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**Sender Policy Framework (SPF) for Authorizing Use of Domains in Email,  
Version 1  
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**Abstract**

Email on the Internet can be forged in a number of ways. In particular, existing protocols place no restriction on what a sending host can use as the "MAIL FROM" of a message or the domain given on the SMTP HELO/EHLO commands. This document describes version 1 of the Sender Policy Framework (SPF) protocol, whereby an ADMD can explicitly authorize the hosts that are allowed to use its domain names, and a receiving host can check such authorization.

This document obsoletes [RFC4408](#).

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## **1. Introduction**

The current email infrastructure has the property that any host injecting mail into the system can use any DNS domain name it wants in each of the various identifiers specified by [\[RFC5321\]](#) and [\[RFC5322\]](#). Although this feature is desirable in some circumstances, it is a major obstacle to reducing Unsolicited Bulk Email (UBE, aka spam). Furthermore, many domain owning ADMDs (Administrative Management Domains, see [\[RFC5598\]](#)) are understandably concerned about the ease with which other entities can make use of their domain names, often with malicious intent.

This document defines a protocol by which ADMDs can authorize hosts to use their domain names in the "MAIL FROM" or "HELO" identities. Compliant ADMDs publish Sender Policy Framework (SPF) records in the DNS specifying which hosts are permitted to use their names, and compliant mail receivers use the published SPF records to test the authorization of sending Mail Transfer Agents (MTAs) using a given "HELO" or "MAIL FROM" identity during a mail transaction.

An additional benefit to mail receivers is that after the use of an identity is verified, local policy decisions about the mail can be made based on the sender's domain, rather than the host's IP address. This is advantageous because reputation of domain names is likely to be more accurate than reputation of host IP addresses. Furthermore, if a claimed identity fails verification, local policy can take stronger action against such email, such as rejecting it.

### **1.1. Protocol Status**

SPF has been in development since the summer of 2003 and has seen deployment beyond the developers beginning in December 2003. The design of SPF slowly evolved until the spring of 2004 and has since stabilized. There have been quite a number of forms of SPF, some written up as documents, some submitted as Internet Drafts, and many discussed and debated in development forums. The protocol was originally defined in [\[RFC4408\]](#), which this document replaces.

[\[RFC4408\]](#) was designed to clearly document the protocol defined by earlier draft specifications of SPF as used in existing implementations. This updated specification is intended to clarify identified ambiguities in [\[RFC4408\]](#), resolve technical issues identified in post-RFC 4408 deployment experience, and document widely deployed extensions to SPF that have been developed since [\[RFC4408\]](#) was published.



## **1.2. Experimental History**

This document updates and replaces [RFC 4408](#) that was part of a group of simultaneously published Experimental RFCs ([RFC 4405](#), [RFC 4406](#), [RFC 4407](#), and [RFC 4408](#)) in 2006. At that time the IESG requested the community observe the success or failure of the two approaches documented in these RFCs during the two years following publication, in order that a community consensus could be reached in the future.

SPF is widely deployed by large and small email providers alike. There are multiple, interoperable implementations.

For SPF (as documented in [RFC 4408](#)) a careful effort was made to collect and document lessons learned and errata during the two year period. The errata list has been stable (no new submissions) and only minor protocol lessons learned were identified. Resolution of the IESG's experiment is documented in [[RFC6686](#)].

## **1.3. Terminology**

### **1.3.1. Keywords**

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 [[RFC2119](#)].

### **1.3.2. Imported Definitions**

The ABNF tokens "ALPHA", "DIGIT", and "SP" are defined in [[RFC5234](#)].

The token "local-part" is defined in [[RFC5321](#)].

"dot-atom", "quoted-string", "comment", "CFWS", "FWS", and "CRLF" are defined in [[RFC5322](#)].

### **1.3.3. Mail From Definition**

This document is concerned with the portion of a mail message commonly called "envelope sender", "return path", "reverse path", "bounce address", "5321 FROM", "MAIL FROM", or [RFC5321](#).MailFrom. Since these terms are either not well defined or often used casually, this document uses "MAIL FROM" for consistency. This means the [RFC5321](#).MailFrom as defined in [[RFC5598](#)]. Note that other terms that might superficially look like the common terms, such as "reverse-path", are used only with the defined meanings from normative documents.



#### **1.3.4. HELO Definition**

This document also makes use of the HELO/EHLO identity. The "HELO" identity derives from either the SMTP HELO or EHLO command (see [[RFC5321](#)]). Since HELO and EHLO can, in many cases, be used interchangeably, they are identified commonly as "HELO" in this document. This means [RFC5321](#).HELO/.EHLO as defined in [[RFC5598](#)]. These commands supply the identity of the SMTP client (sending host) for the SMTP session.

#### **1.3.5. Deprecated**

There are [[RFC4408](#)] features that are marked "deprecated". In the context of this document, deprecated means that senders SHOULD NOT publish SPF records that make use of such features because they might be removed entirely in future updates to the protocol. Such features do, however, remain part of the SPF protocol and receiving systems MUST support them unless this document explicitly says otherwise.



## **2. Operation**

### **2.1. The "HELO" Identity**

It is RECOMMENDED that SPF verifiers not only check the "MAIL FROM" identity, but also separately check the "HELO" identity by applying the `check_host()` function ([Section 4](#)) to the "HELO" identity as the `<sender>`. Checking "HELO" promotes consistency of results and can reduce DNS resource usage. Additionally, since SPF records published for "HELO" identities refer to a single host, when available, they are a very reliable source of host authorization status.

Note that requirements for the domain presented in the EHLO or HELO command are not always clear to the sending party, and SPF verifiers MUST be prepared for the "HELO" identity to be malformed or an IP address literal. This SPF check can only be performed when the "HELO" string is a valid fully qualified domain.

### **2.2. The "MAIL FROM" Identity**

SPF verifiers MUST check the "MAIL FROM" identity if a completed "HELO" check has not reached a definitive policy result by applying the `check_host()` function to the "MAIL FROM" identity as the `<sender>`.

[RFC5321] allows the reverse-path to be null (see [Section 4.5.5 in \[RFC5321\]](#)). In this case, there is no explicit sender mailbox, and such a message can be assumed to be a notification message from the mail system itself. When the reverse-path is null, this document defines the "MAIL FROM" identity to be the mailbox composed of the local-part "postmaster" and the "HELO" identity (which might or might not have been checked separately before).

### **2.3. Publishing Authorization**

An SPF-compliant domain MUST have valid SPF records as described in [Section 3](#). These records authorize the use of the relevant domain names in the "HELO" and "MAIL FROM" identities by the MTAs specified therein.

SPF results can be used to make both positive (source is authorized) and negative (source is not authorized) determinations. If domain owners choose to publish SPF records and want to support receivers making negative authorization determinations, then they MUST publish records that end in "-all", or redirect to other records that do, otherwise, no definitive determination of authorization can be made. Potential issues and mitigations associated with negative determinations are discussed in [Section 9](#).





ADMDs can publish SPF records that explicitly authorize no hosts for domain names that are neither used in the domain part of email addresses nor expected to originate mail.

When changing SPF records, care has to be taken to ensure that there is a transition period so that the old policy remains valid until all legitimate email can reasonably expect to have been checked. This can be as much as 30 days.

#### **2.4. Checking Authorization**

A mail receiver can perform a set of SPF checks for each mail message it receives. An SPF check tests the authorization of a client host to emit mail with a given identity. Typically, such checks are done by a receiving MTA, but can be performed elsewhere in the mail processing chain so long as the required information is available and reliable. At least the "MAIL FROM" identity **MUST** be checked, but it is **RECOMMENDED** that the "HELO" identity also be checked beforehand.

Without explicit approval of the domain owner, checking other identities against SPF version 1 records is **NOT RECOMMENDED** because there are cases that are known to give incorrect results. For example, almost all mailing lists rewrite the "MAIL FROM" identity (see [Section 9.2.1](#)), but some do not change any other identities in the message. The scenario described in [Section 9.2.2](#), sub-[section 1.2](#), is another example. Documents that define other identities will have to define the method for explicit approval.

It is possible that mail receivers will use the SPF check as part of a larger set of tests on incoming mail. The results of other tests might influence whether or not a particular SPF check is performed. For example, finding the sending host's IP address on a local white list might cause all other tests to be skipped and all mail from that host to be accepted.

When a mail receiver decides to perform an SPF check, it **MUST** use a correctly-implemented `check_host()` function ([Section 4](#)) evaluated with the correct parameters. Although the test as a whole is optional, once it has been decided to perform a test it has to be performed as specified so that the correct semantics are preserved between publisher and receiver.

To make the test, the mail receiver **MUST** evaluate the `check_host()` function with the arguments set as follows:



<ip> - the IP address of the SMTP client that is emitting the mail, either IPv4 or IPv6.

<domain> - the domain portion of the "MAIL FROM" or "HELO" identity.

<sender> - the "MAIL FROM" or "HELO" identity.

Note that the <domain> argument might not be a well-formed domain name. For example, if the reverse-path was null, then the EHLO/HELO domain is used, with its associated problems (see [Section 2.1](#)). In these cases, `check_host()` is defined in [Section 4.3](#) to return a "none" result.

Although invalid, malformed, or non-existent domains cause SPF checks to return "none" because no SPF record can be found, it has long been the policy of many MTAs to reject email from such domains, especially in the case of invalid "MAIL FROM". Rejecting email will prevent one method of circumventing of SPF records.

Implementations have to take care to correctly extract the <domain> from the data given with the SMTP MAIL FROM command as many MTAs will still accept such things as source routes (see [\[RFC5321\]](#), [Appendix C](#)), the %-hack (see [\[RFC1123\]](#)), and bang paths (see [\[RFC1983\]](#)). These archaic features have been maliciously used to bypass security systems.

## **[2.5. Interpreting the Result](#)**

This section describes how software that performs the authorization interprets the results of the `check_host()` function. The authorization check SHOULD be performed during the processing of the SMTP transaction that sends the mail. This allows errors to be returned directly to the sending MTA by way of SMTP replies.

Performing the authorization other than using the return-path and client address at the time of the MAIL command during the SMTP transaction can cause problems, such as the following: (1) It might be difficult to accurately extract the required information from potentially deceptive headers; (2) legitimate email might fail because the sender's policy had since changed.

Generating non-delivery notifications to forged identities that have failed the authorization check is a source of backscatter and SHOULD be avoided. [\[RFC3834\] section 2](#) describes backscatter and the problems it causes.



### **2.5.1. None**

A result of "none" means either (a) no syntactically valid DNS domain name was extracted from the SMTP session that could be used as the one to be authorized, or (b) no TXT records were retrieved from the DNS that appeared to be intended for use by SPF verifiers.

### **2.5.2. Neutral**

The domain owner has explicitly stated that they cannot or do not want to assert whether the IP address is authorized or not. A "neutral" result MUST be treated exactly like the "none" result; the distinction exists only for informational purposes. Treating "neutral" more harshly than "none" would discourage domain owners from testing the use of SPF records (see [Section 9.1](#)).

### **2.5.3. Pass**

A "pass" result means that the client is authorized to inject mail with the given identity. The domain can now, in the sense of reputation, be considered responsible for sending the message. Further policy checks can now proceed with confidence in the legitimate use of the identity. This is further discussed in [Section 9.3.1](#).

