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# RFC 8778

## Use of the HSS/LMS Hash-Based Signature Algorithm with CBOR Object Signing and Encryption (COSE)

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### Abstract

This document specifies the conventions for using the Hierarchical Signature System (HSS) / Leighton-Micali Signature (LMS) hash-based signature algorithm with the CBOR Object Signing and Encryption (COSE) syntax. The HSS/LMS algorithm is one form of hash-based digital signature; it is described in RFC 8554.

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## 1. Introduction

This document specifies the conventions for using the Hierarchical Signature System (HSS) / Leighton-Micali Signature (LMS) hash-based signature algorithm with the CBOR Object Signing and Encryption (COSE) [RFC8152] syntax. The LMS system provides a one-time digital signature that is a variant of Merkle Tree Signatures (MTS). The HSS is built on top of the LMS system to efficiently scale for a larger number of signatures. The HSS/LMS algorithm is one form of a hash-based digital signature, and it is described in [HASHSIG]. The HSS/LMS signature algorithm can only be used for a fixed number of signing operations. The number of signing operations depends upon the size of the tree. The HSS/LMS signature algorithm uses small public keys, and it has low computational cost; however, the signatures are quite large. The HSS/LMS private key can be very small when the signer is willing to perform additional computation at signing time; alternatively, the private key can consume additional memory and provide a faster signing time. The HSS/LMS signatures [HASHSIG] are currently defined to use exclusively SHA-256 [SHS].

### 1.1. Motivation

Recent advances in cryptanalysis [BH2013] and progress in the development of quantum computers [NAS2019] pose a threat to widely deployed digital signature algorithms. As a result, there is a need to prepare for a day that cryptosystems, such as RSA and DSA, that depend on discrete logarithm and factoring cannot be depended upon.

If large-scale quantum computers are ever built, these computers will have more than a trivial number of quantum bits (qubits), and they will be able to break many of the public-key cryptosystems currently in use. A post-quantum cryptosystem [PQC] is a system that is secure against such large-scale quantum computers. When it will be feasible to build such computers is open to conjecture; however, RSA [RFC8017], DSA [DSS], Elliptic Curve Digital Signature Algorithm (ECDSA) [DSS], and Edwards-curve Digital Signature Algorithm (EdDSA) [RFC8032] are all vulnerable if large-scale quantum computers come to pass.

Since the HSS/LMS signature algorithm does not depend on the difficulty of discrete logarithm or factoring, the HSS/LMS signature algorithm is considered to be post-quantum secure. The use of HSS/LMS hash-based signatures to protect software update distribution will allow the deployment of future software that implements new cryptosystems. By deploying HSS/LMS today, authentication and integrity protection of the future software can be provided, even if advances break current digital-signature mechanisms.

### 1.2. 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.

## 2. LMS Digital Signature Algorithm Overview

This specification makes use of the hash-based signature algorithm specified in [HASHSIG], which is the Leighton and Micali adaptation [LM] of the original Lamport-Diffie-Winternitz-Merkle one-time signature system [M1979][M1987][M1989a][M1989b].

The hash-based signature algorithm has three major components:

- Hierarchical Signature System (HSS) -- see [Section 2.1](#)
- Leighton-Micali Signature (LMS) -- see [Section 2.2](#)
- Leighton-Micali One-time Signature (LM-OTS) Algorithm-- see [Section 2.3](#)

As implied by the name, the hash-based signature algorithm depends on a collision-resistant hash function. The hash-based signature algorithm specified in [HASHSIG] currently makes use of the SHA-256 one-way hash function [SHS], but it also establishes an IANA registry to permit the registration of additional one-way hash functions in the future.

### 2.1. Hierarchical Signature System (HSS)

The hash-based signature algorithm specified in [HASHSIG] uses a hierarchy of trees. The N-time Hierarchical Signature System (HSS) allows subordinate trees to be generated when needed by the signer. Otherwise, generation of the entire tree might take weeks or longer.

An HSS signature, as specified in [HASHSIG], carries the number of signed public keys (N<sub>spk</sub>), followed by that number of signed public keys, followed by the LMS signature, as described in [Section 2.2](#). The public key for the topmost LMS tree is the public key of the HSS system. The LMS private key in the parent tree signs the LMS public key in the child tree, and the LMS private key in the bottom-most tree signs the actual message. The signature over the public key and the signature over the actual message are LMS signatures, as described in [Section 2.2](#).

The elements of the HSS signature value for a stand-alone tree (a top tree with no children) can be summarized as:

```
u32str(0) ||  
lms_signature /* signature of message */
```

where the notation comes from [HASHSIG].

