not be available. Although the Bill is clearly intended to score political points by targeting violent criminals — as the inclusion of the words “Serious and Violent Offenders” in its title demonstrates — this is yet another unintended consequence of equating cartellists with robbers, rapists and murderers. The potential chill effects on the Bureau’s Leniency Program30 are significant, as individuals involved in price fixing will no doubt balk at the potential of serving jail time despite co-operating and pleading guilty. The Bureau and the PPSC may be forced to take more individuals to trial or revert to using plea agreements that are limited to fines.

IV. Immunity Considerations Under the New Regime

More than ever, securing immunity under the new regime is critical. With a simpler per se offense to prosecute, dramatically higher penalties, and a publicly-stated goal to bring more cases,31 the Competition Bureau has raised the stakes on cartel participants. The PPSC has also demonstrated its prosecutorial zeal, having pursued multiple corporate and individual accused in the Québec retail gasoline price-fixing investigation, and appealing the sentence of one of the participants who had been granted a discharge by the trial court.32 In the Bureau’s view, its immunity program is the “single most powerful means for detecting criminal activity” and its role in cartel enforcement is “unmatched”.33

Fortunately for cartel participants, the Bureau has a long-established and well-understood immunity program. The Bureau deserves much credit for having consistently improved the transparency of its immunity program through a campaign of...
public consultations and publishing explanatory materials. The criteria for earning a recommendation for immunity are that:

- The applicant be the first to disclose illegal conduct of which the Bureau is unaware, or be the first party to provide evidence of conduct of which the Bureau is aware that leads to a referral of the matter to the PPSC.
- The applicant have terminated its participation in the illegal activity.
- The applicant not have coerced others to participate in the illegal activity.
- The applicant not have acted solely on its own (where there are no other parties involved in the conduct, the sole responsible party is not eligible for immunity).
- The party provide complete, timely and ongoing cooperation, at its own expense, throughout the Bureau’s investigation and any subsequent prosecution.

Immunity applications (like leniency applications and prosecutions) are processed in a bifurcated manner, with the initial contact and issuance of a “marker” handled by the Bureau, and the ultimate decision to grant or refuse immunity made by the PPSC, albeit with input and recommendations from the Bureau. Where a party meets the above criteria, the Bureau will recommend to the PPSC that the party be granted immunity from prosecution. Given the bifurcated nature of the investigative and prosecutorial functions, the Bureau’s recommendation is not binding upon the PPSC. However, immunity applicants can take comfort in the generally harmonious working relationship that appears to exist between the Bureau and the PPSC, and certain positive statements in the Bureau’s Leniency Bulletin, which suggests that their odds of receiving the coveted grant of immunity may be significantly higher value”. An important implication of this approach is that it can undermine the race to cooperate. Where a party has access to witnesses or records not available to the Bureau, it may be prepared to take a wait-and-see approach, knowing that it can still seek to negotiate a significant cooperation discount if pleading guilty becomes its best outcome. With the higher penalties under the new regime, this may become more common. A cartel participant may also wish to delay pleading guilty and cooperating in order to assess the enforcers’ level of commitment to seeking out and punishing all members of the alleged cartel. As past practice demonstrates, in various cases the Bureau/PPSC have secured guilty pleas from some – but not all – members of a cartel and have not pursued prosecutions against the remaining parties. A party that pleads out early, only to find that its competitors are not prosecuted, will consider the overall outcome to be a poor result; it is also problematic for the integrity and long-term viability of the Bureau’s leniency program. Similarly, in some cases the perceived penalty levels for latecomers were not materially heavier than for the early cooperators. Such outcomes may send the unfortunate message, however unintentional, that there is value in declining, or at least in delaying, to cooperate. This is reinforced by the fact that those parties that do come forward and plead guilty in exchange for leniency will find themselves more vulnerable (including to joint and several liability for the total harm caused by the cartel) in the inevitable follow-on class actions, as the Act provides that a guilty plea will constitute prima facie evidence for a civil damages claim. For example, in the polyester staple fibre investigation, the Canadian authorities secured a guilty plea from Arteva Specialties S.a.r.l. and a fine of C$1.5 million. However, they subsequently did not secure guilty pleas from, or pursue prosecutions against, the
other parties named in the indictment and the guilty plea (i.e., Wellman Inc. and Nan Ya Plastics Corporation). Similarly, in the choline chloride investigation, the Bureau secured guilty pleas from Chinook Group Limited (C$2.5 million), Akzo Nobel Chemicals BV (C$1 million), BASF AG (C$1 million) and Bioproducts Inc. (C$600,000). Two other parties named in the indictment and in the agreed statement of facts as members of the cartel, DuCoa Animal Health and UCB S.A., never pled guilty and were never prosecuted in Canada.