### **2.5.4. Fail**

A "fail" result is an explicit statement that the client is not authorized to use the domain in the given identity. Disposition of SPF fail messages is a matter of local policy. See [Section 9.3.2](#) for considerations on developing local policy.

If the checking software chooses to reject the mail during the SMTP transaction, then it SHOULD use an SMTP reply code of 550 (see [\[RFC5321\]](#)) and, if supported, the 5.7.1 enhanced status code (see [\[RFC3463\]](#)), in addition to an appropriate reply text. The `check_host()` function will return either a default explanation string or one from the domain that published the SPF records (see [Section 6.2](#)). If the information does not originate with the checking software, it is good to make it clear that the text is provided by the sender's domain. For example:

```
550-5.7.1 SPF MAIL FROM check failed:
550-5.7.1 The domain example.com explains:
550 5.7.1 Please see http://www.example.com/mailpolicy.html
```

If the checking software chooses not to reject the mail during the SMTP transaction, then it SHOULD add a Received-SPF or



Authentication-Results header field (see [Section 7](#)) to communicate this result to downstream message processors. While this is true for all SPF results, it is of particular importance for "fail" results since the message is explicitly not authorized by the domain owner.

#### [2.5.5.](#) Softfail

A "softfail" result ought to be treated as somewhere between "fail" and "neutral"/"none". The domain owner believes the host is not authorized but is not willing to make a strong policy statement. Receiving software SHOULD NOT reject the message based solely on this result, but MAY subject the message to closer scrutiny than normal.

The domain owner wants to discourage the use of this host and thus desires limited feedback when a "softfail" result occurs. For example, the recipient's Mail User Agent (MUA) could highlight the "softfail" status, or the receiving MTA could give the sender a message using greylisting, [[RFC6647](#)], with a note the first time the message is received, but accept it on a later attempt based on receiver policy.

#### [2.5.6.](#) Temperror

A "temperror" result means the SPF verifier encountered a transient (generally DNS) error while performing the check. Checking software can choose to accept or temporarily reject the message. If the message is rejected during the SMTP transaction for this reason, the software SHOULD use an SMTP reply code of 451 and, if supported, the 4.4.3 enhanced status code. These errors can be caused by problems in either the sender's or receiver's DNS software.

#### [2.5.7.](#) Permerror

A "permerror" result means the domain's published records could not be correctly interpreted. This signals an error condition that definitely requires manual intervention to be resolved. If the message is rejected during the SMTP transaction for this reason, the software SHOULD use an SMTP reply code of 550 and, if supported, the 5.5.2 enhanced status code. Be aware that if the domain owner uses macros ([Section 8](#)), it is possible that this result is due to the checked identities having an unexpected format. It is also possible that this result is generated by certain SPF clients due to the input arguments having an unexpected format; see [Section 4.8](#).





### 3. SPF Records

An SPF record is a DNS record that declares which hosts are, and are not, authorized to use a domain name for the "HELO" and "MAIL FROM" identities. Loosely, the record partitions all hosts into permitted and not-permitted sets (though some hosts might fall into neither category).

The SPF record is a single string of text. The record format is described below in [Section 4](#). An example record is the following:

```
v=spf1 +mx a:colo.example.com/28 -all
```

This record has a version of "spf1" and three directives: "+mx", "a:colo.example.com/28" (the + is implied), and "-all".

Each SPF record is placed in the DNS tree at the host name it pertains to, not a subdomain under it, such as is done with SRV records [[RFC2782](#)].

The example in this section might be published via these lines in a domain zone file:

```
example.com.          TXT "v=spf1 +mx a:colo.example.com/28 -all"
smtp-out.example.com. TXT "v=spf1 a -all"
```

Since TXT records have multiple uses, beware of other TXT records published there for other purposes. They might cause problems with size limits (see [Section 3.4](#)) and care has to be taken to ensure only SPF records are used for SPF processing.

ADMDs publishing SPF records SHOULD try to keep the number of "include" mechanisms and chained "redirect" modifiers to a minimum. ADMDs SHOULD also try to minimize the amount of other DNS information needed to evaluate a record. [Section 4.6.4](#) and [Section 9.1.1](#) provide some suggestions on how to achieve this.

#### 3.1. DNS Resource Records

SPF records MUST be published as a DNS TXT (type 16) Resource Record (RR) [[RFC1035](#)] only. The character content of the record is encoded as [[US-ASCII](#)]. Use of alternate DNS RR types was supported in SPF's experimental phase, but has been discontinued. See [Appendix A of \[RFC6686\]](#) for further information.



### **3.2. Multiple DNS Records**

A domain name MUST NOT have multiple records that would cause an authorization check to select more than one record. See [Section 4.5](#) for the selection rules.

### **3.3. Multiple Strings in a Single DNS record**

As defined in [[RFC1035](#)] sections [3.3.14](#) and [3.3](#), a single text DNS record can be composed of more than one string. If a published record contains multiple character-strings, then the record MUST be treated as if those strings are concatenated together without adding spaces. For example:

```
IN TXT "v=spf1 .... first" "second string..."
```

MUST be treated as equivalent to

```
IN TXT "v=spf1 .... firstsecond string..."
```

TXT records containing multiple strings are useful in constructing records that would exceed the 255-byte maximum length of a character-string within a single TXT record.

### **3.4. Record Size**

The published SPF record for a given domain name SHOULD remain small enough that the results of a query for it will fit within 512 octets. This UDP limit is defined in [[RFC1035](#)] [section 2.3.4](#). This will keep even older DNS implementations from falling over to TCP. Since the answer size is dependent on many things outside the scope of this document, it is only possible to give this guideline: If the combined length of the DNS name and the text of all the records of a given type is under 450 characters, then DNS answers ought to fit in UDP packets. Note that when computing the sizes for queries of the TXT format, one has to take into account any other TXT records published at the domain name. Records that are too long to fit in a single UDP packet could be silently ignored by SPF verifiers due to firewall and other issues that cause DNS over TCP to be less reliable than DNS over UDP.

### **3.5. Wildcard Records**

Use of wildcard records for publishing is discouraged and care has to be taken if they are used. If a zone includes wildcard MX records, it might want to publish wildcard declarations, subject to the same requirements and problems. In particular, the declaration MUST be repeated for any host that has any RR records at all, and for



subdomains thereof. Consider the example in [[RFC1034](#)], [Section 4.3.3](#). Based on that, we can do the following:

|                  |     |             |                               |
|------------------|-----|-------------|-------------------------------|
| EXAMPLE.COM.     | MX  | 10          | A.EXAMPLE.COM                 |
| EXAMPLE.COM.     | TXT |             | "v=spf1 a:A.EXAMPLE.COM -all" |
| *.EXAMPLE.COM.   | MX  | 10          | A.EXAMPLE.COM                 |
| *.EXAMPLE.COM.   | TXT |             | "v=spf1 a:A.EXAMPLE.COM -all" |
| A.EXAMPLE.COM.   | A   | 203.0.113.1 |                               |
| A.EXAMPLE.COM.   | MX  | 10          | A.EXAMPLE.COM                 |
| A.EXAMPLE.COM.   | TXT |             | "v=spf1 a:A.EXAMPLE.COM -all" |
| *.A.EXAMPLE.COM. | MX  | 10          | A.EXAMPLE.COM                 |
| *.A.EXAMPLE.COM. | TXT |             | "v=spf1 a:A.EXAMPLE.COM -all" |

SPF records have to be listed twice for every name within the zone: once for the name, and once with a wildcard to cover the tree under the name, in order to cover all domains in use in outgoing mail.



#### **4. The `check_host()` Function**

This description is not an API (Application Program Interface) definition, but rather a function description used to illustrate the algorithm. A compliant SPF implementation **MUST** do something semantically equivalent to this description.

The `check_host()` function fetches SPF records, parses them, and evaluates them to determine whether a particular host is or is not permitted to send mail with a given identity. Mail receivers that perform this check **MUST** correctly evaluate the `check_host()` function as described here.

Implementations **MAY** use a different algorithm than the canonical algorithm defined here, so long as the results are the same in all cases.

##### **4.1. Arguments**

The `check_host()` function takes these arguments:

- `<ip>` - the IP address of the SMTP client that is emitting the mail, either IPv4 or IPv6.
- `<domain>` - the domain that provides the sought-after authorization information; initially, the domain portion of the "MAIL FROM" or "HELO" identity.
- `<sender>` - the "MAIL FROM" or "HELO" identity.

The domain portion of `<sender>` will usually be the same as the `<domain>` argument when `check_host()` is initially evaluated. However, this will generally not be true for recursive evaluations (see [Section 5.2](#) below).

##### **4.2. Results**

The function `check_host()` can return one of several results described in [Section 2.5](#). Based on the result, the action to be taken is determined by the local policies of the receiver.

##### **4.3. Initial Processing**

If the `<domain>` is malformed (e.g. label longer than 63 characters, zero-length label not at the end, etc.) or is not a fully qualified domain name, or if the DNS lookup returns "domain does not exist" (RCODE 3), `check_host()` immediately returns the result "none". Properly formed domains are fully qualified email domains as





described in [\[RFC5321\] Section 2.3.5](#). Internationalized domain names MUST be encoded as A-labels, as described in [Section 2.3 of \[RFC5890\]](#).on 2.3 of [\[RFC5890\]](#).

If the <sender> has no local-part, substitute the string "postmaster" for the local-part.

#### **[4.4.](#) Record Lookup**

In accordance with how the records are published (see [Section 3](#) above), a DNS query needs to be made for the <domain> name, querying for type TXT only.

If all DNS lookups that are made return a server failure (RCODE 2), or other error (RCODE other than 0 or 3), or time out, then `check_host()` terminates immediately with the result "temperror". Alternatively, for a server failure (RCODE 2) result, `check_host()` MAY track failures and treat multiple failures within 24 hours for the same domain as "permerror".

This alternative is intended to shorten the queue time of messages that cannot be accepted, by returning a permanent negative completion reply code to the client, instead of a transient one. [\[RFC2308\]](#) suggests on an algorithm for doing such tracking and handling of server failure codes.

#### **[4.5.](#) Selecting Records**

Records begin with a version section:

```
record          = version terms *SP
version         = "v=spf1"
```

Starting with the set of records that were returned by the lookup, discard records that do not begin with a version section of exactly "v=spf1". Note that the version section is terminated either by an SP character or the end of the record. A record with a version section of "v=spf10" does not match and MUST be discarded.

If the resultant record set includes no records, `check_host()` produces the "none" result. If the resultant record set includes more than one record, `check_host()` produces the "permerror" result.

#### **[4.6.](#) Record Evaluation**

The `check_host()` function parses and interprets the SPF record to find a result for the current test. If there are any syntax errors, `check_host()` returns immediately with the result "permerror".



Implementations MAY choose to parse the entire record first and return "permerror" if the record is not syntactically well formed. However, in all cases, any syntax errors anywhere in the record MUST be detected.

#### [4.6.1.](#) Term Evaluation

There are two types of terms: mechanisms and modifiers. A record contains an ordered list of these as specified in the following Augmented Backus-Naur Form (ABNF).

```
terms           = *( 1*SP ( directive / modifier ) )

directive       = [ qualifier ] mechanism
qualifier       = "+" / "-" / "?" / "~"
mechanism       = ( all / include
                  / A / MX / PTR / IP4 / IP6 / exists )
modifier        = redirect / explanation / unknown-modifier
unknown-modifier = name "=" macro-string
                  ; where name is not any known modifier

name            = ALPHA *( ALPHA / DIGIT / "-" / "_" / "." )
```

Most mechanisms allow a ":" or "/" character after the name.