The elements of the HSS signature value for a tree with N<sub>spk</sub> signed public keys can be summarized as:

```

u32str(Nspk) ||
signed_public_key[0] ||
signed_public_key[1] ||
...
signed_public_key[Nspk-2] ||
signed_public_key[Nspk-1] ||
lms_signature /* signature of message */

```

As defined in [Section 3.3](#) of [HASHSIG], a signed\_public\_key is the lms\_signature over the public key followed by the public key itself. Note that Nspk is the number of levels in the hierarchy of trees minus 1.

## 2.2. Leighton-Micali Signature (LMS)

Subordinate LMS trees are placed in the HSS structure, as discussed in [Section 2.1](#). Each tree in the hash-based signature algorithm specified in [HASHSIG] uses the Leighton-Micali Signature (LMS) system. LMS systems have two parameters. The first parameter is the height of the tree,  $h$ , which is the number of levels in the tree minus one. The [HASHSIG] includes support for five values of this parameter:  $h=5$ ,  $h=10$ ,  $h=15$ ,  $h=20$ , and  $h=25$ . Note that there are  $2^h$  leaves in the tree. The second parameter is the number of bytes output by the hash function,  $m$ , which is the amount of data associated with each node in the tree. The [HASHSIG] specification supports only SHA-256 with  $m=32$ . An IANA registry is defined so that other hash functions could be used in the future.

The [HASHSIG] specification supports five tree sizes:

- LMS\_SHA256\_M32\_H5
- LMS\_SHA256\_M32\_H10
- LMS\_SHA256\_M32\_H15
- LMS\_SHA256\_M32\_H20
- LMS\_SHA256\_M32\_H25

The [HASHSIG] specification establishes an IANA registry to permit the registration of additional hash functions and additional tree sizes in the future.

The [HASHSIG] specification defines the value  $I$  as the private key identifier, and the same  $I$  value is used for all computations with the same LMS tree. The value  $I$  is also available in the public key. In addition, the [HASHSIG] specification defines the value  $T[r]$  as the  $m$ -byte string associated with the  $i$ th node in the LMS tree, and the nodes are indexed from 1 to  $2^{(h+1)}-1$ . Thus,  $T[1]$  is the  $m$ -byte string associated with the root of the LMS tree.

The LMS public key can be summarized as:

```

u32str(lms_algorithm_type) || u32str(otstype) || I || T[1]

```

As specified in [HASHSIG], the LMS signature consists of four elements:

- the number of the leaf associated with the LM-OTS signature,

- an LM-OTS signature, as described in [Section 2.3](#),
- a type code indicating the particular LMS algorithm, and
- an array of values that is associated with the path through the tree from the leaf associated with the LM-OTS signature to the root.

The array of values contains the siblings of the nodes on the path from the leaf to the root but does not contain the nodes on the path itself. The array for a tree with height  $h$  will have  $h$  values. The first value is the sibling of the leaf, the next value is the sibling of the parent of the leaf, and so on up the path to the root.

The four elements of the LMS signature value can be summarized as:

```
u32str(q) ||
ots_signature ||
u32str(type) ||
path[0] || path[1] || ... || path[h-1]
```

### 2.3. Leighton-Micali One-Time Signature (LM-OTS) Algorithm

The hash-based signature algorithm depends on a one-time signature method. This specification makes use of the Leighton-Micali One-time Signature (LM-OTS) Algorithm [[HASHSIG](#)]. An LM-OTS has five parameters:

- n:** The number of bytes output by the hash function. For SHA-256 [SHS],  $n=32$ .
- H:** A preimage-resistant hash function that accepts byte strings of any length and returns an  $n$ -byte string.
- w:** The width in bits of the Winternitz coefficients. [[HASHSIG](#)] supports four values for this parameter:  $w=1$ ,  $w=2$ ,  $w=4$ , and  $w=8$ .
- p:** The number of  $n$ -byte string elements that make up the LM-OTS signature.
- ls:** The number of left-shift bits used in the checksum function, which is defined in [Section 4.4](#) of [[HASHSIG](#)].

The values of  $p$  and  $ls$  are dependent on the choices of the parameters  $n$  and  $w$ , as described in [Appendix B](#) of [[HASHSIG](#)].

The [[HASHSIG](#)] specification supports four LM-OTS variants:

- LMOTS\_SHA256\_N32\_W1
- LMOTS\_SHA256\_N32\_W2
- LMOTS\_SHA256\_N32\_W4
- LMOTS\_SHA256\_N32\_W8

The [[HASHSIG](#)] specification establishes an IANA registry to permit the registration of additional hash functions and additional parameter sets in the future.

Signing involves the generation of *C*, which is an *n*-byte random value.

