

CBOR Object Signing and Encryption
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M. Prorock
mesur.io
O. Steele
Tradeverifyd
H. Tschofenig
UniBw M.
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SLH-DSA for JOSE and COSE
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Abstract

This document specifies JSON Object Signing and Encryption (JOSE) and CBOR Object Signing and Encryption (COSE) serializations for Stateless Hash-Based Digital Signature Standard (SLH-DSA), a Post-Quantum Cryptography (PQC) digital signature scheme defined in US NIST FIPS 205.

About This Document

This note is to be removed before publishing as an RFC.

The latest revision of this draft can be found at <https://cose-wg.github.io/draft-ietf-cose-sphincs-plus/draft-ietf-cose-sphincs-plus.html>. Status information for this document may be found at <https://datatracker.ietf.org/doc/draft-ietf-cose-sphincs-plus/>.

Discussion of this document takes place on the CBOR Object Signing and Encryption Working Group mailing list (<mailto:cose@ietf.org>), which is archived at <https://mailarchive.ietf.org/arch/browse/cose/>. Subscribe at <https://www.ietf.org/mailman/listinfo/cose/>.

Source for this draft and an issue tracker can be found at <https://github.com/cose-wg/draft-ietf-cose-sphincs-plus>.

Status of This Memo

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1. Introduction

This document specifies JSON Object Signing and Encryption (JOSE) [RFC7515] and CBOR Object Signing and Encryption (COSE) [RFC9052] serializations for the Stateless Hash-Based Digital Signature Standard (SLH-DSA), which was derived from Version 3.1 of SPHINCS+, a Post-Quantum Cryptography (PQC) based digital signature scheme standardized in [FIPS-205].

This document builds on the Algorithm Key Pair (AKP) type, as defined in [I-D.ietf-cose-dilithium]. The AKP type enables flexible representation of keys used across different post-quantum cryptographic algorithms, including SLH-DSA.

2. Terminology

The key words "MUST", "MUST NOT", "REQUIRED", "SHALL", "SHALL NOT", "SHOULD", "SHOULD NOT", "RECOMMENDED", "NOT RECOMMENDED", "MAY", and "OPTIONAL" in this document are to be interpreted as described in BCP 14 [RFC2119] [RFC8174] when, and only when, they appear in all capitals, as shown here.

3. The SLH-DSA Algorithm Family

The SLH-DSA Signature Scheme is parameterized to support different security levels.

This document introduces the registration of the following algorithms in [IANA.jose]:

Name	alg	Description
SLH-DSA-SHA2-128s	SLH-DSA-SHA2-128s	JSON Web Signature Algorithm for SLH-DSA-SHA2-128s
SLH-DSA-SHAKE-128s	SLH-DSA-SHAKE-128s	JSON Web Signature Algorithm for SLH-DSA-SHAKE-128s

Table 1: JOSE Algorithms for SLH-DSA

This document introduces the registration of the following algorithms in [IANA.cose]:

Name	alg	Description
SLH-DSA-SHA2-128s	TBD1 (-51)	CBOR Object Signing Algorithm for SLH-DSA-SHA2-128s
SLH-DSA-SHAKE-128s	TBD2 (-52)	CBOR Object Signing Algorithm for SLH-DSA-SHAKE-128s

Table 2: COSE Algorithms for SLH-DSA

[FIPS-205] defines twelve parameter sets in total, across three NIST security categories (1, 3, 5), two hash function families (SHA2 and SHAKE), and two size/speed tradeoffs (small s and fast f). This document registers only the two NIST Category 1, "small" parameter sets - one for each hash function family. Limiting the initial registration to a small, symmetric set is intended to maximize interoperability among early implementations and to keep the JOSE and COSE registries focused.

Future documents may register additional SLH-DSA parameter sets — including higher security categories or the "fast" variants — as deployment experience identifies the need.

4. SLH-DSA Keys

Private and public keys are produced to enable the sign and verify operations for each of the SLH-DSA algorithms.

The SLH-DSA Algorithm Family uses the Algorithm Key Pair (AKP) key type, as defined in [I-D.ietf-cose-dilithium]. This ensures compatibility across different cryptographic algorithms that use AKP for key representation.