Modifiers always contain an equals ('=') character immediately after the name, and before any ":" or "/" characters that might be part of the macro-string.

Terms that do not contain any of "=", ":", or "/" are mechanisms, as defined in [Section 5](#).

As per the definition of the ABNF notation in [[RFC5234](#)], mechanism and modifier names are case-insensitive.

#### [4.6.2.](#) Mechanisms

Each mechanism is considered in turn from left to right. If there are no more mechanisms, the result is specified in [Section 4.7](#).

When a mechanism is evaluated, one of three things can happen: it can match, not match, or return an exception.

If it matches, processing ends and the qualifier value is returned as the result of that record. If it does not match, processing continues with the next mechanism. If it returns an exception, mechanism processing ends and the exception value is returned.



The possible qualifiers, and the results they cause `check_host()` to return are as follows:

```
"+" pass
"-" fail
"~" softfail
"? " neutral
```

The qualifier is optional and defaults to "+".

When a mechanism matches and the qualifier is "-", then a "fail" result is returned and the explanation string is computed as described in [Section 6.2](#).

The specific mechanisms are described in [Section 5](#).

#### **[4.6.3](#). Modifiers**

Modifiers are not mechanisms. They do not return match or not-match. Instead, they provide additional information. Although modifiers do not directly affect the evaluation of the record, the "redirect" modifier has an effect after all the mechanisms have been evaluated.

#### **[4.6.4](#). DNS Lookup Limits**

SPF implementations MUST limit the number of mechanisms and modifiers ("terms") that cause any DNS query to at most 10 during SPF evaluation. Specifically, the "include", "a", "mx", "ptr", and "exists" mechanisms as well as the "redirect" modifier count against this limit. The "all", "ip4", and "ip6" mechanisms do not count against this limit. If this number is exceeded during a check, a permerror MUST be returned. The "exp" modifier does not count against this limit because the DNS lookup to fetch the explanation string occurs after the SPF record evaluation has been completed.

When evaluating the "mx" and "ptr" mechanisms, or the `%{p}` macro, there MUST be a limit of no more than 10 MX or PTR RRs looked up and checked. If more than 10 "mx" or "ptr" records are returned for this further lookup, a permerror MUST be returned. This limit is per mechanism or macro in the record and in addition to the lookup limits above.

MTAs or other processors SHOULD impose a limit on the maximum amount of elapsed time to evaluate `check_host()`. Such a limit SHOULD allow at least 20 seconds. If such a limit is exceeded, the result of authorization SHOULD be "temperror".



#### **4.7. Default Result**

If none of the mechanisms match and there is no "redirect" modifier, then the `check_host()` returns a result of "neutral", just as if "?all" were specified as the last directive. If there is a "redirect" modifier, `check_host()` proceeds as defined in [Section 6.1](#).

Note that records SHOULD always use either a "redirect" modifier or an "all" mechanism to explicitly terminate processing. Although the latter has default (specifically "?all"), it aids debugging efforts if it is explicitly included.

For example:

```
v=spf1 +mx -all
or
v=spf1 +mx redirect=_spf.example.com
```

#### **4.8. Domain Specification**

Several of these mechanisms and modifiers have a domain-spec section. The domain-spec string is subject to macro expansion (see [Section 8](#)). The resulting string is the common presentation form of a fully-qualified DNS name: a series of labels separated by periods. This domain is called the <target-name> in the rest of this document.

Note: The result of the macro expansion is not subject to any further escaping. Hence, this facility cannot produce all characters that are legal in a DNS label (e.g., the control characters). However, this facility is powerful enough to express legal host names and common utility labels (such as "\_spf") that are used in DNS.

For several mechanisms, the <domain-spec> is optional. If it is not provided, the <domain> is used as the <target-name>. Domain and domain-spec are syntactically identical after macro expansion. Domain is an input value for `check_host()` while domain-spec is computed by `check_host()`.

Note: Historically, this document has made no provisions for how to handle domain-specs, or macro-expansions thereof, that are syntactically invalid per [\[RFC1035\]](#), such as names with empty labels (e.g., "foo..example.com") or overlong labels (more than 63 characters). Some implementations choose to treat as a no-match mechanisms, and ignore modifiers, with such names, whereas others return a "permerror" exception. The outcome for an unexpected domain-spec without macros might even differ from that for an unexpected target-name after macro expansion.





## 5. Mechanism Definitions

This section defines two types of mechanisms.

Basic mechanisms contribute to the language framework. They do not specify a particular type of authorization scheme.

```
all
include
```

Designated sender mechanisms are used to designate a set of <ip> addresses as being permitted or not permitted to use the <domain> for sending mail.

```
a
mx
ptr (deprecated)
ip4
ip6
exists
```

The following conventions apply to all mechanisms that perform a comparison between <ip> and an IP address at any point:

If no CIDR prefix length is given in the directive, then <ip> and the IP address are compared for equality. (Here, CIDR is Classless Inter-Domain Routing, described in [[RFC4632](#)].)

If a CIDR prefix length is specified, then only the specified number of high-order bits of <ip> and the IP address are compared for equality.

When any mechanism fetches host addresses to compare with <ip>, when <ip> is an IPv4 address, A records are fetched; when <ip> is an IPv6 address, AAAA records are fetched. Even if the SMTP connection uses IPv6, an IPv4-mapped IPv6 IP address (see [[RFC4291](#)], [Section 2.5.5](#)) MUST still be considered an IPv4 address and MUST be evaluated using IPv4 mechanisms (i.e. "ip4" and "a").

Several mechanisms rely on information fetched from the DNS. For these DNS queries, except where noted, if the DNS server returns an error (RCODE other than 0 or 3) or the query times out, the mechanism stops and the `topmost check_host()` returns "temperror". If the server returns "domain does not exist" (RCODE 3), then evaluation of the mechanism continues as if the server returned no error (RCODE 0) and zero answer records.



### [5.1.](#) "all"

all = "all"

The "all" mechanism is a test that always matches. It is used as the rightmost mechanism in a record to provide an explicit default.

For example:

```
v=spf1 a mx -all
```

Mechanisms after "all" will never be tested. Mechanisms listed after "all" MUST be ignored. Any "redirect" modifier ([Section 6.1](#)) MUST be ignored when there is an "all" mechanism in the record.

### [5.2.](#) "include"

include = "include" ":" domain-spec

The "include" mechanism triggers a recursive evaluation of `check_host()`.

1. The domain-spec is expanded as per [Section 8](#).
2. `check_host()` is evaluated with the resulting string as the `<domain>`. The `<ip>` and `<sender>` arguments remain the same as in the current evaluation of `check_host()`.
3. The recursive evaluation returns either match, not match, or an error. If it matches, then the appropriate result for the include: mechanism is used (e.g. include or +include gives a "pass" result and -include gives "fail").
4. If there is no match, the parent `check_host()` resumes processing as per the table below, with the previous value of `<domain>` restored.

In hindsight, the name "include" was poorly chosen. Only the evaluated result of the referenced SPF record is used, rather than acting as if the referenced SPF record was literally included in the first. For example, evaluating a "-all" directive in the referenced record does not terminate the overall processing and does not necessarily result in an overall "fail". (Better names for this mechanism would have been "if-match", "on-match", etc.)

The "include" mechanism makes it possible for one domain to designate multiple administratively-independent domains. For example, a vanity domain "example.net" might send mail using the servers of



administratively-independent domains example.com and example.org.

Example.net could say

```
IN TXT "v=spf1 include:example.com include:example.org -all"
```

This would direct check\_host() to, in effect, check the records of example.com and example.org for a "pass" result. Only if the host were not permitted for either of those domains would the result be "fail".

Whether this mechanism matches, does not match, or returns an exception depends on the result of the recursive evaluation of check\_host():

| +-----+<br>  A recursive check_host() result  <br>  of: | +-----+<br>  Causes the "include" mechanism  <br>  to: |
|---|--|
| +-----+   | +-----+  |
| pass  | match  |
|   |  |
| fail  | not match  |
|   |  |
| softfail  | not match  |
|   |  |
| neutral   | not match  |
|   |  |
| temperror   | return temperror                                       |
|   |  |
| permerror   | return permerror                                       |
|   |  |
| none  | return permerror                                       |
| +-----+   | +-----+  |

The "include" mechanism is intended for crossing administrative boundaries. For example, if example.com and example.org were managed by the same entity, and if the permitted set of hosts for both domains was

"mx:example.com", it would be possible for example.org to specify "include:example.com", but it would be preferable to specify "redirect=example.com" or even "mx:example.com".

With the "include" mechanism an administratively external set of hosts can be authorized, but determination of sender policy is still a function of the original domain's SPF record (as determined by the "all" mechanism in that record). The redirect modifier is more suitable for consolidating both authorizations and policy into a common set to be shared within an ADMD. Redirect is much more like a



common code element to be shared among records in a single ADMD. It is possible to control both authorized hosts and policy for an arbitrary number of domains from a single record.

### 5.3. "a"

This mechanism matches if <ip> is one of the <target-name>'s IP addresses.

```
a                = "a"          [ ":" domain-spec ] [ dual-cidr-length ]
```

An address lookup is done on the <target-name>. The <ip> is compared to the returned address(es). If any address matches, the mechanism matches.

### 5.4. "mx"

This mechanism matches if <ip> is one of the MX hosts for a domain name.

```
mx               = "mx"          [ ":" domain-spec ] [ dual-cidr-length ]
```

check\_host() first performs an MX lookup on the <target-name>. Then it performs an address lookup on each MX name returned. The <ip> is compared to each returned IP address. To prevent Denial of Service (DoS) attacks, more than 10 MX names MUST NOT be looked up during the evaluation of an "mx" mechanism. If there are more than 10 MX names then permerror is returned and the evaluation terminated (see [Section 4.6.4](#)). If any address matches, the mechanism matches.

Note regarding implicit MXs: If the <target-name> has no MX records, check\_host() MUST NOT pretend the target is its single MX, and MUST NOT default to an A or AAAA lookup on the <target-name> directly. This behavior diverges from the legacy "implicit MX" rule, (See [\[RFC5321\]](#), [Section 5](#). If such behavior is desired, the publisher will have to specify an "a" directive).

### 5.5. "ptr" (deprecated)

This mechanism tests whether the DNS reverse-mapping for <ip> exists and correctly points to a domain name within a particular domain. This mechanism is deprecated and SHOULD NOT be used.

```
ptr              = "ptr"         [ ":" domain-spec ]
```

The <ip>'s name is looked up using this procedure:





1. Perform a DNS reverse-mapping for <ip>: Look up the corresponding PTR record in "in-addr.arpa." if the address is an IPv4 one and in "ip6.arpa." if it is an IPv6 address.
2. For each record returned, validate the domain name by looking up its IP addresses. To prevent DoS attacks, more than 10 PTR names MUST NOT be looked up during the evaluation of a "ptr" mechanism (see [Section 4.6.4](#)).
3. If <ip> is among the returned IP addresses, then that domain name is validated.

