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**Eighth United Nations Conference on the  
Standardization of Geographical Names**

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Item 4 of the provisional agenda\*

**Reports by Governments on the situation in their countries  
and on the progress made in the standardization of  
geographical names since the Seventh Conference**

**Report of the United States of America**

**Submitted by the United States of America\*\***

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## **Introduction**

The United States Board on Geographic Names (USBGN) was established by Executive order in 1890 to resolve inconsistencies and contradictions of spelling and application resulting from mapping and scientific reports associated with exploration, mining, and settlement of the western part of the United States. In 1906, the Board was instructed to adjudicate controversies, and was also given the authority to approve names for otherwise unnamed features. In 1947, the Board was re-organized when the U.S. Congress established the Board by Public Law 80-242. The work of the Board is primarily divided among two standing committees and two advisory committees. The Domestic Names Committee (DNC) and the Foreign Names Committee (FNC) are empowered to make decisions on behalf of the Board, while the advisory committees, made up of advisors and experts, make recommendations to the Board for decision. All decisions by the Board are subject to concurrence by the Secretary of the Interior. The research and staff support for the DNC and the Advisory Committee for Antarctic Names (ACAN) are provided by the U.S. Geological Survey while the research and support staff for the FNC and the Advisory Committee for Undersea Features (ACUF) is provided by the National Imagery and Mapping Agency.

## **Domestic Names Activities Since the Seventh Conference**

The Domestic Names Committee of the U.S. Board on Geographic Names meets monthly, and since the last conference, has rendered decisions on 422 newly proposed names and has adjudicated 514 controversial issues involving geographic names. During this period, the domestic names staff responded to more 20,000 inquires of which almost 75 percent were by electronic mail mostly from the Geographic Names Information System (GNIS) webpage. GNIS is the nation's official geographic names repository. The DNC is pleased to announce that since the last conference six States and two Territories have formed State and Territorial Names Authorities, which brings the total of such organizations to 49 States and two Territories. The one remaining State is in the process of forming such an authority. The USBGN relies heavily on these State and Territorial authorities because local use and acceptance is the principle of paramount importance to the Board in the standardization of domestic geographic names. One of the highlights of the DNC scheduled meetings is to hold one monthly meeting in conjunction with the annual meeting of the Council of Geographic Names Authorities (COGNA see meeting reports), which is a national organization whose council is composed of delegates from the various States and territories of the United States as well as the Federal government. The council meets yearly, and invites public participation in one of the largest gatherings of toponymists in the world. These conferences were held in Cody, Wyoming in 1998; Spokane, Washington in 1999; Saint Louis, Missouri in 2000; Boise, Idaho in 2001, and Baltimore, Maryland in 2002. The members of the USBGN and staff participated in each conference by reading papers as well as extensive participation in the popular State/Federal Roundtable where informal and often lively and emotional dialogue is

exchanged regarding policy and procedures as well as techniques of problem-solving. Also, the entire 2002 conference was organized and hosted by the Board.

In 1997, shortly before the seventh conference, the USBGN released the third edition of *Principles, Policies, and Procedures: Domestic Geographic Names*. In 2000, the DNC held a series of review meetings to examine the existing policies with reference to current issues and application. Comments, suggestions, and recommendations were solicited from all interested parties, and these were discussed at the 2002 COGNA Conference. The final draft of a revision is being analyzed and examined. The new version should be released in 2003. There has been much editing to clarify various policies, and previously “unstated” policies have been codified. Examples of clarification in wording include administrative names or those to which the Board declares its policies do not apply, names in wilderness areas, and the use and application of historical factors for name changes, to name a few. Some policy issues explained include no standard orthography for names, use of the genitive apostrophe, names issues within territorial seas, names legislated by States and Territories, pronunciation, and commercial names. Other aspects of revision address changing the term “Native American” to “indigenous” for references to this category of name, and the much-debated issue of reversing generic terms in position one of a geographic name. In 1997, the DNC announced its new policy relating to domestic names of foreign language and indigenous language origin, which specifically indicated that names using diacritical and special marks can be approved if it is determined that these characters are from a widely accepted, standard orthography. There have been a few examples of name proposals where the names contained characters not recognizable to other than one hundred or so individuals. The DNC may seek alternate names in such cases, and in others where the type of feature is not readily discernable, an appropriate generic term might be added.

