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### **Tenth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names**

New York, 31 July – 9 August 2012

Item 5 of the provisional agenda\*

**Reports on the work of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical  
Names, its divisions, working groups and task teams since the Ninth  
Conference.**

### **Report of the United States / Canada Division, 2007 – 2012**

Submitted by the United States / Canada Division \*\*

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## **Areas of Divisional cooperation since 2007**

Since the Ninth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names in 2007, representatives of the United States / Canada Division have met as often as possible. Meetings take place two to three times a year, most often at geographical names meetings of each country - the United States Board of Geographic Names (USBGN), and the Geographical Names Board of Canada (GNBC). Representatives from each country have also participated in the annual meetings of the American Names Society (ANS), the Council of Geographic Names Authorities (COGNA), and the Canadian Society for the Study of Names (CSSN) on a less formal basis.

Both Canada and the United States were represented at the 24<sup>th</sup> Session of UNGEGN in New York, and the 26<sup>th</sup> Session in Vienna, Austria. The United States was represented at the 25<sup>th</sup> Session in Nairobi, Kenya.

Both countries continue to apply the principles and procedures set out in Resolution V/22 (Fifth Conference) addressing Aboriginal/indigenous names in the way most applicable to each country. There has been considerable activity in both countries regarding agreements, use and application for Aboriginal/indigenous languages, and policy development and enhancement. Divisional representatives have held discussions about policies and procedures for collecting, processing, and applying Aboriginal/indigenous names according to the guidelines applicable to each country.

The combination of digital geographical names databases and the Web has made official geographical names more accessible to the user community and to the general public in both countries. In both countries, approximately 90% of name inquiries arrive via the respective Web sites. Both national names authorities still manage their digital systems with ORACLE RDBMS software and make their data available to their clients through the WWW or through the acquisition of digital files. In Canada, as of April 10, geographical names data, which was previously sold, was made available without cost to the user. A variety of files in various formats is available via the GeoBase Portal and other distribution channels. The two countries continue to exchange information and advice on data, databases, Web-based applications, and other technical matters.

In Canada, the Canadian Geographical Names Data Base (CGNDB) continues to be operational. Current official and formerly official names and a selection of their attributes is available to the public online through a Web-based query, or through an api (Application Programming Interface). For members of the Geographical Names Board of Canada (GNBC), the entire dataset is accessible through an online application. As of 2012, one member of the GNBC has adopted the CGNDB in place of their own database, and uses the online tool to maintain their own data. Other members are considering this approach as well.

In the United States, the Geographic Names Information System (GNIS), the nation's official geographic names repository, was completely redesigned including aspects of data management, the national maintenance program, and the public interface, the latter of which was made more intuitive and faster with direct data links to the most technically current map displays. Also, the

principles, policies, and procedures of the U.S. Board on Geographic Names were revised and updated, and can be found at (<http://geonames.usgs.gov>).

Members of the Division met with a representative from Google Earth during COGNA 2006 to discuss the importance of national standardization of toponymy, as well as the role of UNGEGN. Discussions have continued with other representatives since that time to stress the importance of using official, authoritative names. Both countries submitted lists of major city names and geographic coordinates to the UNGEGN Secretariat for inclusion in its database on country and major city names. Expertise and experience were exchanged within the Division on techniques used to digitally delineate and store the extents of physical features which Canada has completed at various scales used by the Atlas of Canada and the United States is contemplating undertaking in the future.

By attending each other's annual meetings, each naming authority has been able to benefit from the other's experiences in order to evolve their approaches to making traditional geographical names official. Although the approval process differs, there are many common elements in our work, including the need for consultation and discussion prior to naming decisions, the need for standards and guidelines, and the increasing role of technology in the work, which is both a benefit and a challenge.

There continues to be harmonious cooperation between both countries at the state/provincial/national level to address issues concerning common boundary features. In 2010, the trans-boundary name Salish Sea was adopted for a feature shared by the province of British Columbia in Canada and the state of Washington in the United States. Stakeholders on both sides of the border, including many Aboriginal groups, and the scientific and academic communities were consulted. As a result of this consultation, and of the close collaboration and cooperation by the naming authorities during the name approval process, there was widespread support for the new name in both countries.

### **Division members and UNGEGN**

Since the Ninth UN Conference in 2007, Ms. Helen Kerfoot, as Chair of UNGEGN, has participated in a number of meetings of UNGEGN Working Groups (Toponymic Data Files and Gazetteers, 2009; Exonyms, 2010, 2012; Publicity and Funding / Evaluation and Implementation, 2010, 2011) and UNGEGN Divisions (Norden, 2008; Asia South-East and Pacific South-West, 2009; East Central and South-East Europe, 2010; Dutch- and German-speaking, 2010; Africa Central, 2010; Africa East, 2011; Africa South, 2012).

She has presented material relative to current UNGEGN issues and geographical names standardization at various venues, including: International Geographical Congress (Tunis, 2008); geodata, cultural heritage and marine geophysical symposia (Frankfurt, 2007; Vienna, 2008; Busan, 2010; Johannesburg, 2011); 10th South East Asian Survey Congress (Indonesia, 2009); International Cartographic Conference (Chile, 2009); American Association of Geographers (Washington, 2010); Ewha Women's University (Seoul, 2010); and the International Congress of Onomastic Sciences (Toronto, 2008; Barcelona, 2011).

Ms. Kerfoot has been an instructor at UNGEGN training courses and consultative workshops in Africa in Burkina Faso (2008); Romania (2008); Brazil (2008); Kenya (2009); Cameroon (2010); Botswana (2011); South Africa (2012), and she participated in the early meetings of the UN Global Geospatial Information Management in New York and Seoul (2011). She was elected as President of the Ninth UN Conference in 2007, and has chaired the 25th and 26th Sessions of UNGEGN.

Not only has there been collaboration within the Division but also throughout UNGEGN as a result of positions held by Division members within UNGEGN. These positions include: the Chair of UNGEGN and the Convener of the Working Group on Country Names. Individual division members also participate in several of the UNGEGN working groups, and Canadian members participate in the work of the Francophone Division. Also, Division members serve as UNGEGN liaisons with the International Hydrographic Organization and the Pan American Institute of Geography & History (PAIGH).