The authors are aware of other similar examples. While there is no statute of limitation for indictable offenses (including conspiracy) in Canada – and thus the theoretical possibility of the Bureau and PPSC resuming these cases – given the passage of time and declining quality of evidence it now seems extremely unlikely they will do so. In the absence of an unambiguous policy from the Bureau and PPSC to pursue all alleged members of a cartel once a guilty plea has been taken, the past practice of the agencies may have the unintended effect of encouraging parties to adopt a “wait-and-see” approach, to the detriment of the leniency program and effective cartel enforcement.

The absence of a clear policy from the Bureau regarding the treatment of individual employees may also discourage parties from coming forward, particularly where the culpable individuals are also the directing minds of the company. The past practice of extending immunity to a corporate applicant’s former directors, officers and employees has been replaced by a case-by-case approach. Similarly, in corporate leniency applications it is difficult to predict, based on the Bureau’s past practice, whether responsible individuals will be required to enter into separate guilty pleas or whether the overarching corporate plea will be considered sufficient. In the Québec retail gasoline cartel, for example, guilty pleas have been taken from 10 individuals and four companies to date. Individual pleas have been required in various other cases. Conversely, carbonless paper is an example of a case where three Canadian companies pled guilty to price-fixing and market sharing and paid the maximum fines available under the Act (marking the first time maximum fines had been imposed), but no guilty pleas were required in respect of any individuals. It is thus difficult for companies, and their advisors, to assess the potential liability of individual employees and predict whether or not guilty pleas will be required from them. This uncertainty, particularly in the new era of substantially increased prison terms, and coupled with the future possibility that conditional sentences will not be available to individuals, may also discourage companies from coming forward to seek leniency.

VI. Conclusions

The Bureau has publicly stated its intention to bring more cartel cases and to test the boundaries of the new law. While it may have greater prosecutorial success under the new regime, and will certainly have greater negotiating leverage, a per se offense does not guarantee convictions, as recent American prosecutions in the DRAM and marine hose cases demonstrate. Although the removal of the undueness element from section 45 will facilitate more efficient and expedited investigations, proving the existence of an illegal agreement as well as the requisite knowledge/intent beyond a reasonable doubt has often proved difficult in the past, and the Bureau and PPSC must still overcome this hurdle in future cases.

Ultimately, the new cartel offense will need to be tested before the courts to resolve the many open questions concerning its application and scope. A critical determinant of the effectiveness of cartel enforcement under the new regime will be the response of the judiciary to the increased maximum penalties. Reluctance to convict persons in the absence of “smoking gun” evidence appears to have played a role in cases such as Dave Spear, PANS II, Clarke Transport, and Bayda. At a recent international cartel conference, the Commissioner noted that the Bureau is “looking for the right case to galvanize public opinion and bring the judges along.” Given that conspiracies, by their nature, are rarely susceptible to direct proof, the willingness of judges to draw inferences from circumstantial evidence – and send individuals to prison for potentially lengthy periods based on such inferences – will play a critical role in the new regime.
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The law as stated in this article is current to September 1, 2010.


2. Act for the Prevention and Suppression of Combinations formed in Restraint of Trade, 52 Vict. c. 41 (1889) [hereinafter the Competition Act].


4. For example, under the former $10 million per count maximum, F. Hoffmann-LaRoche Ltd. was convicted of eight counts of conspiracy agreements, and fined a total of $50.9 million for its role in the bulk's metals and citric acid cartels: see Competition Bureau, News Release, “Federal Court Imposes Fines Totalling $88.4 Million For International Vitamin Import Conspiracy” (22 September 1999), available online at <http://www.competitionbureau.ca/eic/site/ch-bc.nsf/eng/02551.html>.

