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REPORTS OF LIAISON OFFICERS, REGIONAL MEETINGS, AND INTERNATIONAL  
ORGANIZATIONS

Council of Geographic Names Authorities

Submitted by: United States of America

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# Council of Geographic Names Authorities

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What is now The Council of Geographic Names Authorities was originally founded in 1977 as the Intermountain Geographic Names Council, an organization consisting of a few States, mostly in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States, specifically to examine issues of policy and procedure, and especially the differences of these among the States and between the Federal Government. The success of the organization and its annual conference led to expansion in 1979 to include the "Pacific Coast States" and the State of Hawaii, as well as a name change to the Western States Geographic Names Council. Further success led to another expansion in 1991 to include all States west of the Mississippi River. Then in 1998, the Executive Committee of the Western States Geographic Names Council in session on 3 September 1998 in Cody, Wyoming approved (with one dissenting vote) the proposal to expand membership from States west of the Mississippi River to all States, Commonwealths, and Territories of the United States, representing the third expansion in the 25-year history of the organization. The new name is the Council of Geographic Names Authorities (COGNA) and each State, Commonwealth, and Territory of the United States has one vote with the Federal Government as a member having two votes, the Chairman of the Domestic Names Committee of the U.S. Board on Geographic Names and the Executive Secretary of the Domestic Names Committee. Other Federal Agencies have non-voting observer status as do representatives of the Federal Governments of Canada and Mexico, and including one observer each from their respective Provinces (and Territories) and States. The purpose of the organization includes the following objectives:

1. Promote standardization of procedures in assigning or authorizing the names of geographic features within governmental jurisdictions in the United States;
2. Promote cooperation among federal and state agencies that have some degree of responsibility in maintaining databases of names for geographic features and/or cultural entities as mandated by the United States Board on Geographic Names;
3. Make available geographic name information to officials of governmental agencies and public and private enterprises (foreign and domestic), and the general public;
4. Provide a professional and educational forum at which members of the Council, Federal Advisory Group, International Advisory Group, and interested citizens may present research papers and/or workshops and to learn about the "Principles, Policies, and Procedures" concerning geographic names and the naming processes within the United States;
5. Co-sponsor an annual conference at which members of the Council may take appropriate actions or make recommendation to relevant federal and state agencies regarding purposes 1, 2, 3, and 4.

Since the 21<sup>st</sup> UNGEGN Session, the Council has held one conference of three days followed by a toponymic tour on the fourth day. It was convened September and October 2003 in Pacific Grove, California. A standard part of each year's agenda includes a meeting of the host State Board on Geographic

Names, the monthly meeting of the Federal Board, and numerous relevant papers as well as the very popular and often exciting State/Federal Roundtable. During this session various issues including differences in policy and procedure are discussed, debated, and often solutions to problems are offered. Examples of other topics include issues of local toponymy, review and debate of procedures of the Federal Board on Geographic Names, and some papers on scholarly themes although the organization was founded to discuss, debate, and solve practical problems in the application of geographic names, which is the primary focus. Sessions devoted to the discussion of offensive names and the topic of indigenous names have become regular agenda items. There are also various panels and discussion groups such as how to publish a “placename” book, and there are workshops for Federal and State personnel who are part of the National Maintenance Program for the Geographic Names Information System (GNIS), the nation’s official geographic names repository. Any individual is welcome to attend the conference.

The conference in 2003 specifically concentrated on three topics. There were numerous papers related to names of coastal and undersea features, a review of the forthcoming major changes to policies for domestic names (in the United states), and especially the development and implementation of the names layer of *The National Map*, the nation’s topographic map for the 21<sup>st</sup> century and more.