

**ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL**

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Standardization of Geographical Names**

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Item 8(d) of the provisional agenda\*

**National standardization:**

**Administrative structure of national names authorities,  
legislation, policies and procedures**

**Private vs. public standardization of names of single holdings**

Submitted by Norway\*\*

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## Summary

### **Private vs. public standardization of names of single holdings**

The Norwegian Place-Names Act of 1990 with amendments of 2005 gives a general protection for place-names as part of the intangible cultural heritage. The first paragraph of the act says that “the intention of this act is to preserve place-names as cultural inheritance”. One aspect in the law which relates to the protection of place-names is the rule that place-names should be standardized on the basis of the inherited local pronunciation, following current orthographic rules in Norwegian. However, over the last decades single holdings owners have protested against the standardized spelling of the names of their properties, particularly in cases where the standardized name differs from the spelling of their surname, for instance standardized name *Vik* vs. surname *Wiig*.

A few years ago, a local protest encouraged some parliamentarians to suggest an amendment to the Place-Name Statute, and in 2009 the National Assembly voted unanimously in favor of a proposal to instruct the Ministry of Cultural Affairs to prepare an amendment to the Place-Names Act of 1990. The aim is to give the owners of single holdings the right to determine the spelling of the names of their properties. The proposed text has been sent out for hearing in relevant administrative bodies and organizations.

The Mapping Authority, as well as the Norwegian Language Council and name scholars, has argued against the proposal as it will open for various spellings of the same name, depending on the owner’s view. Seen in the light of the requirements for the preservation of the intangible cultural heritage, this initiative is regarded by name scholars as a step backwards. Still it is correct to say that most Norwegian place-names will be safeguarded in compliance with the existing paragraphs of the Statute.

### **Private vs. Public Standardization of Names of Single Holdings**

The Norwegian Place-Names Act of 1990 with amendments of 2005 gives a general protection for place-names as part of the intangible cultural heritage. The first paragraph of the act says that “the intention of this act is to preserve place-names as cultural inheritance”. One aspect in the law which relates to the protection of place-names is the rule that place-names should be standardized on the basis of the inherited local pronunciation, following current orthographic rules in Norwegian.

The reason is that the inherited local pronunciation is looked upon as the primary one as it is handed over from generation to generation. However, in many cases locals have reacted against officially standardized names. This applies particularly to families that have an alternative spelling of the name in question as surname, for instance *Schee* for the standardized form *Skeie* and *Wiig* for the standardized form *Vik*.

The examples are an illustration of a name feature peculiar to Norway, i.e. that a large number of Norwegians have a surname that was originally a farm name. Up to the 1800s the farm names functioned as addresses, and when a person moved to another location, the “surname” was changed to correspond to the new residence. As time went on, the farm names gradually were adopted as permanent surnames, and because there normally was no official spelling of many names, the orthography for the same name was inconsistent and could be confusing in regard to

the etymology and local pronunciation. During the 1800s and 1900s the orthography of farm names was standardized, while at the same time, the names used as surnames were preserved using the old orthography with the “mistakes”.

Another historical factor is that most of the old farms have been divided up during the last few centuries, but the various farmsteads parceled off have mostly retained the same name as the original main farm. Since the same name is used for both the original farm and the farmstead parcels, it has been customary to standardize the names according to the same rules. But individual families often have their own ideas about how the surname should be spelled. For example, the family with Wiig as its surname might live on a Vik farmstead that was originally a part of the main farm named Vik. The owners of the Vik farmstead prefer to spell the surname *Wiig*, while their neighbors at another farmstead originally a part of the main Vik farm might insist on spelling it *Wik* or *Vik* (the latter corresponds to the standardized orthography). Such autonomy in spelling conventions leads to conditions of anarchy in the standardization of orthography and causes considerable practical problems for the Mapping Authority, which is the primary agency to authorize spellings.

A basic question is whether the right to own private property also includes the right to determine the name of it. It is understandable that people object to having to use a spelling of a name that they are not accustomed to using. Here we are up against considerations towards the identity of the individual or family as opposed to considerations of orthographic consistency to serve the common good. The current trend however, in politics as well as public opinion, seems to be that the jurisdiction over the name of the property should be on an equal footing with the right to choose one’s surname.

A few years ago a local protest encouraged some parliamentarians to suggest an amendment to the Place-Name Statute, and the Norwegian parliament (Stortinget) voted unanimously in favor of a proposal to instruct the Ministry of Cultural Affairs to prepare such an amendment. The proposed text has been sent out for hearing in relevant administrative bodies and organizations. The Mapping Authority of Norway, as well as the Norwegian Language Council and name scholars, has argued against the proposal as it will open for various spellings of the same name, depending on the owner’s view. Seen in the light of the requirements for the preservation of the intangible cultural heritage, this initiative is regarded by name scholars as a step backwards. Still it is correct to say that most Norwegian place-names will be safeguarded in compliance with the existing paragraphs of the Statute.

The Ministry of Cultural Affairs has prepared a bill in which the wording distinguishes between farm names and the names of smaller farm parcels:

In the opinion of the Ministry it will prove expedient to establish different rules in connection with the orthography of smaller farm parcels<sup>1</sup> than those used for farm names<sup>2</sup>. This solution will pave the way for creating a good balance between the right of the owner to influence the orthography of the name of his or her property and considerations involved with preserving our cultural heritage.

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<sup>1</sup> A farm parcel was originally a part of a medieval farm and was divided off from it in more recent times. A parcel has a different name than the main farm, such as *Nylende* (new land) or *Voll* (pasture). According to this proposal, the owner could choose to spell the names *Nylænde* or *Vold*.

<sup>2</sup> A farm name is the name that the original farm had in the Middle Ages, before it was divided.

According to the Mapping Authority, this line of reasoning will make it difficult to distinguish between a farmstead parcel name, where the owner has the right to determine the spelling, and a farm name, which is standardized according to the orthographic rules. This may in turn lead to the parcel name taking over the function of the official farm name.