NEW gTLD PROGRAM: 2026 ROUND

gTLD

Dispute Resolution Service Providers

Information Pack

Version 1.0

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ICANN

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1. Overview

This document provides Dispute Resolution Service Providers (DRSPs) with additional information regarding the objections and appeals processes in the context of the New Generic Top-Level Domains (gTLD) Program: 2026 Round, complementing the New gTLD Program: 2026 Round Applicant Guidebook, in particular Section 4.5 Objections and Appeals, Appendix 3 Objection and Appeal Materials and DRSP Rules. In the event of any discrepancy between the Procedure in Appendix 3 and the applicable DRSP Rules, the Procedure shall prevail.

2. Guidance, Processes, and Clarifications

2.1. Key Dates

The Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) has announced the following key dates for the 2026 Round.

- **Reveal Day**: 7 October 2026
- **String Confirmation Day**: 17 November 2026
- **Community Input and Objections Period**: 17 November 2026–16 March 2027

2026 Round operations will be paused from 1:00 UTC on 19 December 2026 until 16:00 UTC on 4 January 2027. This pause has been factored into the Community Input and Objections Period to ensure that applicants, the community, and the public retain the full amount of allotted time to provide input or respond to objections.

2.2. Consolidation

- Appeals can only be consolidated if the related objections were consolidated.
- Single vs separate Objection Panel Determinations:
    - As per Article 11(c) of the Objection Procedure, “In the case of String Confusion, Objections against Applications that are in direct contention may be consolidated and a single Panel Determination will be issued explaining the contention.”
    - For other objection grounds, the Applicant Guidebook does not explicitly foresee single Panel Determinations even in case of consolidation; while the same Panel will consider the consolidated applications to save costs, separate Panel Determinations will be issued, even if with similar or identical content.
- ICANN does not have rules in place concerning payments for the parties electing to proceed as a single appellant. If one of the parties fails to make a payment within the specified timelines, the respondent will prevail. DRSPs may elect to specify this in their rules or leave it to the parties to decide how they wish to proceed.

2.3. Registry Voluntary Commitments Pursuant to Commitments Made to Overcome Objections

2.3.1. Overview

Registry Voluntary Commitments (RVCs) are additional promises an applicant may propose to address specific concerns related to its gTLD application. These commitments can enhance public interest protections, respond to objections, address government concerns, or clarify how a registry will operate. Once approved and included in the Registry Agreement, RVCs become legally binding obligations. Details can be found in Section 7.8.3 of the Guidebook.

Per Section 4.5.8.13, the Objection Panel, in extraordinary circumstances and as part of its Panel Determination, might order that an application cannot proceed unless a new or amended RVC that is approved by ICANN is included in the applicable Registry Agreement. DRSPs should be aware that this option should be limited to extraordinary circumstances since by the time the Panel Determination is issued the parties will have already had the opportunity to attempt to agree on an RVC as an option for settlement but failed or opted not to do so. An RVC must be approved by ICANN via the Registry Commitments Evaluation (RCE) to resolve an objection. Refer to Section 7.8.3.2 for more information on the RCE. Note that it is estimated that an RCE will take approximately 4-5 months to complete.

Such RVCs will be considered “RVCs Pursuant to Commitments Made to Overcome Objections or GAC Consensus Advice”, as described in Section 7.8.3.2.3.1 of the Applicant Guidebook. Due to the specific purpose these RVCs serve, applicants and registry operators generally will not, absent extraordinary circumstances, be able to materially change or remove these commitments once they are approved by ICANN. These commitments are expected to be included in a separate subsection of Specification 11 of the Registry Agreement to make clear that they are subject to heightened restrictions.

To make changes to an existing RVC or add a new RVC, applicants will have to file an Application Change Request (ACR), as per Section 4.5.8.12 of the Applicant Guidebook. According to Section 4.5.8.11.2, for an objection proceeding to be put on hold, the parties will have to file a joint request for a cooling-off period, which the DRSP will have to approve. While cooling-off periods are normally limited to 30 days, if an ACR is filed, the process might be put on hold for a longer time.