The specific algorithms for SLH-DSA, namely SLH-DSA-SHA2-128s and SLH-DSA-SHAKE-128s, are defined in this document and are used in the alg value of an AKP key representation to specify the corresponding algorithm.

Thumbprints for SLH-DSA keys are computed according to the process described in [I-D.ietf-cose-dilithium].

5. Signing and Verification

Signatures are produced and verified using the procedures defined in [FIPS-205]. The SLH-DSA signing function takes a context string ctx as input. For the algorithms registered in this document, the ctx parameter MUST be the empty string. Implementations that produce or accept a non-empty ctx value will not interoperate.

Signatures are encoded as the byte strings produced by the signature generation algorithms in [FIPS-205]. When producing JSON Web Signatures, the signature byte strings are base64url encoded. When producing COSE signatures, no encoding is needed; see Section 4 of [RFC9052] for more details on how COSE signatures are created.

6. Security Considerations

The security considerations of [RFC7515], [RFC7517] and [RFC9053] apply to this specification as well.

A detailed security analysis of SLH-DSA is beyond the scope of this specification; see [FIPS-205] for additional details.

The following considerations apply to all parameter sets described in this specification.

6.1. Pre-Hash and Hashing Considerations

[FIPS-205] defines two variants of the signature scheme: SLH-DSA, which takes the message directly as input, and HashSLH-DSA, which applies an external pre-hash to the message before invocation. This document specifies only SLH-DSA for use with JOSE and COSE. HashSLH-DSA is out of scope.

A key identified by an SLH-DSA algorithm identifier defined in this document MUST NOT be used to generate or verify a HashSLH-DSA signature, and vice versa. The same constraint is described for X.509 deployments in [RFC9909].

This document does not define or register separate HashSLH-DSA algorithm identifiers for JOSE or COSE. Doing so would require distinct algorithm registrations and would introduce additional implementation and interoperability complexity.

For many JOSE and COSE use cases, this restriction is acceptable because the application can already structure the signed content in a way that limits the amount of data processed directly by the signature algorithm. In particular, applications that need to sign large payloads, detached content, or remotely held content may use the COSE Hash Envelope mechanism [I-D.ietf-cose-hash-envelope].

Hash Envelope can provide operational properties similar to those sought from a pre-hash signature mode, such as reduced data transfer to a signer, reduced buffering requirements, and simplified remote-signing workflows. However, Hash Envelope is not cryptographically equivalent to HashSLH-DSA. HashSLH-DSA binds the identity of the pre-hash function into the signature through a domain separator inside the signing algorithm; Hash Envelope carries the digest and the digest algorithm at the COSE layer, outside the signature's domain separator.

Applications that use Hash Envelope together with SLH-DSA need to ensure that the digest is recomputed over the original content and compared with the signed digest before treating the signature as valid for that content. Profiles that rely on this construction SHOULD specify the permitted hash algorithms and the verification procedure explicitly.

If future deployment experience shows clear demand for algorithm-level pre-hash semantics in JOSE or COSE, separate registrations for HashSLH-DSA could be defined in a future specification.

6.2. Validating Public Keys

All algorithms that operate on public keys require validation before use. For sign, verify and proof schemes, the use of KeyValidate is REQUIRED.

6.3. Side-Channel Attacks

Implementations of the signing algorithm SHOULD protect the secret key from side-channel attacks. Any implementation of SLH-DSA signing algorithms SHOULD employ at least the following best practices:

- * Constant-time operation
- * Consistent instruction sequence and memory access
- * Uniform sampling without information leakage

6.4. Deterministic and Randomized Signing

[FIPS-205] permits both deterministic and randomized (hedged) signing. The choice of mode is implementation-defined; signatures produced under either mode are verifiable with the same public key, and verifiers cannot and need not distinguish them.

Deterministic signing is simpler and removes a runtime dependency on a random number generator at signing time. Randomized signing offers improved resistance to fault and side-channel attacks that target the signing operation, at the cost of requiring a high-quality random source on every invocation.

Implementations that select randomized signing MUST source the per-signature randomness from a trusted and cryptographically secure source as described in Section 9.2 of [FIPS-205].