The National Geographic Names Data Compilation Program is in progress still. This major effort began in 1976 as a 30-year project that is basically on schedule. The initial phase of data collection during the first six years was devoted to collecting names from most products of the Federal government. The results of an ensuing analysis revealed that only about 20 – 30 percent of the known names were found in these products, so an extensive phase was begun whereby, State-by-State, over a four year contract period per State, names are compiled from a variety of sources including official State and local documents as well as other pertinent material approved by the project coordinator and historical documents. Thus far, 35 States have been completed, 11 States and all territories are in progress, and four States remain to begin this extensive compilation effort. Since the seventh conference, more than 500,000 names that are not controversial have been collected and added to the database.

The official website for geographic names in the United States is known as the Geographic Names Information System (GNIS), and has been operational since 1995. The URL address is <http://geonames.usgs.gov>. Since the last conference there have been several, minor enhancements to the website incorporating improvements based upon user comments and continuing analysis by staff. Some enhancements include improved techniques for searching, additional data fields, and added graphic display capability. In process, is a complete redesign

of the search page whereby users will have access to the capability to search by spatial definition or “footprint”, which is the result of a complete redesign and modernization of GNIS. The ever increasing usage of the website has resulted in less demand for conventional gazetteers, and therefore, the sale and distribution of these products has been discontinued. In fact, the standard gazetteers by State and Territory as well as certain topical gazetteers are available for “downloading” from the website, and they are being downloaded at the rate of more than 100 per day. The interactive, query function is utilized daily by thousands of users averaging about 500,000 accesses each month. In support of requirements of the user community, a completely redesigned disc product with expanded capabilities will be issued. The disc will have the text-based version of the database with graphic capability that will be accompanied by other data to augment the application of the geographical names. This product has not yet reached the implementation stage, but examples of the graphic capability might include hydrography, transportation, political units, and similar type data themes. There is also the possibility that this could be a joint effort and product between the domestic and the foreign names programs.

The viability and integrity of any database requires a well-developed and managed program of maintenance. Aspects of a maintenance program for GNIS were first introduced in 1987, and have progressed through a series of upgrades and enhancements. Presently version 2.3 of this web-based maintenance software, designed by staff, is available for use to selected offices of various Federal agencies responsible for activities using geographical names. The full participation of Federal agencies in the GNIS Maintenance Program is a major component of maintenance for GNIS, but it does not allow for complete maintenance of every category of feature or complete geographical coverage as Federal maintenance is often based upon a project area, and Federal land management areas have bounded areas of responsibility. The long-range goals of the GNIS Maintenance program includes State and local agencies and organizations as instruments of database maintenance, which will assure completeness, and virtually instant and local assurance of data that is current and correct. In the past year, agreements have been reached with the State of Delaware and the State of Florida to develop such a program with various procedures that will serve as the national model for State and local maintenance. The Delaware project is in a testing stage, while the Florida project is still developmental. Each of these programs is coordinated with the larger program of the U.S. Geological Survey known as *The National Map* project, which upon completion and implementation will utilize State, local, and other suppliers of data from identified themes to provide a seamless and integrated, digital national map series that is continuously maintained and that reflects completely current data. The GNIS database has been completely redesigned and enhanced to reflect increased user needs and applications as well as be responsive to requirements of *The National Map* program. Geographical names has been identified as one of the eight framework data layers required for use and maintenance of *The National Map*, and as such, the redesign effort has been accomplished to satisfy this requirement. The GNIS staff is working closely with participants in nine “pilot” projects testing the implementation of *The National Map*. This is also in support of the recent recognition of geographical names as a major component of National Spatial Data Infrastructure (NSDI), which then supports Global Spatial Data Infrastructure (GSDI). Also, a special aspect of the redesigned database is the incorporation of a spatial component into the

database whereby feature boundaries may be stored, searched, and displayed including more than one spatial “footprint” thereby allowing temporal displays. This spatial function will be available to the general user community at the new public website. It must be noted that the population of the database with spatial geometry for features will be a slow process including mostly administrative features at first for which geometry exists. The database will be populated with geometry for natural features as can be acquired; in fact, algorithms do not even exist for determining the extent of some natural features. One aspect of the test projects in Delaware and especially Florida will test the collection and submission of geometry for features, even small, natural features for which existing geometry does not exist. The provenance of the geometry will also be readily available.