The DRSP and panels should be aware of the RVC and RCE requirements and processes described in the Applicant Guidebook and in this document, as well as other relevant provisions and impact on the timing for the objections and appeals processes.

2.3.2. Scenarios

2.3.2.1. Scenario 1

An applicant believes that an existing RVC in its application addresses the concerns raised in the objection. Should the panel determine that the concern has merit and that the already existing RVC will address it, the panel will

indicate in its Panel Determination that the RVC is an RVC Pursuant to Commitments Made to Overcome Objections or GAC Consensus Advice.

Where an applicant believes that an existing RVC in its application addresses the concerns raised in an objection, the panel will notify the Parties and the DRSP that the applicant may proceed with the RCE process for that existing RVC. The DRSP will place the proceeding on hold, pending completion of the applicable ACR, which pertains to the update to Question 175 of the application, and RCE processes, as the Panel Determination can only be issued once the evaluation outcome is known. The DRSP will promptly notify ICANN accordingly. ICANN will send an inquiry to the applicant, requesting the filing of an ACR within 30 days to update its response to Question 175. The updated response should reflect that the existing RVC is being proposed to address the objection. Once the ACR and RCE processes are complete, ICANN will inform the DRSP of the results. The DRSP will then provide the results to the Panel and resume the objection proceeding so that the Panel can determine whether the final approved RVC (if any) still addresses the concerns raised in the objection.

2.3.2.2. Scenario 2

An applicant and the objector in a given objection proceeding reach a settlement that includes the addition of a new or the amendment of an existing RVC. In such cases, the applicant will have to file an ACR which, if accepted by ICANN, will be followed by a Registry Commitment Evaluation (RCE). If the RVC passes the RCE, the objector will withdraw the objection upon the condition that the RVC will be considered an RVC Pursuant to Commitments Made to Overcome Objections or GAC Consensus Advice.

For this situation, the parties will have to file a joint request for a cooling-off period and, if the request is accepted, the DRSP will put the objection proceeding on hold and inform ICANN. ICANN will request the applicant to file an ACR requesting the addition or amendment of an RVC within 30 days as well as an update to Question 175, and inform the DRSP of the results of the ACR and RCE. If the objection is not withdrawn, the DRSP will resume the objection proceeding 30 days after being notified of the results.

2.3.2.3. Scenario 3

The panel determines that a new or amended RVC will address the concerns raised in an objection. In such an instance, the applicant will update the existing or draft a new RVC and file an ACR which, if accepted, will be followed by the RCE. If the RVC passes the ACR and RCE, the panel will indicate in its Panel Determination that the RVC is an RVC Pursuant to Commitments Made to Overcome Objections or GAC Consensus Advice if the panel finds that the new or amended RVC would enable the applicant to overcome the objection. If the panel finds that the new or amended RVC does not resolve the objection, the objector will prevail.

In such cases, the Panel will notify the applicant, objector, and the DRSP of the requirements the applicant needs to meet in order to be able to proceed with its application. The DRSP will put the objection proceeding on hold and inform ICANN.

ICANN will request the applicant to file an ACR requesting the addition or amendment of an RVC within 30 days as well as an update to Question 175, and inform the DRSP of the results, which will inform the Panel accordingly.

2.4. String Confusion Objections

- String Confusion objection panels will also consider the String Similarity Evaluation Data and String Similarity Evaluation Guidelines as one of the elements to keep into account in their assessment.
- Singular/Plural Notification Evaluation, String Similarity Evaluation, and String Confusion objections are different complementing processes. Through each of these mechanisms, the application may become part of a contention set or ineligible. If this is the case, applicants will have to challenge the results of the evaluations or appeal the determination of the objection or appellate panel through each of the mechanisms causing such outcome. Each mechanism must be cleared separately for the application to get out of such a contention set or proceed in the evaluation process.

2.5. Independent Objectors

ICANN has selected three Independent Objectors (IOs) to file objections against highly objectionable applications on Limited Public Interest and Community grounds, notwithstanding the regular standing requirements for such objections. ICANN will cover the costs associated with objections and appeals filed by IOs, as well as mediation services. The International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) should invoice ICANN directly for these costs.