Check all validated domain names to see if they either match the <target-name> domain or are a subdomain of the <target-name> domain. If any do, this mechanism matches. If no validated domain name can be found, or if none of the validated domain names match or are a subdomain of the <target-name>, this mechanism fails to match. If a DNS error occurs while doing the PTR RR lookup, then this mechanism fails to match. If a DNS error occurs while doing an A RR lookup, then that domain name is skipped and the search continues.

Pseudocode:

```
sending-domain_names := ptr_lookup(sending-host_IP);
if more than 10 sending-domain_names are found, use at most 10.
for each name in (sending-domain_names) {
    IP_addresses := a_lookup(name);
    if the sending-domain_IP is one of the IP_addresses {
        validated-sending-domain_names += name;
    }
}

for each name in (validated-sending-domain_names) {
    if name ends in <domain-spec>, return match.
    if name is <domain-spec>, return match.
}
return no-match.
```

This mechanism matches if the <target-name> is either a subdomain of a validated domain name or if the <target-name> and a validated domain name are the same. For example: "mail.example.com" is within the domain "example.com", but "mail.bad-example.com" is not.

Note: This mechanism has been deprecated because it is slow, it is not as reliable as other mechanisms in cases of DNS errors, and it places a large burden on the .arpa name servers. If used, proper PTR records MUST be in place for the domain's hosts and the "ptr" mechanism SHOULD be one of the last mechanisms checked. After many



years of SPF deployment experience it has been concluded it is unnecessary and more reliable alternatives used instead. It is, however, still in use and part of the SPF protocol, so compliant `check_host()` implementations MUST support it.

### 5.6. "ip4" and "ip6"

These mechanisms test whether `<ip>` is contained within a given IP network.

```
ip4          = "ip4"      ":" ip4-network  [ ip4-cidr-length ]
ip6          = "ip6"      ":" ip6-network  [ ip6-cidr-length ]

ip4-cidr-length = "/" 1*DIGIT
ip6-cidr-length = "/" 1*DIGIT
dual-cidr-length = [ ip4-cidr-length ] [ "/" ip6-cidr-length ]

ip4-network    = qnum "." qnum "." qnum "." qnum
qnum           = DIGIT                ; 0-9
                / %x31-39 DIGIT        ; 10-99
                / "1" 2DIGIT           ; 100-199
                / "2" %x30-34 DIGIT     ; 200-249
                / "25" %x30-35          ; 250-255
                ; as per conventional dotted quad notation. e.g., 192.0.2.0
ip6-network    = <as per \[RFC 4291\], section 2.2>
                ; e.g., 2001:DB8::CD30
```

The `<ip>` is compared to the given network. If CIDR prefix length high-order bits match, the mechanism matches.

If `ip4-cidr-length` is omitted, it is taken to be `"/32"`. If `ip6-cidr-length` is omitted, it is taken to be `"/128"`. It is not permitted to omit parts of the IP address instead of using CIDR notations. That is, use `192.0.2.0/24` instead of `192.0.2`.

### 5.7. "exists"

This mechanism is used to construct an arbitrary domain name that is used for a DNS A record query. It allows for complicated schemes involving arbitrary parts of the mail envelope to determine what is permitted.

```
exists       = "exists"  ":" domain-spec
```

The `domain-spec` is expanded as per [Section 8](#). The resulting domain name is used for a DNS A RR lookup. If any A record is returned, this mechanism matches. The lookup type is A even when the connection type is IPv6.



Domains can use this mechanism to specify arbitrarily complex queries. For example, suppose example.com publishes the record:

```
v=spf1 exists:%{ir}._{l1r+-}._spf.{d} -all
```

The <target-name> might expand to "1.2.0.192.someuser.\_spf.example.com". This makes fine-grained decisions possible at the level of the user and client IP address.

This mechanism enables queries that mimic the style of tests that existing DNS white/black lists (DNSxLs) use, as described in [\[RFC5782\]](#). The query will either return NXDOMAIN (no match), any valid answer (match), or an error.



## **6. Modifier Definitions**

Modifiers are name/value pairs that provide additional information. Modifiers always have an "=" separating the name and the value.

The modifiers defined in this document ("redirect" and "exp") MAY appear anywhere in the record, but SHOULD appear at the end, after all mechanisms. Ordering of these two modifiers does not matter. These two modifiers MUST NOT appear in a record more than once each. If they do, then `check_host()` exits with a result of "permerror".

Unrecognized modifiers MUST be ignored no matter where in a record, or how often. This allows implementations of this document to gracefully handle records with modifiers that are defined in other specifications.

### **6.1. redirect: Redirected Query**

The redirect modifier is intended for consolidating both authorizations and policy into a common set to be shared within a single ADMD. Redirect is like a common code element to be shared among records in a single ADMD. It is possible to control both authorized hosts and policy for an arbitrary number of domains from a single record.

```
redirect          = "redirect" "=" domain-spec
```

If all mechanisms fail to match, and a "redirect" modifier is present, then processing proceeds as follows:

The domain-spec portion of the redirect section is expanded as per the macro rules in [Section 8](#). Then `check_host()` is evaluated with the resulting string as the <domain>. The <ip> and <sender> arguments remain the same as in the current evaluation of `check_host()`.

The result of this new evaluation of `check_host()` is then considered the result of the current evaluation with the exception that if no SPF record is found, or if the target-name is malformed, the result is a "permerror" rather than "none".

Note that the newly-queried domain can itself specify redirect processing.

This facility is intended for use by organizations that wish to apply the same record to multiple domains. For example:





```
la.example.com. TXT "v=spf1 redirect=_spf.example.com"
ny.example.com. TXT "v=spf1 redirect=_spf.example.com"
sf.example.com. TXT "v=spf1 redirect=_spf.example.com"
_spf.example.com. TXT "v=spf1 mx:example.com -all"
```

In this example, mail from any of the three domains is described by the same record. This can be an administrative advantage.

Note: In general, the domain "A" cannot reliably use a redirect to another domain "B" not under the same administrative control. Since the <sender> stays the same, there is no guarantee that the record at domain "B" will correctly work for mailboxes in domain "A", especially if domain "B" uses mechanisms involving local-parts. An "include" directive is generally be more appropriate.

For clarity, it is RECOMMENDED that any "redirect" modifier appear as the very last term in a record.

## **6.2. exp: Explanation**

explanation        = "exp" "=" domain-spec

If `check_host()` results in a "fail" due to a mechanism match (such as "-all"), and the "exp" modifier is present, then the explanation string returned is computed as described below. If no "exp" modifier is present, then either a default explanation string or an empty explanation string MUST be returned.

The domain-spec is macro expanded (see [Section 8](#)) and becomes the <target-name>. The DNS TXT record for the <target-name> is fetched.

If there are any DNS processing errors (any RCODE other than 0), or if no records are returned, or if more than one record is returned, or if there are syntax errors in the explanation string, then proceed as if no exp modifier was given.

The fetched TXT record's strings are concatenated with no spaces, and then treated as an explain-string, which is macro-expanded. This final result is the explanation string. Implementations MAY limit the length of the resulting explanation string to allow for other protocol constraints and/or reasonable processing limits. Since the explanation string is intended for an SMTP response and [\[RFC5321\]](#) [Section 2.4](#) says that responses are in [\[US-ASCII\]](#), the explanation string MUST be limited to US-ASCII.

Software evaluating `check_host()` can use this string to communicate information from the publishing domain in the form of a short message or URL. Software SHOULD make it clear that the explanation string



comes from a third party. For example, it can prepend the macro string "%{o} explains: " to the explanation, such as shown in [Section 2.5.4](#).

Suppose example.com has this record:

```
v=spf1 mx -all exp=explain._spf.{d}
```

Here are some examples of possible explanation TXT records at explain.\_spf.example.com:

```
"Mail from example.com should only be sent by its own servers."
```

```
-- a simple, constant message
```

```
"%{i} is not one of %{d}'s designated mail servers."
```

```
-- a message with a little more information, including the IP  
address that failed the check
```

```
"See http://%{d}/why.html?s=%{S}&i=%{I}"
```

```
-- a complicated example that constructs a URL with the  
arguments to check_host() so that a web page can be  
generated with detailed, custom instructions
```

Note: During recursion into an "include" mechanism, an exp= modifier from the <target-name> MUST NOT be used. In contrast, when executing a "redirect" modifier, an exp= modifier from the original domain MUST NOT be used.



## **7. Recording The Result**

To provide downstream agents, such as MUAs, with the information they might need in terms of evaluating or representing the apparent safety of the message content, it is RECOMMENDED that SMTP receivers record the result of SPF processing in the message header. For operators that choose to record SPF results in the header of the message for processing by internal filters or MUAs, two methods are presented. [Section 7.1](#) defines the Received-SPF field, which is the results field originally defined for SPF use. [Section 7.2](#) discusses Authentication-Results [[RFC5451](#)] which was specified more recently and is designed for use by SPF and other authentication methods.

Both are in common use, and hence both are included here. However, it is important to note that they were designed to serve slightly different purposes. Received-SPF is intended to include enough forensic information to enable reconstruction of the SPF evaluation of the message, while Authentication-Results is designed only to relay the result itself and related output details of likely use to end users (e.g., what property of the message was actually authenticated and what it contained), leaving forensic work to the purview of system logs and the Received field contents. Also, Received-SPF relies on compliance of agents within the receiving ADMD to adhere to the header field ordering rules of [[RFC5321](#)] and [[RFC5322](#)], while Authentication-Results includes some provisions to protect against non-compliant implementations.

An operator could choose to use both to serve different downstream agents. In such cases, care needs to be taken to ensure both fields are conveying the same details, or unexpected results can occur.

### **7.1. The Received-SPF Header Field**

The Received-SPF header field is a trace field (see [[RFC5322](#)] [Section 3.6.7](#)) and SHOULD be prepended to the existing header, above the Received: field that is generated by the SMTP receiver. It MUST appear above all other Received-SPF fields in the message. The header field has the following format:



header-field = "Received-SPF:" [CFWS] result FWS [comment FWS]  
[ key-value-list ] CRLF

result = "pass" / "fail" / "softfail" / "neutral" /  
"none" / "temperror" / "permerror"

key-value-list = key-value-pair \*( ";" [CFWS] key-value-pair )  
[";"]

key-value-pair = key [CFWS] "=" ( dot-atom / quoted-string )

key = "client-ip" / "envelope-from" / "helo" /  
"problem" / "receiver" / "identity" /  
mechanism / name

identity = "mailfrom" ; for the "MAIL FROM" identity  
/ "helo" ; for the "HELO" identity  
/ name ; other identities

dot-atom = <unquoted word as per [\[RFC5322\]](#)>

quoted-string = <quoted string as per [\[RFC5322\]](#)>

comment = <comment string as per [\[RFC5322\]](#)>

CFWS = <comment or folding white space as per [\[RFC5322\]](#)>

FWS = <folding white space as per [\[RFC5322\]](#)>

CRLF = <standard end-of-line token as per [\[RFC2532\]](#)>

The header field SHOULD include a "(...)" style comment after the result, conveying supporting information for the result, such as <ip>, <sender>, and <domain>.