6.5. Randomness considerations

All nonces MUST originate from a trusted and cryptographically secure source of randomness.

7. IANA Considerations

7.1. New COSE Algorithms

IANA is requested to add the following entries to the COSE Algorithms Registry.

The following registration templates are provided in accordance with the procedures described in [RFC9053] and [RFC9054].

7.1.1. SLH-DSA-SHA2-128s

- * Name: SLH-DSA-SHA2-128s

- * Value: TBD1 (requested assignment -51)
- * Description: CBOR Object Signing Algorithm for SLH-DSA-SHA2-128s
- * Capabilities: [kty]
- * Change Controller: IETF
- * Reference: RFC XXXX
- * Recommended: Yes

7.1.2. SLH-DSA-SHAKE-128s

- * Name: SLH-DSA-SHAKE-128s
- * Value: TBD2 (requested assignment -52)
- * Description: CBOR Object Signing Algorithm for SLH-DSA-SHAKE-128s
- * Capabilities: [kty]
- * Change Controller: IETF
- * Reference: RFC XXXX
- * Recommended: Yes

7.2. New JOSE Algorithms

IANA is requested to add the following entries to the JSON Web Signature and Encryption Algorithms Registry.

The following completed registration templates are provided as described in [RFC7518].

7.2.1. SLH-DSA-SHA2-128s

- * Algorithm Name: SLH-DSA-SHA2-128s
- * Algorithm Description: SLH-DSA-SHA2-128s as described in FIPS 205.
- * Algorithm Usage Location(s): alg
- * JOSE Implementation Requirements: Optional
- * Change Controller: IETF

- * Specification Document(s): RFC XXXX
- * Algorithm Analysis Documents(s): [FIPS-205]

7.2.2. SLH-DSA-SHAKE-128s

- * Algorithm Name: SLH-DSA-SHAKE-128s
- * Algorithm Description: SLH-DSA-SHAKE-128s as described in FIPS 205.
- * Algorithm Usage Location(s): alg
- * JOSE Implementation Requirements: Optional
- * Change Controller: IETF
- * Specification Document(s): RFC XXXX
- * Algorithm Analysis Documents(s): [FIPS-205]

8. References

8.1. Normative References

- [FIPS-205] "Stateless Hash-Based Digital Signature Standard", n.d.,
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- [I-D.ietf-cose-dilithium]
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- [RFC9054] Schaad, J., "CBOR Object Signing and Encryption (COSE): Hash Algorithms", RFC 9054, DOI 10.17487/RFC9054, August 2022, <<https://www.rfc-editor.org/rfc/rfc9054>>.

8.2. Informative References

- [I-D.ietf-cose-hash-envelope] Steele, O., Lasker, S., and H. Birkholz, "COSE Hash Envelope", Work in Progress, Internet-Draft, draft-ietf-cose-hash-envelope-10, 15 November 2025, <<https://datatracker.ietf.org/doc/html/draft-ietf-cose-hash-envelope-10>>.
- [IANA.cose] IANA, "CBOR Object Signing and Encryption (COSE)", <<https://www.iana.org/assignments/cose>>.
- [IANA.jose] IANA, "JSON Object Signing and Encryption (JOSE)", <<https://www.iana.org/assignments/jose>>.
- [RFC9909] Bashiri, K., Fluhrer, S., Gazdag, S., Van Geest, D., and S. Kousidis, "Internet X.509 Public Key Infrastructure -- Algorithm Identifiers for the Stateless Hash-Based Digital Signature Algorithm (SLH-DSA)", RFC 9909, DOI 10.17487/RFC9909, December 2025, <<https://www.rfc-editor.org/rfc/rfc9909>>.

Appendix A. Examples

These examples were generated using Cloudflare CIRCL and cross-validated against the Trail of Bits go-slh-dsa implementation. Source code is available in the examples/ directory.

