ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL   12 July 2007

Ninth United Nations Conference on the
Standardization of Geographical Names
New York, 21 - 30 August 2007
Item 4 of the provisional agenda*
**Reports by Governments on the situation in their countries
and on the progress made in the standardization of
geographical names since the Eighth Conference**

Report of the United States of America

Submitted by the United States of America**

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Introduction

The United States Board on Geographic Names (USBGN) was established by Executive Order in 1890 to resolve inconsistencies of spelling and application that had resulted from mapping and scientific reports associated with exploration, mining, and settlement of the western part of the United States. In 1906, the Board was instructed to adjudicate controversies, and was also given the authority to approve names for otherwise unnamed features. In 1947, the Board was re-organized when the U.S. Congress established the Board by Public Law 80-242. The work of the Board is divided primarily among two standing committees and two advisory committees. The Domestic Names Committee (DNC) and the Foreign Names Committee (FNC) are empowered to make decisions on behalf of the Board, while the advisory committees, made up of advisors and experts, make recommendations to the Board for decision. All decisions by the Board are subject to concurrence by the Secretary of the Interior. The research and staff support for the DNC and the Advisory Committee for Antarctic Names (ACAN) are provided by the U.S. Geological Survey, while the research and support staff for the FNC and the Advisory Committee for Undersea Features (ACUF) are provided by the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency.

Domestic Names Activities since the Eighth Conference

The Domestic Names Committee of the U.S. Board on Geographic Names meets monthly, and since the Eighth conference has rendered decisions on 1,166 new name proposals and name controversies. During this period, the DNC staff responded to more than 20,000 inquiries of which at least 90 percent were by electronic mail from the Geographic Names Information System (GNIS) webpage. GNIS serves as the official domestic geographic names repository for the U.S., as well as the geographic names layer for The National Map. Much effort has been expanded lately towards integrating the various geospatial layers of The National Map in order to produce hard copy graphics, with the ultimate goal being the production of print on demand graphics. The DNC continues to work closely with the Council of Geographic Names Authorities (COGNA), which consists of State names boards and committees from each of the 50 States, the District of Columbia, and two Territories. The individual members of COGNA provide input to the USBGN when it is rendering decisions on new name and name change proposals, and the USBGN relies heavily on this input since local use or acceptance is of great importance to the USBGN.

Shortly after the Eighth Conference the DNC staff of the USBGN was made aware of an Executive Order issued by the President of the United States that stipulates that agencies of the Federal government will consult and coordinate with Indian and Alaska Native tribal governments on matters that significantly or uniquely affect their communities. The DNC has formulated procedures by which it solicits input on any new name or name change proposal from all Indian or Alaska Native tribes with a current or historical interest within 50 miles (80 km) of the feature proposed to be (re)named. Using manual

and automated means, the DNC staff makes every effort to determine the appropriate tribes to be contacted. Letters, and more recently, emails, are sent to the tribal councils, with a prescribed time period in which to respond. As an incentive to reply, the staff includes a statement to the effect that if no response is received by the prescribed date the DNC will make a decision without their input.

With the award of the final two contracts in 2007 the National Geographic Names Data Compilation Program will be complete. The project began in 1976 with the collection of geographic names from most products of the Federal government. Subsequent to that an extensive effort was undertaken to compile names, State-by-State, from a variety of sources including official State and local documents, historical documents and other pertinent sources approved by the project coordinator. The next phase of the program will be a maintenance, or stewardship phase performed by the individual States for records with their domain. The challenge will be to train and educate each State steward about the USBGN's policies and principles for domestic names. Any name not in conflict with the policies will be added to GNIS, those in conflict will be submitted to the USBGN for resolution. It is envisioned that after the 30-year data compilation process that most of the names submitted will be for cultural features, mostly buildings, and since the USBGN has delegated the naming authority for buildings to those administering them, the names will only need to be checked against the USBGN's guidelines for nomenclature.

Foreign Names Activities since the Eighth Conference

The Foreign Names Committee (FNC) of the U.S. Board on Geographic Names is responsible for establishing policies and procedures for the standardization of foreign place-name spellings for official U.S. Government use. The Committee's membership comprises representatives from five Federal departments and agencies, and meets on a quarterly basis. In addition to formulating standards for foreign nomenclature, the FNC also renders decisions on specific place names, reconciling from among a variety of alternatives the most appropriate foreign place name spelling for use in an official English language context. The FNC's decisions relate only to official U.S. Government application, and carry no official weight beyond that context.

Since the eighth UNCSGN, the FNC and its staff have continued its work plan to augment the content of its Geographic Names Data Base, a database covering foreign geographic areas and undersea features. The database is accessible at the GEOnet Names Server: http://earth-info.nga.mil/gns/html/index.html, hosted by the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency.

Most recently the FNC has been engaged in documenting its basic principles and polices for the standardization of foreign geographic names. Additionally, the FNC is working in collaboration with the British Permanent Committee on Geographical Names to revise its 1994 publication, *Romanization Systems and Roman-Script Spelling Conventions*. A new edition (hardcopy and electronic) is expected by the end of 2007.

Enhancements to the US BGN Foreign Names Committee's Geographic Names Data Base

Since the Eighth Conference in August - September 2002, a number of significant enhancements have been made to the Geographic Names Data Base (GNDB) and its maintenance environment, the Geographic Names Processing System (GNPS). The GNDB holds the USBGN's foreign place-name recommendations, variant name spellings, and feature location information.