The following key-value pairs are designed for later machine parsing. SPF verifiers SHOULD give enough information so that the SPF results can be verified. That is, at least "client-ip", "helo", and, if the "MAIL FROM" identity was checked, "envelope-from".

client-ip        the IP address of the SMTP client

envelope-from   the envelope sender mailbox

helo            the host name given in the HELO or EHLO command

mechanism       the mechanism that matched (if no mechanisms matched, substitute the word "default")

problem         if an error was returned, details about the error





receiver        the host name of the SPF verifier

identity        the identity that was checked; see the <identity> ABNF rule

Other keys MAY be defined by SPF verifiers.

SPF verifiers MUST make sure that the Received-SPF header field does not contain invalid characters, is not excessively long (See [\[RFC5322\] Section 2.1.1](#)), and does not contain malicious data that has been provided by the sender.

Examples of various header field styles that could be generated are the following:

```
Received-SPF: pass (mybox.example.org: domain of
  myname@example.com designates 192.0.2.1 as permitted sender)
  receiver=mybox.example.org; client-ip=192.0.2.1;
  envelope-from="myname@example.com"; helo=foo.example.com;
```

```
Received-SPF: fail (mybox.example.org: domain of
  myname@example.com does not designate
  192.0.2.1 as permitted sender)
  identity=mailfrom; client-ip=192.0.2.1;
  envelope-from="myname@example.com";
```

## **7.2. SPF Results in the Authentication-Results Header Field**

As mentioned in [Section 7](#), the Authentication-Results header field is designed to communicate lists of tests a border MTA did and their results. The specified elements of the field provide less information than the SPF-Received field:

```
Authentication-Results: myhost.example.org; spf=pass
  smtp.mailfrom=example.net
```

```
Received-SPF: pass (myhost.example.org: domain of
  myname@example.com designates 192.0.2.1 as permitted sender)
  receiver=mybox.example.org; client-ip=192.0.2.1;
  envelope-from="myname@example.com"; helo=foo.example.com;
```

It is, however, possible to add CFWS in the "reason" part of an Authentication-Results header field and provide the equivalent information, if desired.

As an example, an expanded Authentication-Results header field might look like (for a "MAIL FROM" check in this example):



```
Authentication-Results: myhost.example.org; spf=pass  
  reason="client-ip=192.0.2.1; smtp.helo=foo.example.com"  
  smtp.mailfrom=user@example.net
```

## 8. Macros

### 8.1. Macro Definitions

Many mechanisms and modifiers perform macro expansion on a term.

```

domain-spec      = macro-string domain-end
domain-end       = ( "." toplabel [ "." ] ) / macro-expand

toplabel         = ( *alphanum ALPHA *alphanum ) /
                  ( 1*alphanum "-" *( alphanum / "-" ) alphanum )
                  ; LDH rule plus additional TLD restrictions
                  ; (see \[RFC3696\], Section 2 for background)
alphanum         = ALPHA / DIGIT

explain-string   = *( macro-string / SP )

macro-string     = *( macro-expand / macro-literal )
macro-expand     = ( "%{" macro-letter transformers *delimiter "}" )
                  / "%%" / "%_" / "%-"
macro-literal    = %x21-24 / %x26-7E
                  ; visible characters except "%"
macro-letter     = "s" / "l" / "o" / "d" / "i" / "p" / "h" /
                  "c" / "r" / "t" / "v"
transformers     = *DIGIT [ "r" ]
delimiter        = "." / "-" / "+" / "," / "/" / "_" / "="

```

A literal "%" is expressed by "%%".

"%\_" expands to a single " " space.

"%-" expands to a URL-encoded space, viz., "%20".

The following macro letters are expanded in term arguments:

```

s = <sender>
l = local-part of <sender>
o = domain of <sender>
d = <domain>
i = <ip>
p = the validated domain name of <ip> (deprecated)
v = the string "in-addr" if <ip> is ipv4, or "ip6" if <ip> is ipv6
h = HELO/EHLO domain

```

The following macro letters are allowed only in "exp" text:

```

c = SMTP client IP (easily readable format)
r = domain name of host performing the check
t = current timestamp

```



A '%' character not followed by a '{', '%', '-', or '\_' character is a syntax error. So

```
-exists:%(ir).sbl.spamhaus.example.org
```

is incorrect and will cause `check_host()` to yield a "permerror".

Instead, say

```
-exists:%{ir}.sbl.spamhaus.example.org
```

Optional transformers are the following:

\*DIGIT = zero or more digits

'r' = reverse value, splitting on dots by default

If transformers or delimiters are provided, the replacement value for a macro letter is split into parts. After performing any reversal operation and/or removal of left-hand parts, the parts are rejoined using "." and not the original splitting characters.

By default, strings are split on "." (dots). Note that no special treatment is given to leading, trailing, or consecutive delimiters in input strings, and so the list of parts might contain empty strings. Some older implementations of SPF prohibit trailing dots in domain names, so trailing dots SHOULD NOT be published by domain owners, although they MUST be accepted by implementations conforming to this document. Macros can specify delimiter characters that are used instead of ".".

The 'r' transformer indicates a reversal operation: if the client IP address were 192.0.2.1, the macro `%{i}` would expand to "192.0.2.1" and the macro `%{ir}` would expand to "1.2.0.192".

The DIGIT transformer indicates the number of right-hand parts to use, after optional reversal. If a DIGIT is specified, the value MUST be nonzero. If no DIGITs are specified, or if the value specifies more parts than are available, all the available parts are used. If the DIGIT was 5, and only 3 parts were available, the macro interpreter would pretend the DIGIT was 3. Implementations MUST support at least a value of 128, as that is the maximum number of labels in a domain name.

The "s" macro expands to the <sender> argument. It is an email address with a local-part, an "@" character, and a domain. The "l" macro expands to just the local-part. The "o" macro expands to just the domain part. Note that these values remain the same during recursive and chained evaluations due to "include" and/or "redirect". Note also that if the original <sender> had no local-part, the local-part was set to "postmaster" in initial processing (see [Section 4.3](#)).

For IPv4 addresses, both the "i" and "c" macros expand to the



standard dotted-quad format.

For IPv6 addresses, the "i" macro expands to a dot-format address; it is intended for use in `%{ir}`. The "c" macro can expand to any of the hexadecimal colon-format addresses specified in [\[RFC4291\]](#), [Section 2.2](#). It is intended for humans to read.

The "p" macro expands to the validated domain name of `<ip>`. The procedure for finding the validated domain name is defined in [Section 5.5](#). If the `<domain>` is present in the list of validated domains, it SHOULD be used. Otherwise, if a subdomain of the `<domain>` is present, it SHOULD be used. Otherwise, any name from the list can be used. If there are no validated domain names or if a DNS error occurs, the string "unknown" is used. This macro is deprecated and SHOULD NOT be used.

The "r" macro expands to the name of the receiving MTA. This SHOULD be a fully qualified domain name, but if one does not exist (as when the checking is done by a MUA) or if policy restrictions dictate otherwise, the word "unknown" SHOULD be substituted. The domain name can be different from the name found in the MX record that the client MTA used to locate the receiving MTA.

The "t" macro expands to the decimal representation of the approximate number of seconds since the Epoch (Midnight, January 1, 1970, UTC) at the time of the evaluation. This is the same value as is returned by the POSIX `time()` function in most standards-compliant libraries.

When the result of macro expansion is used in a domain name query, if the expanded domain name exceeds 253 characters (the maximum length of a domain name), the left side is truncated to fit, by removing successive domain labels (and their following dots) until the total length does not exceed 253 characters.

Uppercased macros expand exactly as their lowercased equivalents, and are then URL escaped. URL escaping MUST be performed for characters not in the "unreserved" set, which is defined in [\[RFC3986\]](#).

Note: Care has to be taken so that macro expansion for legitimate email does not exceed the 63-character limit on DNS labels. The local-part of email addresses, in particular, can have more than 63 characters between dots.

Note: Domains SHOULD avoid using the "s", "l", "o", or "h" macros in conjunction with any mechanism directive. Although these macros are powerful and allow per-user records to be published, they severely limit the ability of implementations to cache results of `check_host()`





and they reduce the effectiveness of DNS caches.

Note: If no directive processed during the evaluation of `check_host()` contains an "s", "l", "o", or "h" macro, then the results of the evaluation can be cached on the basis of <domain> and <ip> alone for as long as the shortest Time To Live (TTL) of all the DNS records involved.

## 8.2. Expansion Examples

The <sender> is strong-bad@email.example.com.

The IPv4 SMTP client IP is 192.0.2.3.

The IPv6 SMTP client IP is 2001:DB8::CB01.

The PTR domain name of the client IP is mx.example.org.

| macro   | expansion                    |
|---------|------------------------------|
| -----   | -----                        |
| %{s}    | strong-bad@email.example.com |
| %{o}    | email.example.com            |
| %{d}    | email.example.com            |
| %{d4}   | email.example.com            |
| %{d3}   | email.example.com            |
| %{d2}   | example.com                  |
| %{d1}   | com                          |
| %{dr}   | com.example.email            |
| %{d2r}  | example.email                |
| %{l}    | strong-bad                   |
| %{l-}   | strong.bad                   |
| %{lr}   | strong-bad                   |
| %{lr-}  | bad.strong                   |
| %{l1r-} | strong                       |

| macro-string                      | expansion  |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| -----                             | -----  |
| %{ir}.%{v}._spf.%{d2}             | 3.2.0.192.in-addr._spf.example.com               |
| %{lr-}.lp._spf.%{d2}              | bad.strong.lp._spf.example.com                   |
| %{lr-}.lp.%{ir}.%{v}._spf.%{d2}   | bad.strong.lp.3.2.0.192.in-addr._spf.example.com |
| %{ir}.%{v}.%{l1r-}.lp._spf.%{d2}  | 3.2.0.192.in-addr.strong.lp._spf.example.com     |
| %{d2}.trusted-domains.example.net | example.com.trusted-domains.example.net          |

IPv6:

|                       |                  |
|-----------------------|------------------|
| %{ir}.%{v}._spf.%{d2} | 1.0.B.C.0.0.0.0. |
|-----------------------|------------------|



```
0.0.0.0.0.0.0.0.0.0.0.0.0.0.8.B.D.0.1.0.0.2.ip6._spf.example.com
```

## 9. Implications

This section outlines the major implications that adoption of this document will have on various entities involved in Internet email. It is intended to make clear to the reader where this document knowingly affects the operation of such entities. This section is not a "how-to" manual, or a "best practices" document, and it is not a comprehensive list of what such entities SHOULD do in light of this document.

This section is non-normative. [RFC5598] describes the Internet email architecture. This section is organized based on the different segments of the architecture.

### 9.1. Sending Domains

Originating ADMDs (ADministrative Management Domains - [RFC5598] Section 2.2.1 and Section 2.3) that wish to be compliant with this specification will need to determine the list of relays ([RFC5598] Section 2.2.2) that they allow to use their domain name in the "HELO" and "MAIL FROM" identities when relaying to other ADMDs. It is recognized that forming such a list is not just a simple technical exercise, but involves policy decisions with both technical and administrative considerations.

#### 9.1.1. DNS Resource Considerations

Minimizing the DNS resources required for SPF lookups can be done by choosing directives that require less DNS information and by placing lower-cost mechanisms earlier in the SPF record.

| term     | cost   | limit           |
|----------|--------|-----------------|
| ip4/ip6  | 0      | -               |
| a        | 1      | 10              |
| include  | 1      | 10              |
| redirect | 1      | 10              |
| exists   | 1      | 10              |
| mx       | 1 + N* | 10 and N* <= 10 |
| ptr/{p}  | 1 + N* | 10 and N* <= 10 |
| all      | 0      | -               |

\* N is the number of RRs found during each term evaluation

Section 4.6.4 specifies the limits receivers have to use. It is essential to publish records that do not exceed these requirements. It is also required to carefully weight the cost and the



maintainability of licit solutions.

