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**A Widely-Deployed Solution To The Generic Routing Encapsulation (GRE)  
Fragmentation Problem  
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**Abstract**

This memo describes how many vendors have solved the Generic Routing Encapsulation (GRE) fragmentation problem. The solution described herein is configurable. It is widely deployed on the Internet in its default configuration.

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## [1.](#) Introduction

Generic Routing Encapsulation (GRE) [[RFC2784](#)] [[RFC2890](#)] can be used to carry any network layer protocol over any network layer protocol. GRE has been implemented by many vendors and is widely deployed in the Internet.

The GRE specification does not describe fragmentation procedures. Lacking guidance from the specification, vendors have developed implementation-specific fragmentation solutions. A GRE tunnel will operate correctly only if its ingress and egress nodes support compatible fragmentation solutions. [[RFC4459](#)] describes several fragmentation solutions and evaluates their relative merits.

This memo reviews the fragmentation solutions presented in [[RFC4459](#)]. It also describes how many vendors have solved the GRE fragmentation problem. The solution described herein is configurable, and has been widely deployed in its default configuration.

This memo addresses point-to-point unicast GRE tunnels that carry IPv4, IPv6 or MPLS payloads. All other tunnel types are beyond the scope of this document.



### **1.1. Terminology**

The following terms are specific to GRE and are taken from [[RFC2784](#)]:

- o GRE delivery header - an IPv4 or IPv6 header whose source address represents the GRE ingress node and whose destination address represents the GRE egress node. The GRE delivery header encapsulates a GRE header.
- o GRE header - the GRE protocol header. The GRE header is encapsulated in the GRE delivery header and encapsulates GRE payload.
- o GRE payload - a network layer packet that is encapsulated by the GRE header. The GRE payload can be IPv4, IPv6 or MPLS. Procedures for encapsulating IPv4 and IPv6 in GRE are described in [[RFC2784](#)] and [[RFC2890](#)]. Procedures for encapsulating MPLS in GRE are described in [[RFC4023](#)]. While other protocols may be delivered over GRE, they are beyond the scope of this document.
- o GRE delivery packet - A packet containing a GRE delivery header, a GRE header, and GRE payload.
- o GRE payload header - the IPv4, IPv6 or MPLS header of the GRE payload
- o GRE overhead - the combined size of the GRE delivery header and the GRE header, measured in octets

The following terms are specific MTU discovery:

- o link MTU (LMTU) - the maximum transmission unit, i.e., maximum packet size in octets, that can be conveyed over a link. LMTU is a unidirectional metric. A bidirectional link may be characterized by one LMTU in the forward direction and another MTU in the reverse direction.
- o path MTU (PMTU) - the minimum LMTU of all the links in a path between a source node and a destination node. If the source and destination node are connected through an equal cost multipath (ECMP), the PMTU is equal to the minimum LMTU of all links contributing to the multipath.
- o GRE MTU (GMTU) - the maximum transmission unit, i.e., maximum packet size in octets, that can be conveyed over a GRE tunnel without fragmentation of any kind. The GMTU is equal to the PMTU associated with the path between the GRE ingress and the GRE egress, minus the GRE overhead



- o Path MTU Discovery (PMTUD) - A procedure for dynamically discovering the PMTU between two nodes on the Internet. PMTUD procedures for IPv4 are defined in [[RFC1191](#)]. PMTUD procedures for IPv6 are defined in [[RFC1981](#)].

The following terms are introduced by this memo:

- o fragmentable packet - An IPv4 packet with DF-bit equal to 0 and whose payload is larger than 64 bytes
- o ICMP Packet Too Big (PTB) message - an ICMPv4 [[RFC0792](#)] Destination Unreachable message with code equal to 4 (fragmentation needed and DF set) or an ICMPv6 [[RFC4443](#)] Packet Too Big message

## **[2.](#) Solutions**

### **[2.1.](#) [RFC 4459](#) Solutions**

[Section 3 of \[RFC4459\]](#) identifies several tunnel fragmentation solutions. These solutions define procedures to be invoked when the tunnel ingress router receives a packet so large that it cannot be forwarded though the tunnel without fragmentation of any kind. When applied to GRE, these procedures are:

1. Discard the incoming packet and send an ICMP PTB message to the incoming packet's source.
2. Fragment the incoming packet and encapsulate each fragment within a complete GRE header and GRE delivery header.
3. Encapsulate the incoming packet in a single GRE header and GRE delivery header. Perform source fragmentation on the resulting GRE delivery packet.

As per [RFC 4459](#), Strategy 2) is applicable only when the incoming packet is fragmentable. Also as per [RFC 4459](#), each strategy has its relative merits and costs.

### **[2.2.](#) A Widely-Deployed Solution**

Many vendors have implemented a configurable GRE fragmentation solution. In its default configuration, the solution behaves as follows:

- o When the GRE ingress node receives a fragmentable packet with length greater than the GMTU, it fragments the incoming packet and



encapsulates each fragment within a complete GRE header and GRE delivery header.

- o When the GRE ingress node receives a non-fragmentable packet with length greater than the GMTU, it discards the packet and send an ICMP PTB message to the packet's source.
- o When the GRE egress node receives a GRE delivery packet fragment, it silently discards the fragment, without attempting to reassemble the GRE delivery packet to which the fragment belongs.

In non-default configurations, the GRE ingress node can execute any of the procedures defined in [RFC 4459](#).

The solution described above is widely-deployed on the Internet in its default configuration.

### **3. Implementation Details**

This section describes how many vendors have implemented the solution described in [Section 2.2](#).

#### **3.1. General**

The GRE ingress nodes satisfy all of the requirements stated in [\[RFC2784\]](#).