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7. See, e.g., Competition Bureau, News Release, “Federal Court Imposes Fines Totalling $88.4 Million For International Vitamin Import Conspiracy” (22 September 1999), available online at <http://www.competitionbureau.ca/eic/site/ch-bc.nsf/eng/02551.html>.


10. S.C. 2004, c. 43, s. 104 (hereinafter the “Defence”). The bid-rigging offense has also been expanded to cover agreements between parties responding to an invitation to tender, whereby one party agrees to withdraw a previously submitted bid. This amendment was made as a direct consequence of the outcome in R. v. Reuse et al. (2004), 29 C.P.R. (4th) 525 (Ont. S.C.) [hereinafter Reuse]. One of authors was counsel to a corporation and an individual accused in the Rowe case.

11. National Council of Federal Court Judges, a body which we are told is unique to Canadian law, provides in part that: “a body which we are told is unique to Canadian law, provides in part that: “a. See, e.g., Competition Bureau, News Release, “Federal Court Imposes Fines Totalling $88.4 Million For International Vitamin Import Conspiracy” (22 September 1999), available online at <http://www.competitionbureau.ca/eic/site/ch-bc.nsf/eng/02551.html>.

12. “an individual who carries on business in Canada and that implements, in whole or in part in Canada, a directive, instruction, intimation of policy or other communication [...] from a person in a country other than Canada who is in a position to direct or influence the policies of the corporation, communication is for the purpose of gaining effect to a conspiracy [...] is, whether or not any director or officer of the corporation has knowledge of the conspiracy, combination, agreement or arrangement, guilty of an indictable offence and liable on conviction to a fine in the discretion of the court. While significant doubt exists as to whether this provision would survive a constitutional challenge in a contested case, to date it has formed the basis for guilty pleas in several international cartels, including graphite electrodes, carbon brushes. While her, on its face, applies only to corporations, the Bureau has publicly stated that “an individual could be convicted of aiding and abetting the commission of such an offense” see Competition Bureau, Revised Draft Information Bulletin on Sentencing and Leniency in Cartel Cases (25 March 2009) [hereinafter Revised Leniency Bulletin], available online at <http://competitionbureau.gc.ca/eic/site/ch-bc.nsf/eng/00227.html>.

13. Under s. 21(1) of the Criminal Code of Canada, such an individual could be found to be a party to the section 46 offence and thus liable on conviction to the same fine as the offending corporation (i.e., a fine in the discretion of the court).

14. While decisions are subject to prohibition or other remedial orders. Abuse of dominance is also punishable by administrative monetary penalties, but the competitor agreements and other reviewable practices provisions are not. See Competition Act, art. 90.1. This provision is structured almost identically to the merger regime in ss. 92.96 of the Act.

15. The bid-rigging offence has also been expanded to cover agreements between parties responding to an invitation to tender, whereby one party agrees to withdraw a previously submitted bid. This amendment was made as a direct consequence of the outcome in R. v. Reuse et al. (2004), 29 C.P.R. (4th) 525 (Ont. S.C.) [hereinafter Reuse]. One of authors was counsel to a corporation and an individual accused in the Rowe case.


17. Competition Act, art. 90.1. This provision is structured almost identically to the merger regime in ss. 92.96 of the Act.


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27. See, e.g., Competition Bureau, News Release, “Federal Court Imposes Fines Totalling $88.4 Million For International Vitamin Import Conspiracy” (22 September 1999), available online at <http://www.competitionbureau.ca/eic/site/ch-bc.nsf/eng/02551.html>.


29. See, e.g., Competition Bureau, News Release, “Federal Court Imposes Fines Totalling $88.4 Million For International Vitamin Import Conspiracy” (22 September 1999), available online at <http://www.competitionbureau.ca/eic/site/ch-bc.nsf/eng/02551.html>.

* The law as stated in this article is current to September 1, 2010.
(1997), 78 C.P.R. (3d) 203 (Alta. Q.B.) [hereinafter Baydal] (in which, among other things, the Court found, despite significant documentary and economic evidence to the contrary, that the accused had not reached an agreement to fix prices in the market for real property land survey reports).