For example, consider a domain set up as follows:

```
example.com.      IN MX   10 mx.example.com.
                  IN MX   20 mx2.example.com.
mx.example.com.   IN A     192.0.2.1
mx2.example.com.  IN A     192.0.2.129
```

Assume the administrative point is to authorize (pass) mx and mx2 while failing every other host. Compare the following solutions:

Best record:

```
example.com.      IN TXT   "v=spf1 ip4:192.0.2.1 ip4:192.0.2.129 -all"
```

Good record:

```
$ORIGIN example.com.
@              IN TXT   "v=spf1 a:authorized-spf.example.com -all"
authorized-spf IN A     192.0.2.1
               IN A     192.0.2.129
```

Expensive record:

```
example.com.      IN TXT   "v=spf1 mx:example.com -all"
```

Wasteful, bad record:

```
example.com.      IN TXT   "v=spf1 ip4:192.0.2.0/24 mx -all"
```

### **9.1.2. Administrator's Considerations**

There might be administrative considerations: using "a" over "ip4" or "ip6" allows hosts to be renumbered easily. Using "mx" over "a" allows the set of mail hosts to be changed easily. Unless such changes are common, it is better to use the less resource intensive mechanisms like "ip4" and "ip6" over "a" or "a" or "mx".

In some specific cases, standard advice on record content is appropriate. Publishing SPF records for domains that send no mail is a well established best practice. The record for a domain that sends no mail is:

```
www.example.com.  IN TXT   "v=spf1 -all"
```

Publishing SPF records for individual hosts is also best practice. The hostname is generally the identity used in the 5321.HELO/.EHLO command. In the case of messages with a null 5321.MailFrom, this is





used as the domain for 5321.MailFrom SPF checks, in addition to being used in 5321.HELO/.EHLO based SPF checks. The standard SPF record for an individual host that is involved in mail processing is:

```
relay.example.com.  IN TXT  "v=spf1 a -all"
```

Validating correct deployment is difficult. [\[RFC6652\]](#) describes one mechanism for soliciting feedback on SPF failures. Another approach that can be helpful to publish records that include a "tracking exists:" mechanism. By looking at the name server logs, a rough list can then be generated. For example:

```
v=spf1 exists:_h.%{h}._l.%{l}._o.%{o}._i.%{i}._spf.%{d} ?all
```

Regardless of the method used, understanding the ADMD's outbound mail architecture is essential to effective deployment.

### **[9.1.3.](#) Bounces**

As explained in [Section 1.3.3](#), [\[RFC5321\]](#) allows the reverse-path to be null, which is typical of some Delivery Status Notification [\[RFC3464\]](#), commonly called email bounces. In this case the only entity available for performing an SPF check is the "HELO" identity defined in [Section 1.3.4](#). SPF functionality is enhanced by administrators ensuring this identity is set correctly and has an appropriate SPF record. It is normal to have the HELO identity set to hostname instead of domain. Zone file generation for significant numbers of hosts can be consolidated using the redirect modifier and scripted for initial deployment. Specific deployment advice is given above in [Section 9.1.2](#).

## **[9.2.](#) Mediators**

Broadly speaking, there are two types of mediating ADMDs that can affect SPF deployment of other ADMDs: mailing lists (see [\[RFC5598\]](#) [Section 5.3](#)) and ReSenders ([\[RFC5598\]](#) [Section 5.2](#)).

### **[9.2.1.](#) Mailing Lists**

Mailing lists have to be aware of how they re-inject mail that is sent to the list. Mailing lists MUST comply with the requirements in [\[RFC5321\]](#), [Section 3.10](#), and [\[RFC1123\]](#), [Section 5.3.6](#), that say that the reverse-path MUST be changed to be the mailbox of a person or other entity who administers the list. Whereas the reasons for changing the reverse-path are many and long-standing, SPF adds enforcement to this requirement.

In practice, almost all mailing list software in use already complies



with this requirement. Mailing lists that do not comply might encounter problems depending on how access to the list is restricted. Such lists that are entirely internal to a domain (only people in the domain can send to or receive from the list) are not affected.

### **9.2.2. Forwarding Services and Aliases**

Forwarding services take mail that is received at a mailbox and direct it to some external mailbox. At the time of this writing, the near-universal practice of such services is to use the original "MAIL FROM" of a message when re-injecting it for delivery to the external mailbox. [[RFC1123](#)] and [[RFC5321](#)] describe this action as an "alias" rather than a "mail list". This means the external mailbox's MTA sees all such mail in a connection from a host of the forwarding service, and so the "MAIL FROM" identity will not, in general, pass authorization.

There are three places that techniques can be used to ameliorate this problem.

1. The beginning, when email is first sent (Originating ADMDs).

1. "Neutral" results could be given for IP addresses that might be forwarders, instead of "fail" results based on a list of known reliable forwarders. For example:

```
"v=spf1 mx ?exists:%{ir}.whitelist.example.org -all"
```

This would cause a lookup on an DNS white list (DNSWL) and cause a result of "fail" only for email not either coming from the domain's mx host(s) (SPF pass) or white listed sources (SPF neutral). This, in effect, outsources an element of sender policy to the maintainer of the whitelist.

2. The "MAIL FROM" identity could have additional information in the local-part that cryptographically identifies the mail as coming from an authorized source. In this case, such an SPF record could be used:

```
"v=spf1 mx exists:%{l}._spf_verify.%{d} -all"
```

Then, a specialized DNS server can be set up to serve the `_spf_verify` subdomain that validates the local-part. Although this requires an extra DNS lookup, this happens only when the email would otherwise be rejected as not coming from a known good source.

Note that due to the 63-character limit for domain labels, this approach only works reliably if the local-part signature



scheme is guaranteed either to only produce local-parts with a maximum of 63 characters or to gracefully handle truncated local-parts.

3. Similarly, a specialized DNS server could be set up that will rate-limit the email coming from unexpected IP addresses.

```
"v=spf1 mx exists:%{ir}._spf_rate.%{d} -all"
```

4. SPF allows the creation of per-user policies for special cases. For example, the following SPF record and appropriate wildcard DNS records can be used:

```
"v=spf1 mx redirect=%{l1r+}._at_.%{o}._spf.%{d}"
```

2. The middle, when email is forwarded (Mediating ADMs).

1. Forwarding services can solve the problem by rewriting the "MAIL FROM" to be in their own domain. This means mail rejected from the external mailbox will have to be forwarded back to the original sender by the forwarding service. Various schemes to do this exist though they vary widely in complexity and resource requirements on the part of the forwarding service.
2. Several popular MTAs can be forced from "alias" semantics to "mailing list" semantics by configuring an additional alias with "owner-" prepended to the original alias name (e.g., an alias of "friends: george@example.com, fred@example.org" would need another alias of the form "owner-friends: localowner").
3. Forwarding servers could reject mail that would "fail" SPF if forwarded using an SMTP reply code of 551, User not local, (see [\[RFC5321\] section 3.4](#)) to communicate the correct target address to resend the mail to.

3. The end, when email is received (Receiving ADMs).

1. If the owner of the external mailbox wishes to trust the forwarding service, he can direct the external mailbox's MTA to skip SPF tests when the client host belongs to the forwarding service.
2. Tests against other identities, such as the "HELO" identity, MAY be used to override a failed test against the "MAIL FROM" identity.



3. For larger domains, it might not be possible to have a complete or accurate list of forwarding services used by the owners of the domain's mailboxes. In such cases, whitelists of generally-recognized forwarding services could be employed.

#### **9.2.3. Mail Services**

MSPs (Mail Service Providers - [\[RFC5598\] Section 2.3](#)) that offer mail services to third-party domains, such as sending of bulk mail, might want to adjust their configurations in light of the authorization check described in this document. If the domain part of the "MAIL FROM" identity used for such email uses the domain of one of the MSPs domain, then the provider needs only to ensure that its sending host is authorized by its own SPF record, if any.

If the "MAIL FROM" identity does not use the MSP's domain, then extra care has to be taken. The SPF record format has several options for the third-party domain to authorize the service provider's MTAs to send mail on its behalf. For MSPs, such as ISPs, that have a wide variety of customers using the same MTA, steps are required to mitigate the risk of cross-customer forgery (see [Section 10.4](#)).

#### **9.2.4. MTA Relays**

Relays are described in [\[RFC5598\] Section 2.2.2](#). The authorization check generally precludes the use of arbitrary MTA relays between sender and receiver of an email message.

Within an organization, MTA relays can be effectively deployed. However, for purposes of this document, such relays are effectively transparent. The SPF authorization check is a check between border MTAs of different ADMDs.

For mail senders, this means that published SPF records have to authorize any MTAs that actually send across the Internet. Usually, these are just the border MTAs as internal MTAs simply forward mail to these MTAs for relaying.

The receiving ADMD will generally want to perform the authorization check at the boundary MTAs, including all secondary MXs. Internal MTAs (including MTAs that might serve both as boundary MTAs and internal relays from secondary MXs when they are processing the relayed mail stream) then do not perform the authorization test. To perform the authorization test other than at the boundary, the host that first transferred the message to the receiving ADMD have to be determined, which can be difficult to extract from the message header because (a) header fields can be forged or malformed, and (b) there's





no standard way to encode that information such that it can be reliably extracted. Testing other than at the boundary is likely to produce unreliable results.

### **9.3. Receivers**

SPF results can be used in combination with other methods to determine the final local disposition (either positive or negative of a message. It can also be considered dispositive on its own.

#### **9.3.1. Policy For SPF Pass**

SPF pass results can be used in combination with "white lists" of known "good" domains to bypass some or all additional pre-delivery email checks. Exactly which checks and how to determine appropriate white list entries has to be based on local conditions and requirements.

#### **9.3.2. Policy For SPF Fail**

SPF fail results can be used to reject messages during the SMTP transaction based on either "MAIL FROM" or "HELO" identity results. This reduces resource requirements for various content filtering methods and conserves bandwidth since rejection can be done before the SMTP content is transferred. It also gives immediate feedback to the sender who might then be able to resolve the issue. Due to some of the issues described above in this section ([Section 9](#)), SPF based rejection does present some risk of rejecting legitimate email when rejecting based on "MAIL FROM" results.

SPF fail results can alternately be used as one input into a larger set of evaluations which might, based on a combination with other evaluation techniques, result in the email being marked negatively in some way (this might be via delivery to a special spam folder, modifying subject lines, or other locally determined means). Developing the details of such an approach have to be based on local conditions and requirements. Using SPF results in this way does not have the advantages of resource conservation and immediate feedback to the sender associated with SMTP rejection, but could produce fewer undesirable rejections in a well designed system. Such an approach might result in email that was not authorized by the sending ADMD being unknowingly delivered to end users.

Either general approach can be used as they both leave a clear disposition of emails. They are either delivered in some manner or the sender is notified of the failure. Other dispositions such as "dropping" or deleting email after acceptance are inappropriate because they leave uncertainty and reduce the overall reliability



and utility of email across the Internet.