#### **3.2. GRE MTU (GMTU) Estimation and Discovery**

GRE ingress nodes support a configuration option that associates a GMTU with a GRE tunnel. By default, GMTU is equal to the MTU associated with next-hop toward the GRE egress node minus the GRE overhead.

Typically, GRE ingress nodes further refine their GMTU estimate by executing PMTUD procedures. However, if an implementation supports PMTUD for GRE tunnels, it also includes a configuration option that disables PMTUD. This configuration option is required to mitigate certain denial of service attacks (see [Section 5](#)).

The ingress node's GMTU estimate will not always reflect the actual GMTU. It is only an estimate. When a tunnel's GMTU changes, the tunnel ingress node will not discover that change immediately. Likewise, if the ingress node performs PMTUD procedures and tunnel interior nodes cannot deliver ICMP feedback to the tunnel ingress, GMTU estimates may be inaccurate.





### **3.3. GRE Ingress Node Procedures**

This section defines procedures that GRE ingress nodes execute when they receive a packet whose size is greater than the relevant GMTU.

#### **3.3.1. Procedures Affecting the GRE Payload**

##### **3.3.1.1. IPv4 Payloads**

By default, if the payload is fragmentable, the GRE ingress node fragments the incoming packet and encapsulates each fragment within a complete GRE header and GRE delivery header. Therefore, the GRE egress node receives several complete, non-fragmented delivery packets. Each delivery packet contains a fragment of the GRE payload. The GRE egress node forwards the payload fragments to their ultimate destination where they are reassembled.

Also by default, if the payload is not fragmentable, the GRE ingress node discards the packet and sends an ICMPv4 Destination Unreachable message to the packet's source. The ICMPv4 Destination Unreachable message code equals 4 (fragmentation needed and DF set). The ICMPv4 Destination Unreachable message also contains an Next-hop MTU (as specified by [[RFC1191](#)]) and the next-hop MTU is equal to the GMTU associated with the tunnel.

The GRE ingress node supports a non-default configuration option that invokes an alternative behavior. If that option is configured, the GRE ingress node fragments the delivery header. See [Section 3.3.2](#) for details.

##### **3.3.1.2. IPv6 Payloads**

By default, the GRE ingress node discards the packet and send an ICMPv6 [[RFC4443](#)] Packet Too Big message to the payload source. The MTU specified in the Packet Too Big message is equal to the GMTU associated with the tunnel.

The GRE ingress node supports a non-default configuration option that invokes an alternative behavior. If that option is configured, the GRE ingress node fragments the delivery header. See [Section 3.3.2](#) for details.

##### **3.3.1.3. MPLS Payloads**

By default, the GRE ingress node discards the packet. As it is impossible to reliably identify the payload source, the GRE ingress node does not attempt to send an ICMP PTB message to the payload source.



The GRE ingress node supports a non-default configuration option that invokes an alternative behavior. If that option is configured, the GRE ingress node fragments the delivery header. See [Section 3.3.2](#).

### **[3.3.2](#). Procedures Affecting The GRE Deliver Header**

#### **[3.3.2.1](#). Tunneling GRE Over IPv4**

By default, the GRE ingress node does not fragment delivery packets. However, the GRE ingress node includes a configuration option that allows delivery packet fragmentation.

By default, the GRE ingress node sets the DF-bit in the delivery header to 1 (Don't Fragment). However, the GRE ingress node also supports a configuration option that invokes the following behavior:

- o when the GRE payload is IPv6, the DF-bit on the delivery header is set to 0 (Fragments Allowed)
- o when the GRE payload is IPv4, the DF-bit is copied from the payload header to the delivery header

When the DF-bit on an IPv4 delivery header is set to 0, the GRE delivery packet can be fragmented by any node between the GRE ingress and the GRE egress.

If the delivery packet is fragmented, it is reassembled by the GRE egress.

#### **[3.3.2.2](#). Tunneling GRE Over IPv6**

By default, the GRE ingress node does not fragment delivery packets. However, the GRE ingress node includes a configuration option that allows this.

If the delivery packet is fragmented, it is reassembled by the GRE egress.

### **[3.4](#). GRE Egress Node Procedures**

By default, the GRE egress node silently discards GRE delivery packet fragments, without attempting to reassemble the GRE delivery packets to which the fragments belongs.

However, the GRE egress node supports a configuration option that allows it to reassemble GRE delivery packets.



#### **4. IANA Considerations**

This document makes no request of IANA.

#### **5. Security Considerations**

In the GRE fragmentation solution described above, either the GRE payload or the GRE delivery packet can be fragmented. If the GRE payload is fragmented, it is typically reassembled at its ultimate destination. If the GRE delivery packet is fragmented, it is typically reassembled at the GRE egress node.

The packet reassembly process is resource intensive and vulnerable to several denial of service attacks. In the simplest attack, the attacker sends fragmented packets more quickly than the victim can reassemble them. In a variation on that attack, the first fragment of each packet is missing, so that no packet can ever be reassembled.

Given that the packet reassembly process is resource intensive and vulnerable to denial of service attacks, operators should decide where reassembly process is best performed. Having made that decision, they should decide whether to fragment the GRE payload or GRE delivery packet, accordingly.

PMTU Discovery is vulnerable to two denial of service attacks (see [Section 8 of \[RFC1191\]](#) for details). Both attacks are based upon on a malicious party sending forged ICMPv4 Destination Unreachable or ICMPv6 Packet Too Big messages to a host. In the first attack, the forged message indicates an inordinately small PMTU. In the second attack, the forged message indicates an inordinately large MTU. In both cases, throughput is adversely affected. On order to mitigate such attacks, GRE implementations includes a configuration option to disable PMTU discovery on GRE tunnels. Also, they can include a configuration option that conditions the behavior of PMTUD to establish a minimum PMTU.

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