Since the last conference the GNIS database has also become the repository for the official five-digit place code of entities in the United States, which is known as the FIPS55 code where FIPS is an acronym for Federal Information Processing Standard. This design of this code assignment is old for the digital world having been developed in the early 1970s. So, a task of high priority is to redesign the very nature of this code so that it is no longer State based, never changes, and is fully integrated into GNIS the nation’s official geographical names repository.

### **Foreign Names Activities Since the Seventh Conference**

The USBGN Foreign Names Committee meets on a quarterly basis. The Committee has three principal functions:

- Develop policies and procedures for the standardization of geographic names in foreign areas for use by United States Government organizations;
- Decide the standard names of specific geographic features of special significance, such as geopolitical entities, their principal administrative divisions, capital cities, features beyond a single sovereignty;
- Advise and inform United States Government organizations regarding place name changes and events affecting the status of toponymy in foreign areas.

In conducting its business, the Foreign Names Committee relies heavily on official and established local usage in foreign areas, as found in evidence such as published toponymic guidelines, national cartographic series, digital and conventional gazetteers, and official pronouncements.

Since the seventh conference, the Foreign Names Committee has taken on responsibility for assisting in the maintenance of the U.S. Federal Information Processing Standard for geopolitical entity codes (FIPS 10).

The Committee's periodicals include the *Foreign Names Information Bulletin* and the *FIPS 10 Change Notice*. Both of these publications are now issued through e-mail distribution.

Publication of USBGN conventional gazetteers of foreign areas has ceased with the development and implementation of the Geonet Names Server, the Foreign Names Committee's presence on the World Wide Web (<http://www.nima.mil/gns/html/index.html>). The Geonet provides access to the USBGN database of foreign place name information through a query interface, and through the provision of country-specific files of toponymic data that may be downloaded to client computers. The database currently holds information on approximately 5,200,000 place names. Since the seventh conference, the Geonet has been enhanced to improve its performance and response time. The current Geonet also incorporates web-based software technology to a greater extent than its previous versions. The Geonet currently receives approximately 300,000 visits per month from users engaged in a variety of research fields requiring toponymic data.

In the area of toponymic policy, the Foreign Names Committee has recently engaged in vigorous discussions on the role of context on geographic name usage. The Committee has long held the policy of recognizing a single local official place name for a feature as the only name recommended for usage in official documents. In relatively rare cases, the Committee will also accept an English-language conventional name for a feature, when such a conventional name can be shown to be in widespread current use. In implementing this policy, the Committee has advocated the retention of adjectives and generic terms, as components of place names, in the local official language. In its recent deliberations, the Committee has begun to examine situations where the recipient of a specific official document that employs foreign place names may be better served if the place names are rendered in a more familiar form. Typically, this rendering would involve the translation of generic terms and some adjectives into English, and the simplification (or elimination) of inflected forms of place name elements in certain languages. Interestingly, the Foreign Names Committee has noted that "anglicization" would generally not be required for place names in languages that are widely used in America. Thus, there would be no need to consider altering the place name *Río Grande*. In contrast, it may not be immediately clear to the reader of an official report that the place name *Changbaishan Ziranbaohuqu* refers to a nature reserve. The question before the Foreign Names Committee is whether (in this example) *Changbaishan Nature Reserve* constitutes an acceptable standard name for official publication in certain contexts where the nature of the named feature must be clear to the user. [Note: The United States has submitted a separate paper on this topic to the present conference.]