### **9.3.3. Policy For SPF Permerror**

The "permerror" result (see [Section 2.5.7](#)) indicates the SPF processing module at the receiver determined that the retrieved SPF policy record could not be interpreted. This gives no true indication about the authorized use of the data found in the envelope.

As with all results, implementers have a choice to make regarding what to do with a message that yields this result. SMTP allows only a few basic options.

Rejection of the message is an option, in that it is the one thing a receiver can do to draw attention to the difficulty encountered while protecting itself from messages that do not have a definite SPF result of some kind. However, if the SPF implementation is defective and returns spurious "permerror" results, only the sender is actively notified of the defect (in the form of rejected mail), and not the receiver making use of SPF.

The less intrusive handling choice is to deliver the message, perhaps with some kind of annotation of the difficulty encountered and/or logging of a similar nature. However, this will not be desirable to operators that wish to implement SPF checking as strictly as possible, nor is this sort of passive problem reporting typically effective.

There is of course the option placing this choice in the hands of the operator rather than the implementer since this kind of choice is often a matter of local policy rather than a condition with a universal solution, but this adds one more piece of complexity to an already non-trivial environment.

Both implementers and operators need to be cautious of all choices and outcomes when handling SPF results.



## **10. Security Considerations**

### **10.1. Processing Limits**

As with most aspects of email, there are a number of ways that malicious parties could use the protocol as an avenue for a Denial-of-Service (DoS) attack. The processing limits outlined in [Section 4.6.4](#) are designed to prevent attacks such as the following:

- o A malicious party could create an SPF record with many references to a victim's domain and send many emails to different SPF verifiers; those SPF verifiers would then create a DoS attack. In effect, the SPF verifiers are being used to amplify the attacker's bandwidth by using fewer bytes in the SMTP session than are used by the DNS queries. Using SPF clients also allows the attacker to hide the true source of the attack.
- o Whereas implementations of `check_host()` are supposed to limit the number of DNS lookups, malicious domains could publish records that exceed these limits in an attempt to waste computation effort at their targets when they send them mail. Malicious domains could also design SPF records that cause particular implementations to use excessive memory or CPU usage, or to trigger bugs.
- o Malicious parties could send a large volume of mail purporting to come from the intended target to a wide variety of legitimate mail hosts. These legitimate machines would then present a DNS load on the target as they fetched the relevant records.

Of these, the case of a third party referenced in the SPF record is the easiest for a DoS attack to effectively exploit. As a result, limits that might seem reasonable for an individual mail server can still allow an unreasonable amount of bandwidth amplification. Therefore, the processing limits need to be quite low.

### **10.2. SPF-Authorized Email May Contain Other False Identities**

Do not construe the "MAIL FROM" and "HELO" identity authorizations to provide more assurance than they do. It is entirely possible for a malicious sender to inject a message using his own domain in the identities used by SPF, to have that domain's SPF record authorize the sending host, and yet the message can easily list other identities in its header. Unless the user or the MUA takes care to note that the authorized identity does not match the other more commonly-presented identities (such as the From: header field), the user might be lulled into a false sense of security.



### **10.3. Spoofed DNS and IP Data**

There are two aspects of this protocol that malicious parties could exploit to undermine the validity of the `check_host()` function:

- o The evaluation of `check_host()` relies heavily on DNS. A malicious attacker could attack the DNS infrastructure and cause `check_host()` to see spoofed DNS data, and then return incorrect results. This could include returning "pass" for an `<ip>` value where the actual domain's record would evaluate to "fail". See [\[RFC3833\]](#) for a description of DNS weaknesses.
- o The client IP address, `<ip>`, is assumed to be correct. In a modern, correctly configured system the risk of this not being true is nil.

### **10.4. Cross-User Forgery**

By definition, SPF policies just map domain names to sets of authorized MTAs, not whole email addresses to sets of authorized users. Although the "l" macro ([Section 8](#)) provides a limited way to define individual sets of authorized MTAs for specific email addresses, it is generally impossible to verify, through SPF, the use of specific email addresses by individual users of the same MTA.

It is up to mail services and their MTAs to directly prevent cross-user forgery: based on SMTP AUTH ([\[RFC4954\]](#)), users have to be restricted to using only those email addresses that are actually under their control (see [\[RFC6409\]](#), [Section 6.1](#)). Another means to verify the identity of individual users is message cryptography such as PGP ([\[RFC4880\]](#)) or S/MIME ([\[RFC5751\]](#)).

### **10.5. Untrusted Information Sources**

An SPF compliant receiver gathers information from the SMTP commands it receives and from the published DNS records of the sending domain holder, (e.g., "HELO" domain name, the "MAIL FROM" address from the envelope, and SPF DNS records published by the domain holder).

#### **10.5.1. Recorded Results**

This information, passed to the receiver in the Received-SPF: or Authentication-Results: trace fields, may be returned to the client MTA as an SMTP rejection message. If such an SMTP rejection message is generated, the information from the trace fields has to be checked for such problems as invalid characters and excessively long lines.





### **10.5.2. External Explanations**

When the authorization check fails, an explanation string could be included in the reject response. Both the sender and the rejecting receiver need to be aware that the explanation was determined by the publisher of the SPF record checked and, in general, not the receiver. The explanation can contain malicious URLs, or it might be offensive or misleading.

Explanations returned to sender domains due to "exp" modifiers, ([Section 6.2](#)), were generated by the sender policy published by the domain holders themselves. As long as messages are only returned with non-delivery notification ([\[RFC3464\]](#)) to domains publishing the explanation strings from their own DNS SPF records, the only affected parties are the original publishers of the domain's SPF records.

In practice, such non-delivery notifications can be misdirected, such as when an MTA accepts an email and only later generates the notification to a forged address, or when an email forwarder does not direct the bounce back to the original sender.

### **10.5.3. Macro Expansion**

Macros ([Section 8](#)) allow senders to inject arbitrary text (any non-null [\[US-ASCII\]](#) character) into receiver DNS queries. It is necessary to be prepared for hostile or unexpected content.

### **10.6. Privacy Exposure**

Checking SPF records causes DNS queries to be sent to the domain owner. These DNS queries, especially if they are caused by the "exists" mechanism, can contain information about who is sending email and likely to which MTA the email is being sent. This can introduce some privacy concerns, which are more or less of an issue depending on local laws and the relationship between the domain owner and the person sending the email.



## **11. Contributors and Acknowledgements**

This document is largely based on the work of Meng Weng Wong, Mark Lentczner, and Wayne Schlitt. Although, as this section acknowledges, many people have contributed to this document, a very large portion of the writing and editing are due to Meng, Mark, and Wayne.

This design owes a debt of parentage to [\[RMX\]](#) by Hadmut Danisch and to [\[DMP\]](#) by Gordon Fecyk. The idea of using a DNS record to check the legitimacy of an email address traces its ancestry further back through messages on the namedroppers mailing list by Paul Vixie [\[Vixie\]](#) (based on suggestion by Jim Miller) and by David Green [\[Green\]](#).

Philip Gladstone contributed the concept of macros to the specification, multiplying the expressiveness of the language and making per-user and per-IP lookups possible.

The authors of both this document and [\[RFC4408\]](#) would also like to thank the literally hundreds of individuals who have participated in the development of this design. They are far too numerous to name, but they include the following:

- The participants in the SPFbis working group.
- The folks on the spf-discuss mailing list.
- The folks on the SPAM-L mailing list.
- The folks on the IRTF ASRG mailing list.
- The folks on the IETF MARID mailing list.
- The folks on #perl.



## **12. IANA Considerations**

### **12.1. The SPF DNS Record Type**

Per [\[RFC4408\]](#), the IANA assigned the Resource Record Type and Qtype from the DNS Parameters Registry for the SPF RR type with code 99. The format of this type is identical to the TXT RR [\[RFC1035\]](#). The character content of the record is encoded as [\[US-ASCII\]](#). Use of this record type is obsolete for SPF Version 1.

IANA is requested to add an annotation to the SPF RRTYPE saying "(OBSOLETE - use TXT)" in the DNS Parameters registry.

[NOTE TO RFC EDITOR: (to be changed to " ... has added ..." upon publication)]

### **12.2. The Received-SPF Mail Header Field**

Per [\[RFC3864\]](#), the "Received-SPF:" header field is added to the IANA Permanent Message Header Field Registry. The following is the registration template:

Header field name: Received-SPF  
Applicable protocol: mail ([\[RFC5322\]](#))  
Status: Standards Track  
Author/Change controller: IETF  
Specification document(s): RFC XXXX  
[NOTE TO RFC EDITOR: (this document)]

### **12.3. SPF Modifier Registration**

[RFC6652] created a new SPF Modifier Registration. IANA is requested to change the reference for the exp and redirect modifiers from [\[RFC4408\]](#) to this document. Their status should not be changed.



## **13. References**

### **13.1. Normative References**

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- [RFC5598] Crocker, D., "Internet Mail Architecture", [RFC 5598](#), July 2009.
- [RFC5890] Klensin, J., "Internationalized Domain Names for Applications (IDNA): Definitions and Document Framework", [RFC 5890](#), August 2010.
- [US-ASCII] American National Standards Institute (formerly United





States of America Standards Institute), "USA Code for Information Interchange, X3.4", 1968.

ANSI X3.4-1968 has been replaced by newer versions with slight modifications, but the 1968 version remains definitive for the Internet.

### **13.2. Informative References**

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Work In Progress
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- [RFC1034] Mockapetris, P., "Domain names - concepts and facilities", STD 13, [RFC 1034](#), November 1987.
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- [Vixie] Vixie, P., "Repudiating MAIL FROM", 2002.



**Appendix A. Collected ABNF**

This section is normative and any discrepancies with the ABNF fragments in the preceding text are to be resolved in favor of this grammar.

