

**Twenty-third Session  
Vienna, 28 March – 4 April 2006**

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**Item 6 of the Provisional Agenda:  
Reports of the liaison officers, regional meetings  
and international organizations**

**Report of the Council of Geographic Names Authorities**

## **Council of Geographic Names Authorities Report**

The Council of Geographic Names Authorities (COGNA) is a National organization consisting of toponymic specialists from each of the 50 United States, the District of Columbia, Guam, and Puerto Rico. Many States are represented by State geographic names boards and committees; while others have assigned knowledgeable and esteemed individuals as advisors. COGNA encourages cooperation among federal and state agencies that have responsibilities for maintaining data bases of names for geographic features and/or cultural entities.

COGNA had its beginnings in 1977 when a group of cartographers and toponymists from State agencies in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States came together to discuss geographic naming issues and problems. The group decided to hold an annual meeting and over the past three decades has expanded and solidified, first encompassing the western United States, and later the entire country. Since its inception COGNA has invited the U.S. Board on Geographic Names to hold its monthly meeting as part of the conference. An informative toponymic field trip that exposes the history and origin of surrounding placenames is also part of the conference.

COGNA is dedicated to bringing together decision makers from federal and state agencies, academia, and the public to deliberate on geographic naming principles, policies, procedures, and issues. One of the most effective means for accomplishing this has been the State/Federal Roundtable session of the conference where there are frank discussions on applied toponymy between and amongst the participants. This productive exchange is unique and unduplicated by any forum in the country. Attendance is open to all and conferences have regularly been attended by individuals associated with toponymy and linguists from other countries; most notably Canada and Australia.

The 2004 annual COGNA conference was held in Jacksonville, Florida October 19-23. There were two papers presented on pilot projects that investigated technologies and methods of collecting the footprints, or geometries, of named physical features and submitting them for storage, retrieval and display in the Geographic Names Information System (GNIS) <http://geonames.usgs.gov>. Another paper described the successes and failures of using geocoding software algorithms to convert addresses, and address ranges to geographic coordinates for cultural features such as hospitals, police stations, fire and rescue stations, and schools. The results varied in accuracy when plotted on aerial photography depending on the source of the data and the software package that was used for the conversion, thus underscoring the need for partners to examine metadata before submitting the data for inclusion in GNIS, the Federal standard of geographic nomenclature. Papers were also given on collection methodologies involved in the 30 year comprehensive GNIS Phase II data compilation project, as well as using GIS technology to identify positional discrepancies and increase the accuracy of the geographic coordinates in GNIS. One session was dedicated to the geographic names layer, which uses GNIS exclusively, of *The National Map* produced by the U.S.

Geological Survey. Special emphasis was placed on techniques used to create partnerships with State and local governments to become stewards of the data in their jurisdictions of authority. A very informative workshop was conducted by the U.S. Board on Geographic Names staff describing in detail the process and research given to proposals for new names and name changes. The conference agenda was rounded out by educational and entertaining papers on geographic nomenclature and onomastics presented by members of the Toponymic Interest Group of the American Name Society, in which many members of COGNA hold dual membership.

The 2005 conference was held in Portland, Oregon on October 10-15 and co-hosted by the Oregon Historical Society. The theme of the conference was GNIS: current, complete, correct; and once again the focus of the conference was on how to take advantage of GIS technology and the Internet to further the collection of geographic names data and expand the holdings of GNIS. Several papers authored by individuals from State, city, and commercial entities which use the names in GNIS to enhance their GIS products were presented. The conference included the quarterly meeting of the Oregon Geographic Names Board, which included a presentation by an employee of the U.S. Forest Service who coordinated the effort to submit proposals to change officially the names of features in Federal forests in Oregon containing the word "squaw". Staff from the U.S. Geological Survey's Geographic Names Project reported on the various partnerships that have been developed to maintain GNIS through *The National Map* effort. The Conference Chair presented a comprehensive paper on the State of Oregon's efforts to sustain the integrity and usability of GNIS by adding the names of cultural features and verifying the precision of geographic coordinates through a cooperative grant with the U.S. Geological Survey. A workshop was conducted by the U.S. Forest Service that included reports from its Regional Geographic Coordinators on how they are using the names from GNIS in their cartographic applications, and how they have partnered to steward geographic nomenclature within the lands that they administer.

The 2006 conference will be held in Boulder, Colorado on October 17-21, and the 2007 conference will be held in Lexington, Kentucky also in October.