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The New Norwegian Place Name Act

Act of 18 May 1990 No 11, Relating to the Standardization of Place Names (Geographical Names)

I The Legislation

The Norwegian Place Name Act was passed by the Norwegian Parliament (Stortinget) on 22 February 1990 and sanctioned on 18 May 1990. The Act came into effect on 1 July 1991. Applying exclusively to the standardization and use of place names, this Act is unique in an international context.

II Background

The place name regulations which were in force previously did not have the status of law, but legislation was needed to give legal weight to decisions concerning the standardization of place names. The act governing the division of property contained a clause giving the owner of a farm the right to determine the written form of the name of the property. In many cases the form chosen by the individual did not comply with the form recommended by the authorities on the basis of the linguistic and cultural history of the place name.

In the 1960s a number of property owners brought court cases against the State in order to have the official written form of place names changed. The State lost these cases due to lacking legislation. Later a research programme was conducted with a view to producing adequate and unambiguous regulations which would on the one hand give the State the necessary legal power to determine written forms and on the other hand take into account the interests of the individual. An official Place Name Committee was appointed in 1979 and presented its recommendations in the NOU 1983:6: Stadnamn (the series of Norwegian Official Reports No. 6, 1983, Place Names). From 1983-89 the Ministry of Cultural Affairs prepared a parliamentary bill which went through the Norwegian Parliament during the 1989-90 session and was passed in the spring of 1990.

The opposition between the two forms of the Norwegian language has been a contributory factor in many place name disputes. More than 400 years of Danish rule ensured that Danish was the dominant written language in Norway until the mid-nineteenth century. All place names were also written in Danish and in many cases the Danish form was based on a misunderstanding of the original name. The process of re-establishing Norwegian forms was made possible by, among other things, the formulation of "Nynorsk", the written form of Norwegian based on the Norwegian dialects. Controversies about place names have often been between supporters of the two forms of the language with those on the one side wanting to maintain the established Danish form and those on the other side favouring the "Nynorsk" written form based on the dialect pronunciation. The latter was preferred by the authorities who composed the standardization regulations for place names at the beginning of this century. However, the Danish written forms were to a great extent kept in cases where the farm names were used as family names. Many property owners prefer to have the name of the property written in the same way as their family name, without regard for the local pronunciation or spelling rules.

III The Main Elements of the Act

1) Area of Jurisdiction

The Place Name Act applies on the Norwegian main land. It does not apply on Svalbard, Jan Mayen, the Norwegian Dependencies, the Norwegian continental shelf or the Norwegian economic zone.

2) Uniform Standardization in Official Contexts

Place names which have been authorized in accordance with the Place Name Act are to be used by all official bodies. If a place name has two or more written forms in use one of the forms is to take precedence. Where a place name has an authorized form in more than one language e.g. Sami or Finnish, all the relevant standardized forms are to be used. Where it is necessary to choose one name for use on maps or signs the form with the longest tradition should be chosen.

3) Standardization is to be based on local pronunciation and current spelling rules

The standardization of a place name is to be based on traditional pronunciation and must comply with current rules for the spelling of one of the two forms of Norwegian, "Bokmål" or "Nynorsk". For the Sami language the current spelling rules for "Nordsamisk", "Lulesamisk" and "Sørsamisk" apply. For Finnish place names in Norway the Finnish spelling rules apply, but with regional modifications. These principles also apply to the inherited (traditional) names of farms and other properties. Newly created place names, literary names and foreign names need not be standardized according to these principles.

4) The Authorization Process

The official body which uses the place name in question is to authorize its written form. This may be done by the State bodies responsible for cartography (Statens kartverk), the postal service (Postverket), the telephone service (Televerket), and roads (Vegvesenet). The majority of place names are authorized by the State Office for Cartography centrally in cooperation with one of the eighteen regional offices. The names for properties and other private concerns are established by the owners within the limits stated above. Local town and county councils authorize the names of roads, streets and council properties.

Before the written form of a name is authorized all parties concerned must be consulted. The local usage of the name and the wishes of the local population must be noted. The official authorization of the name must be accompanied by a statement giving the reasons for the choice of standardized form. This statement is particularly important in the case of controversial names. The local council and, if relevant, the property owner must be officially informed of the authorization of the place name.

5) Appeals Committee

An Appeals Committee has been established to deal with complaints about the standardized forms of place names. The chairman of the committee must be a High Court judge.

6) Place Name Advisors

The Place Name Act has entailed an extension of the advisory service and division of the field of responsibility into regions. There are now two place name advisors at each of the four universities in Norway; in Oslo, Bergen, Trondheim and Tromsø, dealing with the standardization in the corresponding regions. In addition there are two or more positions for advisors for Sami and Finish place names. At each of the universities, there is a position for an assistant advisor whose function is to prepare cases for the advisors. The advisors and the assistants must have university qualifications in Nordic languages. The place name advisors are responsible for making sure that place names are written in accordance with the Act. The advisory service is financed by the Ministry of Cultural Affairs.

7) The Place Name Register

A central computerized register of all Norwegian place names in official use is being established. New place names which come into use and changes in the existing standardized forms are to be notified to the Place Name Register. The Register is based on the the Norwegian Map Series M711 on a scale of 1:50000 and it is administered by the State Office for Cartography. This office has now employed a specialist in name research to deal with the linguistic aspects of the register.