See [\[RFC5234\]](#) for ABNF notation. Please note that as per this ABNF definition, literal text strings (those in quotes) are case-insensitive. Hence, "mx" matches "mx", "MX", "mX", and "Mx".

```

record          = version terms *SP
version         = "v=spf1"

terms           = *( 1*SP ( directive / modifier ) )

directive       = [ qualifier ] mechanism
qualifier       = "+" / "-" / "?" / "~"
mechanism       = ( all / include
                  / A / MX / PTR / IP4 / IP6 / exists )

all             = "all"
include         = "include" ":" domain-spec
A              = "a"      [ ":" domain-spec ] [ dual-cidr-length ]
MX             = "mx"     [ ":" domain-spec ] [ dual-cidr-length ]
PTR            = "ptr"    [ ":" domain-spec ]
IP4            = "ip4"    ":" ip4-network   [ ip4-cidr-length ]
IP6            = "ip6"    ":" ip6-network   [ ip6-cidr-length ]
exists         = "exists" ":" domain-spec

modifier        = redirect / explanation / unknown-modifier
redirect        = "redirect" "=" domain-spec
explanation      = "exp" "=" domain-spec
unknown-modifier = name "=" macro-string
                  ; where name is not any known modifier

ip4-cidr-length = "/" 1*DIGIT
ip6-cidr-length = "/" 1*DIGIT
dual-cidr-length = [ ip4-cidr-length ] [ "/" ip6-cidr-length ]

ip4-network     = qnum "." qnum "." qnum "." qnum
qnum            = DIGIT ; 0-9
                  / %x31-39 DIGIT ; 10-99
                  / "1" 2DIGIT ; 100-199
                  / "2" %x30-34 DIGIT ; 200-249
                  / "25" %x30-35 ; 250-255
                  ; conventional dotted quad notation. e.g., 192.0.2.0
ip6-network     = <as per \[RFC 4291\], section 2.2>
                  ; e.g., 2001:DB8::CD30

```



```

domain-spec      = macro-string domain-end
domain-end       = ( "." toplevel [ "." ] ) / macro-expand

toplevel         = ( *alphanum ALPHA *alphanum ) /
                  ( 1*alphanum "-" *( alphanum / "-" ) alphanum )
                  ; LDH rule plus additional TLD restrictions
                  ; (see \[RFC3696\], Section 2 for background)

alphanum         = ALPHA / DIGIT

explain-string   = *( macro-string / SP )

macro-string     = *( macro-expand / macro-literal )
macro-expand     = ( "%{" macro-letter transformers *delimiter "}" )
                  / "%%" / "%_" / "%-"

macro-literal    = %x21-24 / %x26-7E
                  ; visible characters except "%"

macro-letter     = "s" / "l" / "o" / "d" / "i" / "p" / "h" /
                  "c" / "r" / "t" / "v"

transformers     = *DIGIT [ "r" ]
delimiter        = "." / "-" / "+" / "," / "/" / "_" / "="

name             = ALPHA *( ALPHA / DIGIT / "-" / "_" / "." )

header-field     = "Received-SPF:" [CFWS] result FWS [comment FWS]
                  [ key-value-list ] CRLF

result           = "pass" / "fail" / "softfail" / "neutral" /
                  "none" / "temperror" / "permerror"

key-value-list   = key-value-pair *( ";" [CFWS] key-value-pair )
                  [ ";" ]

key-value-pair   = key [CFWS] "=" ( dot-atom / quoted-string )

key              = "client-ip" / "envelope-from" / "helo" /
                  "problem" / "receiver" / identity /
                  mechanism / name

identity         = "mailfrom"      ; for the "MAIL FROM" identity
                  / "helo"         ; for the "HELO" identity
                  / name           ; other identities

ALPHA            = <A-Z / a-z as per \[RFC5234\]>
DIGIT            = <0-9 as per \[RFC5234\]>
SP               = <space character as per \[RFC5234\]>
domain           = <fully qualified domain as per \[RFC5321\]>
dot-atom         = <unquoted word as per \[RFC5322\]>
quoted-string    = <quoted string as per \[RFC5322\]>

```





|             |   |
|-------------|---|
| comment     | = <comment string as per [ <a href="#">RFC5322</a> ]>                 |
| CFWS        | = <comment or folding white space as per [ <a href="#">RFC5322</a> ]> |
| FWS         | = <folding white space as per [ <a href="#">RFC5322</a> ]>            |
| CRLF        | = <standard end-of-line token as per [ <a href="#">RFC5322</a> ]>     |
| authserv-id | = <authserv-id per [ <a href="#">RFC5451</a> ]>                       |
| reasonspec  | = <reason per [ <a href="#">RFC5451</a> ]>                            |

## [Appendix B](#). Extended Examples

These examples are based on the following DNS setup:

```
; A domain with two mail servers, two hosts
; and two servers at the domain name
$ORIGIN example.com.
```

```
@           MX  10 mail-a
            MX  20 mail-b
            A   192.0.2.10
            A   192.0.2.11
amy         A   192.0.2.65
bob         A   192.0.2.66
mail-a      A   192.0.2.129
mail-b      A   192.0.2.130
www         CNAME example.com.
```

```
; A related domain
$ORIGIN example.org.
```

```
@           MX  10 mail-c
mail-c      A   192.0.2.140
```

```
; The reverse IP for those addresses
```

```
$ORIGIN 2.0.192.in-addr.arpa.
10         PTR example.com.
11         PTR example.com.
65         PTR amy.example.com.
66         PTR bob.example.com.
129        PTR mail-a.example.com.
130        PTR mail-b.example.com.
140        PTR mail-c.example.org.
```

```
; A rogue reverse IP domain that claims to be
```

```
; something it's not
```

```
$ORIGIN 0.0.10.in-addr.arpa.
4          PTR bob.example.com.
```

### [B.1](#). Simple Examples

These examples show various possible published records for example.com and which values if <ip> would cause check\_host() to return "pass". Note that <domain> is "example.com".

```
v=spf1 +all
```



```
-- any <ip> passes

v=spf1 a -all
-- hosts 192.0.2.10 and 192.0.2.11 pass

v=spf1 a:example.org -all
-- no sending hosts pass since example.org has no A records

v=spf1 mx -all
-- sending hosts 192.0.2.129 and 192.0.2.130 pass

v=spf1 mx:example.org -all
-- sending host 192.0.2.140 passes

v=spf1 mx mx:example.org -all
-- sending hosts 192.0.2.129, 192.0.2.130, and 192.0.2.140 pass

v=spf1 mx/30 mx:example.org/30 -all
-- any sending host in 192.0.2.128/30 or 192.0.2.140/30 passes

v=spf1 ptr -all
-- sending host 192.0.2.65 passes (reverse DNS is valid and is in
example.com)
-- sending host 192.0.2.140 fails (reverse DNS is valid, but not
in example.com)
-- sending host 10.0.0.4 fails (reverse IP is not valid)

v=spf1 ip4:192.0.2.128/28 -all
-- sending host 192.0.2.65 fails
-- sending host 192.0.2.129 passes
```

## **B.2. Multiple Domain Example**

These examples show the effect of related records:

```
example.org: "v=spf1 include:example.com include:example.net -all"
```

This record would be used if mail from example.org actually came through servers at example.com and example.net. Example.org's designated servers are the union of example.com's and example.net's designated servers.

```
la.example.org: "v=spf1 redirect=example.org"
ny.example.org: "v=spf1 redirect=example.org"
sf.example.org: "v=spf1 redirect=example.org"
```

These records allow a set of domains that all use the same mail system to make use of that mail system's record. In this way, only



the mail system's record needs to be updated when the mail setup changes. These domains' records never have to change.

### **B.3. DNSBL Style Example**

Imagine that, in addition to the domain records listed above, there are these:

```
$ORIGIN _spf.example.com.
mary.mobile-users          A 127.0.0.2
fred.mobile-users          A 127.0.0.2
15.15.168.192.joel.remote-users  A 127.0.0.2
16.15.168.192.joel.remote-users  A 127.0.0.2
```

The following records describe users at example.com who mail from arbitrary servers, or who mail from personal servers.

example.com:

```
v=spf1 mx
      include:mobile-users._spf.{d}
      include:remote-users._spf.{d}
      -all
```

mobile-users.\_spf.example.com:

```
v=spf1 exists:%{l1r+}.{d}
```

remote-users.\_spf.example.com:

```
v=spf1 exists:%{ir}.{d}%{l1r+}.{d}
```

### **B.4. Multiple Requirements Example**

Say that your sender policy requires both that the IP address is within a certain range and that the reverse DNS for the IP matches. This can be done several ways, including the following:

```
example.com.          SPF  ( "v=spf1 "
                          "-include:ip4._spf.{d} "
                          "-include:ptr._spf.{d} "
                          "+all" )
ip4._spf.example.com.  SPF  "v=spf1 -ip4:192.0.2.0/24 +all"
ptr._spf.example.com.  SPF  "v=spf1 -ptr +all"
```

This example shows how the "-include" mechanism can be useful, how an SPF record that ends in "+all" can be very restrictive, and the use of De Morgan's Law.



## **Appendix C. Change History**

Changes since [RFC 4408](#) (to be removed prior to publication)

Moved to standards track

Authors updated

IESG Note regarding experimental use replaced with discussion of results

Process errata:

Resolved [Section 2.5.7](#) PermError on invalid domains after macro expansion errata in favor of documenting that different clients produce different results.

Add %v macro to ABNF grammar

Replace "uric" by "unreserved"

Recommend an SMTP reply code for optional permerror rejections

Correct syntax in Received-SPF examples

Fix unknown-modifier clause is too greedy in ABNF

Correct use of empty domain-spec on exp modifier

Fix minor typo errata

Convert to spfbis working group draft,  
[draft-ietf-spfbis-4408bis-00](#)

Addressed Ticket #1, [RFC 4408 Section 2.5.6](#) - Temporary errors by giving the option to turn repeated SERVFAIL into permerror and adding [RFC 2308](#) reference.

Clarified text about IPv4 mapped addresses to resolve test suite ambiguity

Clarified ambiguity about result when more than 10 "mx" or "ptr" records are returned for lookup to specify permerror. This resolves one of the test suite ambiguities

Made all references to result codes lower case per issue #7





Adjusted [section 2.2](#) Requirement to check mail from per issue #15

Added missing "v" element in macro-letter in the collected ABNF per issue #16 - [section 8.1](#) was already fixed in the pre-WG draft

Marked ptr and "p" macro deprecated/SHOULD NOT use per issue #27

Expunged lower case may from the draft per issue #8

Expunged "x-" name as an obsolete concept

Updated obsolete references: [RFC2821](#) to [RFC5321](#), [RFC2822](#) to [RFC5322](#), and [RFC4234](#) to [RFC5234](#)

Refer to [RFC6647](#) to describe greylisting instead of trying to describe it directly.

Updated informative references to the current versions.

Added definition for deprecated since there are questions.

Start to rework [section 9](#) with some [RFC5598](#) terms.

Added mention of [RFC 6552](#) feedback reports in [section 9](#).

Added [draft-ietf-spfbis-experiment](#) as an informational reference.

Drop Type SPF.

Try and clarify informational nature of [RFC3696](#)

Fix ABNF nits and add missing definitions per Bill's ABNF checker.

Make DNS lookup time limit SHOULD instead of MAY.

Reorganize and clarify processing limits. Move hard limits to new [section 4.6.4](#), Evaluation Limits. Move advice to non-normative [section 9](#).

Removed paragraph in [section 10.1](#) about limiting total data volumes as it is unused (and removable per the charter) and serves no purpose (it isn't something that actually can be implemented in any reasonable way).

Added text and figures from Alessandro Vesely in [section 9.1](#) to better explain DNS resource limits.



Multiple editorial fixes from Murray Kucherawy's review.

Also based on Murray's review, reworked SMTP identity definitions and made [RFC 5598](#) a normative reference instead of informative. This is a downref that will have to be mentioned in the last call.

Added [RFC 3834](#) as an informative reference about backscatter.

Added IDN requirements and normative reference to [RFC 5890](#) to deal with the question "like DKIM did it.:

Added informative reference to [RFC 4632](#) for CIDR and use CIDR prefix length instead of CIDR-length to match its terminology.

Added [RFC 5782](#) informative reference on DNSxLs to support improving the exists description.

Added text on creating a Authentication-Results header field that matches the Received-SPF header field information and added a normative reference to [RFC 5451](#).

Added informative reference to [RFC 2782](#) due to SRV mention.

Added informative reference to [RFC 3464](#) due to DSN mention.

Added informative reference to [RFC 5617](#) for it's DNS wildcard use.

Added informative reference to [RFC 5782](#) to enhance the explanation of how the exists mechanism works. Clarified the intended match/no-match method.

Added new sections on Receiver policy for SPF pass, fail, and permerror.

Added new [section 9](#) discussion on treatment of bounces and the significance of HELO records.

Added request to IANA to update the SPF modifier registry.



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