30. See Bill C-16, Ending House Arrest for Property and Other Serious Crimes by Serious and Violent Offenders Act, First Reading 22 April 2010, 3rd Sess., 40th Parl., Elizabeth II, 2010, available online at <http://www2.parl.gc.ca/content/hoc/Bills/403/Government/C-16/C-16_3/C-16_1.PDF>. While it is too early to gauge the support for this Bill, a virtually-identical predecessor introduced in 2009 before Parliament was prorogued earned a clear majority of votes after its First Reading. See Bill C-42, Ending Conditional Sentences for Property and Other Serious Crimes Act, First Reading 15 June 2009, 2nd Sess., 40th Parl., Elizabeth II, 2009, available online at <http://www2.parl.gc.ca/content/hoc/Bills/402/Government/C-42/C-42_1/C-42_1.PDF>.

31. Ibid. note 14.

32. See, e.g., the recent speeches of the Commissioner of Competition, in which he proclaimed that the Bureau “needs to initiate responsible cases more often” and “must not be intimidated by the fear of losing”45; Speech of Commissioner Melanie L. Aitken to the Canadian Bar Association Competition Law Section Annual Conference (25 September 2009), available online at <http://competitionbureau.gc.ca/eic/site/cb-bc.nsf/eng/03138.html>; and Speech of Acting Commissioner Melanie L. Aitken to the Canadian Bar Association Competition Law Section 2009 Spring Forum (12 May 2009), available online at <http://competitionbureau.gc.ca/eic/site/cb-bc.nsf/eng/03066.html>.


35. While the Bureau’s practices in respect of immunity developed significantly during the 1990s, it published the first formal Information Bulletin detailing the policies of its immunity program in 2000. This was followed by a “Responses to FAQs” document in 2003, and a revised and expanded FAQs document in 2005. In 2006 it opened a public consultation on various aspects of the immunity process, and subsequently issued a revised Information Bulletin in 2007. In August 2009 it issued an updated version of the Bulletin, noting that “[r]egular reviews and adjustments are essential to ensure that the Program keeps pace with changes that affect its ability to continue delivering significant value to the Bureau” at para 2. The present Immunity Program FAQs are available online at <http://competitionbureau.gc.ca/eic/site/cb-bc.nsf/eng/02928.html>.

36. Immunity Program, supra note 34 at 5-6.

37. To the best of the authors’ knowledge, there has been no instance in which a Bureau recommendation as to immunity or leniency has been refused by the PPSC.

38. The Deskbook states that “Crown counsel should, where reasonably possible, solicit and weigh the views of those involved in the Crown’s case—in particular, the victim (where there is one) and the investigating agency”. See Department of Justice Canada, Federal Prosecution Service Deskbook, Ch. 20, S. 20.3.8.1 (emphasis added).


41. Ibid., at para 55.

42. Ibid., at para 87.

43. Competition Act, s. 36(2).


48. See the discussion at note 30 supra. It is notable that in the ongoing investigation and prosecutions related to the Québec retail gasoline market, four individuals have received custodial sentences, and all of these sentences are to be served conditionally, in the community. It is doubtful whether these individuals would have agreed to plead guilty had the possibility of conditional sentencing not existed.

49. See, e.g., Speech of Commissioner of Competition Melanie L. Aitken to the Canadian Bar Association Spring Competition Law Conference (17 May 2010), available online at <http://www.competitionbureau.gc.ca/eic/site/cb-bc.nsf/eng/03247.html>.

50. See U.S. v. Gary Swanson, Case Number 06-692, U.S. District Court for the Northern District of California, 7 March 2008. Despite securing guilty pleas (and fines in excess of US$730 million) from the four companies that participated in the DRAM cartel, the U.S. Department of Justice prosecution against Gary Swanson, a former Senior Vice-President of Sales for Hynix Semiconductor America Inc., resulted in a mistrial. See also U.S. v. Northcutt, Case Number 07-60220CR, U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Florida, 10 November 2008. In that case, the U.S. DOJ had several co-operating witnesses from the alleged cartel who pled guilty and testified against the two accused at trial, but the jury nevertheless returned an acquittal.

51. The comments were made by Commissioner Aitken during the “Enforcers Roundtable” at the ABA/IBA 2010 International Cartel Workshop (Paris, 12 February 2010).
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