The LM-OTS signature value can be summarized as the identifier of the LM-OTS variant, the random value, and a sequence of hash values (*y*[0] through *y*[*p*-1]), as described in [Section 4.5](#) of [\[HASHSIG\]](#):

```
u32str(otstype) || C || y[0] || ... || y[p-1]
```

### 3. Hash-Based Signature Algorithm Identifiers

The CBOR Object Signing and Encryption (COSE) [\[RFC8152\]](#) supports two signature algorithm schemes. This specification makes use of the signature with appendix scheme for hash-based signatures.

The signature value is a large byte string, as described in [Section 2](#). The byte string is designed for easy parsing. The HSS, LMS, and LM-OTS components of the signature value format include counters and type codes that indirectly provide all of the information that is needed to parse the byte string during signature validation.

When using a COSE key for this algorithm, the following checks are made:

- The 'kty' field **MUST** be 'HSS-LMS'.
- If the 'alg' field is present, it **MUST** be 'HSS-LMS'.
- If the 'key\_ops' field is present, it **MUST** include 'sign' when creating a hash-based signature.
- If the 'key\_ops' field is present, it **MUST** include 'verify' when verifying a hash-based signature.
- If the 'kid' field is present, it **MAY** be used to identify the top of the HSS tree. In [\[HASHSIG\]](#), this identifier is called 'I', and it is the 16-byte identifier of the LMS public key for the tree.

### 4. Security Considerations

The security considerations from [\[RFC8152\]](#) and [\[HASHSIG\]](#) are relevant to implementations of this specification.

There are a number of security considerations that need to be taken into account by implementers of this specification.

Implementations **MUST** protect the private keys. Compromise of the private keys may result in the ability to forge signatures. Along with the private key, the implementation **MUST** keep track of which leaf nodes in the tree have been used. Loss of integrity of this tracking data can cause a one-time key to be used more than once. As a result, when a private key and the tracking data are stored on nonvolatile media or in a virtual machine environment, failed writes, virtual machine snapshotting or cloning, and other operational concerns must be considered to ensure confidentiality and integrity.

When generating an LMS key pair, an implementation **MUST** generate each key pair independently of all other key pairs in the HSS tree.

An implementation **MUST** ensure that an LM-OTS private key is used to generate a signature only one time and ensure that it cannot be used for any other purpose.

The generation of private keys relies on random numbers. The use of inadequate pseudorandom number generators (PRNGs) to generate these values can result in little or no security. An attacker may find it much easier to reproduce the PRNG environment that produced the keys, searching the resulting small set of possibilities rather than brute-force searching the whole key space. The generation of quality random numbers is difficult, and [RFC4086] offers important guidance in this area.

The generation of hash-based signatures also depends on random numbers. While the consequences of an inadequate PRNG to generate these values is much less severe than in the generation of private keys, the guidance in [RFC4086] remains important.

## 5. Operational Considerations

The public key for the hash-based signature is the key at the root of Hierarchical Signature System (HSS). In the absence of a public key infrastructure [RFC5280], this public key is a trust anchor, and the number of signatures that can be generated is bounded by the size of the overall HSS set of trees. When all of the LM-OTS signatures have been used to produce a signature, then the establishment of a new trust anchor is required.

To ensure that none of the tree nodes are used to generate more than one signature, the signer maintains state across different invocations of the signing algorithm. Section 9.2 of [HASHSIG] offers some practical implementation approaches around this statefulness. In some of these approaches, nodes are sacrificed to ensure that none are used more than once. As a result, the total number of signatures that can be generated might be less than the overall HSS set of trees.

A COSE Key Type Parameter for encoding the HSS/LMS private key and the state about which tree nodes have been used is deliberately not defined. It was not defined to avoid creating the ability to save the private key and state, generate one or more signatures, and then restore the private key and state. Such a restoration operation provides disastrous opportunities for tree node reuse.

## 6. IANA Considerations

IANA has added entries for the HSS/LMS hash-based signature algorithm in the "COSE Algorithms" registry and added HSS/LMS hash-based signature public keys in the "COSE Key Types" registry and the "COSE Key Type Parameters" registry.

### 6.1. COSE Algorithms Registry Entry

The new entry in the "COSE Algorithms" registry [IANA] appears as follows:



Name: HSS-LMS  
Value: -46  
Description: HSS/LMS hash-based digital signature  
Reference: RFC 8778  
Recommended: Yes

## 6.2. COSE Key Types Registry Entry

The new entry in the "COSE Key Types" registry [IANA] appears as follows:

Name: HSS-LMS  
Value: 5  
Description: Public key for HSS/LMS hash-based digital signature  
Reference: RFC 8778

## 6.3. COSE Key Type Parameters Registry Entry

The new entry in the "COSE Key Type Parameters" registry [IANA] appears as follows:

Key Type: 5  
Name: pub  
Label: -1  
CBOR Type: bstr  
Description: Public key for HSS/LMS hash-based digital signature  
Reference: RFC 8778

# 7. References

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## Appendix A. Examples

This appendix provides a non-normative example of a COSE full message signature and an example of a COSE\_Sign1 message. This section is formatted according to the extended CBOR diagnostic format defined by [RFC8610].

