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FIFTH UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE  
ON THE STANDARDIZATION OF  
GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES  
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Item 10 (b) of the provisional agenda\*

FEATURES BEYOND A SINGLE SOVEREIGNTY

FEATURES COMMON TO TWO OR MORE NATIONS

International boundary names: United States of America,  
Canada and Mexico

Paper submitted by the United States of America\*\*

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The United States of America shares about 5,525 miles of boundary with its northern neighbor, Canada, and about 1,933 miles with its southern neighbor, Mexico. The United States has worked cooperatively with both countries in developing procedures for the cartographic treatment of transboundary names. Agreements of this kind have become particularly important because of relatively recent mapping agreements and the enlightened policy of including "overedge" cartographic coverage of the other country on map sheets that include the international boundary. Uniform name treatment is also required by both the International Boundary and Water Commission (Mexico-United States) and the International Boundary Commission (Canada-United States) for map updating. The customs services of all three countries also depend on standard geographical name usage to carry out their responsibilities for oversight of border areas.

Canada/United States

The United States Board on Geographic Names and the Canadian Permanent Committee on Geographical Names (formerly called the Geographic Board of Canada) are responsible for establishing official geographical name usage for their respective governments. Both names authorities have been working together since 1898 to resolve transboundary name differences and to approve new names submitted by the International Boundary Commission. In 1911, for example, 60 names were mutually approved by both bodies and, a year later, a large number of new names along the Canada-Alaska boundary were approved. In 1924, an agreement

was made between both names authorities "by which each Board, prior to arriving at a decision respecting any international [boundary] name, would submit it to the other Board, and each would supply the other with all pertinent data in its possession."

Recent cooperation between both names authorities occurred when it was decided that a more definitive agreement on the treatment of transboundary names was needed. Members of a special committee of the United States Board on Geographic Names met in 1984 with officials and members of the Canadian Permanent Committee on Geographical Names and other Canadian officials at the Kempenfelt Conference Center on Lake Simcoe, Ontario, Canada. After 2 days of meeting, the group drafted a document for review and approval by the names authorities in both countries. After minor revisions, the document was approved by the Canadian Permanent Committee in October 1986 and the United States Board in April 1987. The agreement reads as follows:

THE TREATMENT OF NAMES OF GEOGRAPHICAL FEATURES SHARED BY  
CANADA AND THE UNITED STATES

1. COORDINATION IN THE NAMING OF TRANSBOUNDARY FEATURES
- 1.1 Mutual Benefit

WHEREAS: the coordination in the naming of geographical entities on or across the Canada-United States boundary is of mutual benefit to the names authorities in both countries, and to mapping and surveying agencies; and

1.2 Different Names and

Different Spellings

**WHEREAS:** the historical development of the United States and Canada has resulted in several different names or different spellings of the same names for geographical features along their mutual border; it is

1.3 Preservation of

Different Cultural

Heritages and Histories

**Recommended:** that, the different names, and different spellings of the same names, be respected by the appropriate names authorities in each country, in cases where such variances reflect differences in the cultural heritages and historical perspectives of the two countries.

1.4 One Feature - One Name

**WHEREAS:** it is practical, where culturally acceptable, for a single official name (specific and generic) to be considered for adoption by the Canadian and United States names authorities (provincial, state, federal, where appropriate) for the same entity; it is

1.5 Mutual Effort in the

Treatment of Names

**Recommended:** that similar and effective policies and procedures for the handling of names of transboundary geographical features be established in both countries; and it is

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1.6 Cooperative Action

Recommended: that, where a name is proposed for an entity that is unnamed on both sides of the boundary, that name must be submitted to and considered for approval by the appropriate names authorities; if local usage supports the proposal, official adoption of the same name may proceed in both countries.

1.7 Established Name on One Side of the Boundary

Recommended: that, where a geographical entity has an official name on one side of the boundary only, the appropriate names authorities in the other country should consider adoption of the same name, provided it is supported by local usage.

1.8 Joint Adoption of Names, with Unofficial Use on One Side of the Boundary

Recommended: that, where a geographical entity has a name in current but unofficial use on one side of the boundary, the appropriate names authorities in both countries should consider that name for adoption, after local consultation on both sides of the boundary.

1.9 Multiple Names for  
a Single Feature

Recommended: that, where a geographic entity has a different name in current, but not yet official use on each side of the boundary, and the appropriate names authorities are unable to agree on a single name, the appropriate authority in each country either (a) may make its own name official, or (b) may decide not to make any name official at that time.

2. NAME CHANGING

2.1 Name-Change Policy

WHEREAS: it is highly desirable to retain established official names; it is

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Recommended: that, for purposes of conformance to strong local usage or citizen preference, or on special request with strong specific reasons, or mutual standardization, with local agreement a change of an official name may be considered by the appropriate names authorities in both countries.

3. SIMILAR FEATURE CLASS DESCRIPTIONS

3.1 Mutual Understanding

WHEREAS: it is desirable for the mutual understanding of geographic terms in use and for the facilitation of information exchange to have common descriptions of feature designators, it is

3.2 Use of Similar  
Feature Classes

Recommended: that the appropriate names authorities use similar feature classes in both countries.

4. IMPLEMENTATION

4.1 Agreement on Principles

WHEREAS: representatives from the Canadian and United States names authorities have reached agreement on a number of principles for handling boundary name problems.

4.2 Adoption

Recommended: that actions be undertaken to carry out the recommendations.

Mexico - United States

Cooperation between Mexico and the United States concerning boundary names is more recent than with Canada and the United States. Efforts to effect uniform name treatment occurred in connection with a cooperative mapping programme of the border between Mexico and the United States implemented under an agreement between the United States Geological Survey and Direccion General de Geografia del Territorio Nacional (CETENAL) in 1974. The name-treatment agreement was approved by the United States Board and CETENAL (now called DEGETENAL). Lacking an official names organization, CETENAL was considered the national names authority for Mexico because it is that country's official mapping agency. The names agreement reads as follows:



**GEOGRAPHIC NAMES ON THE UNITED STATES-MEXICO BOUNDARY**

- A. Policy:** The United States Board on Geographic Names and the International Boundary and Water Commission, the United States and Mexico recommend a standard policy for the treatment of the names of features that cross or exist on the international boundary. The procedures to be followed are:
- a. If the name of a feature is the same on both sides of the boundary, the feature is to be identified by that particular name.
  - b. If a name or application of a name differs between Mexico and the United States, the feature or features should be identified by the appropriate name forms on the appropriate sides of the boundary. If the difference between names involves the Spanish/English generic element, one of the two forms can be recommended for approval by the United States Board on Geographic Names and CETENAL. In such cases local interests are to be considered.
  - c. Names and applications recommended by the mapping agencies of both countries and the International Boundary and Water Commission, but are in conflict with forms and applications considered official by the United States Board on Geographic Names, are to be submitted to the Board for approval.

Geographical names on an international boundary normally are the responsibility of the national names authority, or lacking such an authority, they become the mapmaker's prerogative. Many differences in name usage between countries cannot be resolved and these differences should be honored. However, it is often possible to reduce the number of such differences. It is possible, for example, for countries with mutual borders to agree on principles and procedures for handling boundary names. Compromise is often possible when spelling differences are minor, when names are ephemeral and not well established, or when a feature is mostly in one country. It is also possible to coordinate the approval of new names and proposed name changes and to agree to disagree when mutual standardization is not possible.

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