A.1. JOSE

A.1.1. SLH-DSA-SHA2-128s

```
{
  "alg": "SLH-DSA-SHA2-128s",
  "kid": "slh-dsa-sha2-128s-kid",
  "kty": "AKP",
  "priv": "Pld2M4reQEET09DkH_hmBUPH5mb12TZkfdp6rs2oXjmDHSYmLJWnKQZRp2I6JmQaXPjlAQXhaDt
lSspnzERlag",
  "pub": "gx0mJiyVpykGUadiOiZkGlz45QEF4Wg7ZUrKZ8xEdWo"
}
```

Figure 1: Example SLH-DSA-SHA2-128s Private JSON Web Key

```
{
  "alg": "SLH-DSA-SHA2-128s",
  "kid": "slh-dsa-sha2-128s-kid",
  "kty": "AKP",
  "pub": "gx0mJiyVpykGUadiOiZkGlz45QEF4Wg7ZUrKZ8xEdWo"
}
```

Figure 2: Example SLH-DSA-SHA2-128s Public JSON Web Key

A.1.2. SLH-DSA-SHAKE-128s

```
{
  "alg": "SLH-DSA-SHAKE-128s",
  "kid": "slh-dsa-shake-128s-kid",
  "kty": "AKP",
  "priv": "Kz9ljgHXlryVS2ne7Z_KtFIagmK5Oep1CrBYQcgK75DzFnbI9OqaLaMaevKz11WJDr3mOmUB9fF
g94rq3Lckug",
  "pub": "8xZ2yPTqmi2jGnr55dViQ695jplAfXxYPEK6ty3JLo"
}
```

Figure 3: Example SLH-DSA-SHAKE-128s Private JSON Web Key

```
{
  "alg": "SLH-DSA-SHAKE-128s",
  "kid": "slh-dsa-shake-128s-kid",
  "kty": "AKP",
  "pub": "8xZ2yPTqmi2jGnr55dViQ695jplAfXxYPEK6ty3JLo"
}
```

Figure 4: Example SLH-DSA-SHAKE-128s Public JSON Web Key

A.2. COSE

A.2.1. SLH-DSA-SHA2-128s

```
{
  / kty AKP / 1: 7,
  / alg SLH-DSA-SHA2-128s / 3: -51,
  / kid / 2: h'736c682d6473612d736861322d313238732d6b6964',
  / public key / -1:
h'831d26262c95a7290651a7623a26641a5cf8e50105e1683b654aca67cc44756a',
  / private key / -2:
h'3f5776338ade40412dd3d0e41ff8660543c7e666f5d936647dda7aaecda85e39
831d26262c95a7290651a7623a26641a5cf8e50105e1683b654aca67cc44756a',
}
```

Figure 5: Example SLH-DSA-SHA2-128s COSE Key

```
18([
  <<{
    / alg SLH-DSA-SHA2-128s / 1: -51,
  }>>,
  / unprotected / {},
  / payload / h'66616b65',
  / signature /
h'88a36aae95778da5bce3a58808d3fe54b2be969d221d1dff264711598f4b5b32
ee27ff1397233805989c5934e5766704a1129390ceb3d937be78463d39cf60e2
4b3c74dadabc7f748da72343844c6a4efb5f829d4025e7be2be63afdeade06a6
447f3eb884e8df9ca0a10625f7216b12eb75831259183d0fe9b9d6fda4754f6a
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f0c8900b2db4a2fbad74e2dbb895d870a6d301e68cf9fb3e87d3afd06e8bade1
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5d85b847f8fcd080e6fbf0a3ef1faa496cd704399f8cdd14f9c8c9b2e39ddb84
3d6a21fdfe3c2f6ff955da15alb4d8d8b317caa957965865b6ca64cb9055fce
9541796fb02f9c31680e230dc5b2497a595b91e9721c26f4427495a162bcb4b3
18a55303a05a7089a72debb5b034a67d5338e80ae4b4d903b26c98f906e9611c
6e87e666a15854d1248f2ccc6a736c42c3f9212f300b587da1f8563938838b5f
63d00c19d89e951fe7c10647e652dc9e91408f66e03bdf087c893494085c7dd9
```