The programs that were used to generate the examples can be found at <<https://github.com/cose-wg/Examples>>.

### A.1. Example COSE Full Message Signature

This section provides an example of a COSE full message signature.

The size of binary file is 2560 bytes.

```

98(
  [
    / protected / h'a10300' / {
      \ content type \ 3:0
    } / ,
    / unprotected / {},
    / payload / 'This is the content.',
    / signatures / [
      [
        / protected / h'a101382d' / {
          \ alg \ 1:-46 \ HSS-LMS \
        } / ,
        / unprotected / {
          / kid / 4:'ItsBig'
        },
        / signature / h'000000000000000010000000391291de76ce6e24d1e2a
9b60266519bc8ce889f814deb0fc00edd3129de3ab9b6bfa3bf47d007d844af7db74
9ea97215e82f456cbdd473812c6a042ae39539898752c89b60a276ec8a9feab900e2
5bdf0ab8e773aa1c36ae214d67c65bb68630450a5db2c7c6403b77f6a9bf4d30a02
19db5cced884d7514f3cbd19220020bf3045b0e5c6955b32864f16f97da02f0cbfea

```

70458b07032e30b0342d75b8f3dc6871442e6384b10f559f5dc594a214924c48ccc3  
37078665653fc740340428138b0fb5154f2f2cb291ad05ace7acae60031b2d09b2f4  
17712d1c01e34b165af2e070f5a521a85a5fb3dd2a6288947bcd5e2265d3670bd61  
92eb2bf643964e2783d84aec343f8e3571e4fcf09cbeea94e80470aa7252d1c733a5  
535907e66c7b9f0b88b159dc2a7370ee47f13e7e134d3d05e5f53fac640b784a9b0f  
183fe14217325626f487cc8d8cb9eaf0abb174ee0b7076cf39c45037cefd3f1e61b  
5174581214c09870b72c39737ec4c46a96199b66cad2990bcbe5bb1abfde99107c7f  
7289395bf2a433598ede0b1969f23db949afb5b4d33831dae6c641a6355f8f9bf16c  
dff4bf86891b93a557c2152ac8a1de51c995344cc10cc4bc9ecfbb4e418bed0f334  
af165339e6725dc4fc1e995521e1be8a566d59b57cd130903b42d07087d63646ef8f  
c1e9e9071bb67a123fdec3f37638cda0f4bf3084074069171c17885b9431ad908d3  
6a6f8a826256d2aa34f8aa0731a357c060db8e80fed61b1c323890e640633b98d17  
5d4d6ebff800a71cfc864ec02837de9d0e079f0f400acafd56805cb273e631ba395d  
23e86acf6eae63181a5afe1f0a361cbbd5feFeb7db0c95591ec3128e80dfbea9ca0f  
89fc035d761c05d41e7a010892c42e8e2af62aa604f4e214c0bb08075481f9cc307a  
555adf333b9424f209b89f161032e413b047ae5ab0aa15643bb4c643446d2c9829eb  
256e7375ce9639047a24a44f4da446b7359556f3ab3484c56511c68a140dc0531f65  
3105800d9f20990d4ebdc5ceea918d7ae95c0d7ec69a00d6a936b25fc19b9dfc5561  
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5b68c5cf0c64c495df2ca6f030db04480a2e11d4a0a0dbf29d9463d5b9e41e346e49  
c894d5e43993c834c4746309c886d6131f2f92155ca1160bac9660802a947b5aba94  
b35357d13fdf02d2aeabef568912f68ae5d3a60214f6d00c4dd9f0af09eb0bf961cd  
9f27251d46899c28d87080ba2ead3e8193f51a789706ec32aacce9f4b14eeca91a25  
2fe894b30dc3938abbbe7d217948cae79ce3adb4d7d7df6756f3099f2543ed3b522b  
acab257503c9e07fcd32cc32fa9aa17977ec05bc5fe0f5954d51f160f52d33f93166  
af68aa90261b3f5ad273adacf2d0cb5b0c5402bfa62da67a52dcddfa463e72d2c005  
f1ac0ea3cb62364ee3419333612e07bf685006137a592e2fcd58398265c4ff9e11e7  
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