

**Twenty-eight session  
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**Item 4 of the Provisional Agenda**

**Report of the divisions**

**Report of the USA/Canada Division \***

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\* Prepared by Heather Ross, Toponymist, Geographical Names Board of Canada Secretariat (Canada) and Lou Yost, Executive Secretary, United States Board on Geographic Names (U.S.A.)

## **Report of the USA/Canada Division**

### **Summary**

Since the Tenth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names in 2012, representatives of the United States / Canada Division have met as often as possible, and continue to work together on areas of shared interest or concern.

Both countries continue to address Aboriginal/indigenous names, dealing with various agreements, use and application of geographical names in Aboriginal/indigenous languages, and policy development and enhancement. Another important aspect of their work is digital geographical names databases and Web sites, which are making authoritative names accessible to an ever-growing user community. Online tools are also valuable for engaging in outreach and education regarding the importance of geographical names, and of standardization. Each country is taking advantage of new and evolving technologies to continuously improve in these areas. In addition, the Division is engaging in on-going efforts to promote the use of official names by companies who engage in conventional and online mapping.

Members of the Division have also been involved in a number of UNGEGN activities. Helen Kerfoot has participated in meetings of working groups, and given training courses, as well as supporting the work of the Task Team for Africa, and of the UNGEGN Secretariat in several ongoing projects. U.S. representatives serve in various UNGEGN positions, and both countries are continuing their efforts to support the goals of UNGEGN.

## **Areas of Divisional cooperation since 2012**

Since the Tenth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names in 2012, representatives of the United States / Canada Division have met as often as possible. Historically, meetings have taken place two to three times a year, most often at geographical names meetings of each country - the United States Board on Geographic Names (USBGN), and the Geographical Names Board of Canada (GNBC). Since 2012, Divisional meetings have been less frequent.

Both Canada and the United States were represented at the 27<sup>th</sup> Session of UNGEGN in New York, and the Tenth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names (UNCSGN) in 2012. U.S. representatives were invited guests at the GNBC annual meeting in Québec in 2012, and two representatives of the GNBC gave presentations at the 2013 Council of Geographic Names Authorities (COGNA) Conference in Minneapolis/St. Paul.

## **Aboriginal naming**

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.

In Canada, land claim agreements being negotiated with Aboriginal groups now usually include establishing procedures to be used within the land claim area for the approval of previously unofficial geographical names, and changes to existing names. Provincial and territorial members of the GNBC, and staff of the GNBC Secretariat, have been asked to review several draft land claim agreements to provide comments and recommendations on sections of the claims relating to geographical naming. In 2010, the GNBC formed a working group on Aboriginal toponymy, which is seeking to increase Aboriginal engagement in naming activities, to develop new guidelines and to improve existing processes for collecting and approving Aboriginal names. One of the stated objectives of a new Strategic Plan being developed by the GNBC is to “Improve Aboriginal Naming Policy, Partnership and Outreach”.

## **Digital databases**

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 for both members of the Division. In both countries name enquiries are most often the result of clients visiting the Web sites. Both national names authorities make their data available to their clients through online query tools for individual names, or small groups of names, as well as through the acquisition of larger digital files. The two countries continue to exchange information and advice on data, databases, Web-based applications, and other technical matters.

In Canada, geographical names data continues to be distributed without cost to the user. A variety of files in various formats is available online via the GeoBase portal ([www.geobase.ca](http://www.geobase.ca)) and other distribution channels. Since moving to the free distribution model, dissemination of data has greatly increased, with thousands of downloads per year of files of various types and formats, compared to averages of less than 100 files per year purchased when data was sold prior to 2010.

The Canadian Geographical Names Data Base (CGNDB), originally created in 1978, continues as the production data base for Canada's national data store. A Web-based query allows all users with Internet access to search for official and formerly official names and a selection of their attributes. Names and associated data are also available to the public online through downloads, or through an api (Application Programming Interface). Over the past year, a system-wide upgrade of all federal government Web sites was undertaken to meet new accessibility standards, ensuring that the site can be used by visitors using screen readers and other assistive technologies, and providing a more streamlined and user-friendly look and feel, and improved functionality for those using the sites. This upgrade provided an opportunity to review and refresh existing Web pages, and to improve navigation and content.

The entire dataset is available to GNBC members through a private online application. Members can view all records including official, formerly official, and unofficial variant or historical names, with all their associated attributes. As of 2014, two member jurisdictions of the GNBC have adopted the CGNDB in place of their own database, and now use the online tool to maintain their own data. Currently, at least two other jurisdictions expect to phase in the use of the national database to maintain their own records.

To adapt to the increasing need for spatial data, new approaches are being developed. Canada's Federal Geospatial Platform (FGP) is an initiative of the Federal Committee on Geomatics and Earth Observation (FCGEO), which recognized an opportunity for federal government departments and agencies to manage geospatial information assets in a more efficient and coordinated way. Using a common "platform" of technical infrastructure, policies, standards and governance will eliminate redundancy, greatly improve access to data, assure interoperability, and enable policy development and innovation.

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.

### **Other areas of shared interest**

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. Since that time, there have been on-going discussions with representatives of Google and other companies to stress the importance of using official names. Both the United States and Canada

are continuing their efforts to ensure that those who provide online names data and maps use names which are authoritative and current.

Within the Division, expertise and experience are being exchanged on techniques used to digitally delineate and store the extents of physical features. Canada has completed digital delineations for features at various scales used by the Atlas of Canada, and is working toward delineation of named features at the 1: 50 000 scale. The United States has begun to create landform full feature “fuzzy” polygons for named features at the 1: 24 000 scale. Named hydrographic features are delineated using the vector representation from the National Hydrography Dataset in The National Map.

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.

Harmonious cooperation continues between the two countries at the state/provincial/national level to address issues concerning shared or cross-boundary features. Since 2012, naming authorities in the USA and Canada have shared information on a number of trans-boundary naming issues, which may result in cooperation on official naming of shared features when research and consultation is complete.

### **Division members and UNGEGN**

Since stepping down as UNGEGN Chair at the Tenth UN Conference in 2012, Helen Kerfoot has continued to be involved in the work of UNGEGN, participating in meetings of UNGEGN Working Groups (Exonyms, Publicity and Funding, Evaluation and Implementation) and of the Africa East Division. She has been an instructor at UNGEGN training courses in Indonesia (2012) and in Madagascar (2013); she presented the keynote address at the Placenames Workshop on the Management and dissemination of toponymic data online at Dublin City University (2012), and prepared a paper on the United Nations: geographical names standardization and gazetteers, for publication by the American Association of Geographers.

Ms. Kerfoot has continued to support the work of the Task Team for Africa; has assisted the Working Group on Toponymic Terminology in its transfer of data from the UNGEGN Glossary to an online database; and has cooperated with the UNGEGN Secretariat in several continuing activities: building the UNGEGN and Conference archival documents on the UNGEGN website, adding data to the UNGEGN World Geographical Names Database, and updating UNGEGN’s information on national names authorities.

Members of the Division also collaborate with UNGEGN as a result of positions held by Division Members, including U.S. Members Leo Dillon, Trent Palmer, and Roger Payne. Mr. Dillon serves as Convener of the Working Group on Country Names. Mr. Palmer is the liaison

between UNGEGN and the International Hydrographic Organization (IHO), and was also elected as rapporteur at the UNCSCN in 2012. Mr. Payne serves as the liaison between UNGEGN and the Pan American Institute of Geography and History (PAIGH). Individual Division members also participate in several of the UNGEGN working groups, and Canadian members participate in the work of the Francophone Division.