As described in the Applicant Guidebook, ICC will provide the IOs access to the objections filed prior to the Administrative Review to ensure they are able to review objections before the relevant deadlines. Each IO will have access to all the objections. ICANN will not be involved in the reviews.

The objection filing window for objections lodged by IOs will begin at the same time as all other parties, on String Confirmation Day, but will be open for seven additional days beyond the end of the objection filing window for the general public; IOs are required to file their objections during these seven days. String Confirmation Day will be on 17 November 2026, and the filing window for IOs will stay open until 24 March 2027. IOs will only file objections during the initial objection filing window. Should their objection not prevail, IOs may appeal the Panel Determination (as described in the Applicant Guidebook). IOs may also act as respondents to appeals filed by the other party and participate in mediation and settlement with affected applicants, where appropriate.

IOs will not have their objection considered if another objection on the same ground has passed the Quick Look Review, absent extraordinary circumstances. Such extraordinary circumstances will be considered by the Panel (as described in the Applicant Guidebook) as part of its assessment as to whether the IO's objection can proceed.

The DRSP will appoint the same Panel to consider both objections and will perform the Quick Look Review on the objection filed by the third party:

- If the Quick Look Review fails, the Panel will consider the objection lodged by the IO.
- If the Quick Look Review passes, the Panel will determine whether the extraordinary circumstances described by the IO apply as part of the assessment as to whether the IO's objection can proceed.

2.6. Conflicts of Interest

ICANN designed guidelines to ensure that all service providers operate with integrity, impartiality, and transparency. All service providers, including DRSPs and Panel members, must comply with ICANN and the New gTLD Program Conflicts of Interest (COI) policies as described in Appendix 7 and Appendix 8 of the 2026 Round Applicant Guidebook and complete COI training required by ICANN. ICANN's COI policies complement and do not replace the existing policies for DRSPs.

2.6.1. As Part of the Contracting Process

The Contractor Conflicts of Interest Disclosure Form aims to facilitate compliance with disclosure obligations described in ICANN's Conflicts of Interest Policy. The form helps ICANN to identify potential or actual COI involving business and family relationships between ICANN, its directors, liaisons, officers, employees, and contractors.

- DRSPs must fill in the form and send it to ICANN's contact person.
- ICANN will review the form to make sure the responses align with its existing COI policies and guidelines.
- If there are any material changes during the current year in the information provided in the form, DRSPs should promptly notify ICANN.
- DRSPs must agree to revise and update the form whenever circumstances require such revisions, and, at a minimum, on an annual basis.

2.6.2. As of Reveal Day

As soon as feasible after Reveal Day (7 October 2026), ICANN's Vendor Management team will compile reports that include information on strings, applicants, parent entities, ultimate entities, directors, relevant shareholders, executives and other pertinent information and share it with the DRSPs. An updated set of reports will be shared as soon as practicable after String Confirmation Day (17 November 2026), reflecting the final applied-for strings, and updated versions will be shared regularly thereafter to capture any changes to the applications.

The spreadsheets are meant to enable the identification of applicants and strings for which **DRSP personnel** involved in the proceedings and **Objection and Appeal Panel members** may have an actual, potential, or perceived COI (for the sake of brevity, referred to simply as "COI" in this section). Vendor Management requires a single point of contact at the DRSP be identified as the individual who will have access to the secure Google Drive where the reports will be posted.

If any personnel or potential Panel member identifies a COI with a specific application (or stakeholder), that individual will not be selected to administer or adjudicate proceedings relating to that application and to any other application that the DRSP or Panel believes is, or may become, part of a contention set with that application.

The DRSPs will compile and regularly update all COI information in the spreadsheet and share it with Vendor Management by uploading the reports to the COI Google drive and informing Vendor Management via email of the new reports at *[redacted]* on a weekly basis as soon as they start appointing personnel or Panel members. The Program team should not be included in the emails.

If a COI is identified or arises following the filing of an objection or appeal, the DRSP will appoint another staff or Panel member to be responsible for the impacted objection or appeal. The DRSP will promptly notify ICANN of the conflict and the change.

3. Practical Arrangements

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