Incremental modifications to the GNDB data model have been made periodically since its inception in 1986. A major review of the GNDB data model was undertaken beginning in 2005. The latest logical GNDB data model diagram is attached. It is characterized primarily by an enriched set of linguistic metadata relating to specific name spellings.

The GNDB is now fully compliant with the Unicode standard. This compliance has permitted the initiation of storage of non-roman script forms of place-name spellings.

Last significantly upgraded in 1999, the GNPS is being replaced in 2007. The new capabilities are based principally on commercial off-the-shelf (COTS) applications. Geospatial toponymic analysis will employ the Intergraph GeoMedia GIS suite; inherent capabilities of Microsoft Windows XP provide the required elements of internationalization for managing the multilingual characteristics of foreign toponymy. The underlying database management system is Oracle 10g. Anticipated future enhancements include a more robust toolset to increasingly automate the conflation of large sets of digital toponymic data with the GNDB.

A redesigned interface to the GEOnet Names Server (GNS) is due to come on-line in 2007. Its intent is to continue to provide the text-based query-and-response mechanism as the current GNS but with a more streamlined user interface. A new capability will provide geospatial viewing tools to enable a graphical display of GNDB content on a backdrop of any dataset from an Open Geospatial Consortium-compliant web feature server. The GEOnet Names Server provides public access via the World Wide Web to the US BGN's foreign place-name holdings.

Activities of the USBGN Advisory Committee on Undersea Features since the Eighth Conference

The issue of undersea feature naming continues to receive greater attention worldwide. The USBGN Advisory Committee on Undersea Features (ACUF) has been involved in undersea feature toponymy since its creation in 1963. Since the Eighth Conference, the ACUF has met 32 times and has approved over 200 new undersea feature names. The greatest changes in the past five years have occurred in the Geographic Names Data Base (GNDB) and the ACUF web site. There are presently 9,476 names recorded for over 4,800 features maintained within the GNDB. Each feature has one USBGN-approved spelling and potentially multiple variant spellings. Within the past two years a significant

effort has been made to begin the capture of non-Roman forms of undersea feature names. The ACUF website has gained more visibility within the revised GEONet Names Server site (http://earth-info.nga.mil/gns/html/acuf.html). New features available on the site include the Microsoft® Access database of the USBGN ACUF undersea feature names file, a bibliography of historical references to undersea features, and a multi-language bathymetric terms glossary. ACUF's close relationship with the IHO's Sub-Committee on Undersea Feature Names (SCUFN) is discussed in the final section of the U.S. Report.

Activities of the USBGN Advisory Committee on Antarctic Names since the Eighth Conference

Since the Eighth Conference, the USBGN Advisory Committee on Antarctic Names (ACAN) has received, processed, and approved more than 400 proposals for previously unnamed features in Antarctica. Most were generated by a need for new large-scale maps. In accordance with policy, these proposals were coordinated with other countries and other interested parties prior to a decision being rendered. Also, in accordance with guidelines for naming in Antarctica, every effort is made to use a name exactly as it is approved by the other country's naming authority, and as listed in *The Composite Gazetteer of Antarctica*. The United States, however, does reserve the right to add an appropriate generic term where such a term is imbedded in the original name or does not provide a clear reference to the type of feature. ACAN adopted a policy regarding proposals submitted by foreign nationals whereby for any such proposal received to name a feature anywhere in Antarctica, the foreign national would be instructed to submit the proposal to the national (or Antarctic) names authority in their respective country. This policy is a reversal of the previous policy of accepting proposals from anyone, and is in support of guidelines for naming in Antarctica.

Common Interface

Since the Eighth Conference the domestic and foreign websites have been combined at a common URL for the convenience of the users. The URL address is http://geonames.usgs.gov from there one can link to one of the four databases maintained by the USBGN: Domestic, Foreign, Undersea, or Antarctica. Improvements have been made to each of the user interfaces and querying capabilities of all four databases. In addition to the interactive query capability it is possible to download files from the GEOnet Names Server (GNS) for foreign countries and undersea features, from GNIS State, Territory and associated areas, as well as topical, and Antarctica files. The possibility of producing a common front end for querying and providing similar output formats for the four databases, thereby further easing access and retrieval by the user, is currently being studied.

Participation in International Activities (other than training)

Since the Eighth Conference in August - September 2002, the USBGN staff and membership have continued the Board's long tradition of promoting place-name standardization through participation in a variety of international forums for collaboration on sharing of expertise and information. Under the United Nations umbrella, the USBGN has actively engaged in the following meetings, in addition to the working group meetings routinely held during UNGEGN sessions:
- UNGEGN Working Group on Country Names, Lefkada, November 2005
- UNGEGN Working Group on Romanization, Tallinn, October 2006
- UNGEGN Working Group on Toponymic Data Files & Gazetteers, Madrid, March 2007

The USBGN's Advisory Committee on Undersea Features (ACUF) has a long-standing collaborative relationship with the International Hydrographic Organization, in particular with IHO's Sub-Committee on Undersea Feature Names (SCUFN) which operations under the auspices of the Guiding Committee of the General Bathymetric Chart of the Ocean. ACUF has participated in the following SCUFN sessions since the Eighth Conference:
- 16th session, Monaco, April 2003
- 17th session, St. Petersburg, June 2004
- 18th session, Monaco, October 2005
- 19th session, Bremerhaven, June 2006

USBGN has participated in other meetings and conferences of considerable toponymic interest, including the Digital Gazetteer Research and Practice meeting sponsored by the National Center for Geospatial Information Analysis, University of California at Santa Barbara, December 2006; and EuroGeoNames workshop held in Madrid in March 2007.