f63cefdb4b69ca99bdf1a647dff354e0e0fb96eaa38922e6fe1001a9a3be2513
90f2506de734a84ccc3e74fd9fe2c9de72ab01462112a390607662c158022642
76b1140473cb3766e36d86568e2a15cd0977d7df2711eee96bdb32e4fe66d9a7
7ccc21ddd36c4a5b4b436b77ea783ca982a17b03b9d55e144e699d83b7f9218e
68d609a93fbec8695770d1ec27dbaa6e162d635c419ff0fd310f46b8c8a1bba2
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c28e3a3b7c0f41f1da95f21551acdf55b72511d7ed2e7de7d13a2382b23feb96
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1e88a324bc4cb099017700846e9884b993d319fa3298e306a484dcb72bf6261d
b40cfa52050c2133fa5fc0eaa3f84004a85a718a86aa6c70f7b4065ac43ae5b9
7fd294870ad08b6d06b60705c6486b9c447e3510c2a17d9b8640dfce6b190bd1
83fc46da15c79bc4dc91e0c93d31ead9e4316342273c65548ecb5e623212f021
ed460e3f590e84ea8c3040010fabe9b9b86eb1100f8b683d654b4b73c524ed24
219a1af97a48881d7c6db5fbd8927b6199229afc0613eac26008bca53c592876
01acdd0ba01aee865068670354d91e58447b36cb55b3c5855d21798991223874
1e39ee0f6ad64d3f06d4a4c2ef833ede9cble5aefe722e92ab86b0a455d3e49f
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93378eae530522c52e356bb75ff6e35d1cda32dfaac9e413ef35152af038cb2b
84ed949d34e8352d263f4577dfed00190d6ecc8e8ab4a62d952723c1f86891d3
e16ee0af156496446158a97f77868655f8d0d7cf6c1c140bbd94balb847cf1f0
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abf38d5212415ebc30605f0b65dc5159d1f9676382122f5f5d7f7a920fb7031a
36b594416367de00cbdcbe33482d8850494d32ea3a2f564e773e2df7cb4baf7c
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582044e341261f71cf6a04c3f29e1cb2acb317ecaa440b5b7bb75e3d500d2a01
442b1a7c73a863d8b57697c86345b726d14e20826ebf1856890e986c3a3f5d39
6e6b6280768a35c686606e5b7037dc7292baf68f21f2c7c511244ff186161852
0e6dd748effe679fcb404e3a156ce87e87df5971eb45cfda5ac6f18656b60840
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```

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7883a014f086d574cfc160b8c8067244',
]

```

Figure 6: Example SLH-DSA-SHA2-128s COSE Sign1

A.2.2. SLH-DSA-SHAKE-128s

```

{
  / kty AKP / 1: 7,
  / alg SLH-DSA-SHAKE-128s / 3: -52,
  / kid / 2: h'736c682d6473612d7368616b652d313238732d6b6964',
  / public key / -1:
h'f31676c8f4ea9a2da31a7af2b39755890ebde63a6501f5f160f78aeadc724ba',
  / private key / -2:
h'2b3f658e01d7d6bc954b69c4ed9fcab5f21a8262b939ea750ab05841c80aef90
f31676c8f4ea9a2da31a7af2b39755890ebde63a6501f5f160f78aeadc724ba',
}

```

Figure 7: Example SLH-DSA-SHAKE-128s COSE Key

```
18([
  <<{
    / alg SLH-DSA-SHAKE-128s / 1: -52,
  }>>,
  / unprotected / {},
  / payload / h'66616b65',
  / signature /
h'739b331fcf62683408d06d279d0726b9cd7ecb471768954695b5ec90d16888f9
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ce7c6addbac48bf339e0fb4882bbc775',
```

])

Figure 8: Example SLH-DSA-SHAKE-128s COSE Sign1

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Contributors

Rafael Misoczki
Google
Email: rafaelmisoczki@google.com

Michael Osborne
IBM
Email: osb@zurich.ibm.com

Christine Cloostermans
NXP
Email: christine.cloostermans@nxp.com

Authors' Addresses

Michael Prorock
mesur.io
Email: mprorock@mesur.io

Orie Steele
Tradeverifyd
Email: orie@or13.io

Hannes Tschofenig
University of the Bundeswehr Munich
85577 Neubiberg
Germany
Email: hannes.tschofenig@gmx.net