### **Activities of the USBGN Advisory Committee on Undersea Features Since the Seventh Conference**

The Board's Advisory Committee on Undersea Features develops policies for naming undersea features beyond the territorial waters of the United States. The Committee applies these policies in evaluating undersea feature name proposals received from the oceanographic research community. The Committee, composed of distinguished experts in the fields of bathymetry and oceanography, meets on a quarterly basis.

Since the seventh conference, the advisory committee has continued its work in standardizing undersea features names. The committee has engaged in a useful exchange of information and views with the Subcommittee on Undersea Feature Names, a subcommittee of the Guiding Committee for the IHO/IOC General Bathymetric Chart of the Ocean. The Advisory Committee has also taken part in a review of the latest draft of the IHO Special Publication No. 23 *Limits in the Oceans and Seas*.

### **Activities of the USBGN Advisory Committee on Antarctic Names Activities Since the Seventh Conference**

Since the Seventh Conference, the USBGN Advisory Committee has received, processed, and approved more than 500 name proposals for previously unnamed features in Antarctica. Most of these proposals were generated by need for projects of large-scale mapping. In accordance with policy, these decisions were coordinated with other countries and all other interested parties before a decision was made. Also, in accordance with guidelines for naming in Antarctica, every effort was made to use a name approved by other country's names authorities, exactly as approved, where such a name already existed, and was part of *The Antarctica Composite Gazetteer*. The United States, however, does reserve the right to add an appropriate generic term where such a term in the original name is imbedded or in any way not a clear reference to the type of feature. The committee adopted a policy regarding proposals submitted by foreign nationals whereby for any such proposal received to name a feature *anywhere* in Antarctica, the foreign national or organization would be instructed to submit the proposal to the National (or Antarctic) Names Authority in their respective country. This policy is a reversal of the previous policy of accepting proposals from anyone, and is in support of guidelines for naming in Antarctica. Incidentally, adopting this policy prompted the Geographical Names Board of Canada to form a Sub-committee on Antarctica Names, a project on which there was collaboration between the members of the United States/Canada Division of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN).

### **International Activities Since the Seventh Conference**

The Board members and staff have represented the Board at various international venues since the seventh conference. The staff participated in the UNGEGN meeting where numerous information and position papers were presented. Also, staff participated as observers and guests at several Divisional meetings of UNGEGN during the past five years where there was valuable exchange of procedures as well as discussion regarding problems and issues common to each division. Staff attended, by invitation, the Seventh Regional Cartographic Conference on Cartography in the Americas where applied toponymy as it relates to cartographic application was a major topic. There was a very meaningful exchange, and geographical names experts assisted in drafting components of resolutions adopted by the conference acknowledging geographical names as a critical element or data layer in a country's National Spatial Data Infrastructure, and supporting the establishment of National Names Authorities to implement principles, policies, and procedures for standardizing geographical names.

There was attendance at several international conferences where relevant papers were presented, and included such important conferences as GEONAMES 2000 and GEONAMES 2001 as well as the conference for the General Bathymetric Chart of the Ocean to name a few. There was participation at several meetings of various UNGEGN working groups such as Data Files and Gazetteers, Country Names, and Romanization. Much was accomplished at these working group meetings especially the exchange of information and procedures vital to the standardization of geographical names.

Representatives of the USBGN were invited to each national meeting of the Geographical Names Board of Canada, and Canadian representatives were invited to attend the national meetings in the United States, which also accounted for eight meetings of the United States/Canada Division. There were two meetings of the USBGN and the British Permanent Committee on Geographical Names (PCGN) where issues and problems of mutual interest were discussed and analyzed.

Since the seventh conference, representatives from the United States and Honduras offered five geographical names training courses under the auspices of the Pan American Institute of Geography and History (PAIGH) where more than 125 students were offered basic training in applied toponymy. The course provides training in developing principles, policies, and procedures and office processing as well as a field exercise and an automation workshop where elements of database design and techniques of data retrieval and processing are examined.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The techniques and requirements for the use and application of geographical names has changed and evolved over the years, but one constant has remained, geographical names must be standardized for use on cartographic and other products as well as in all forms of communication. The basic tenet of UNGEGN is that strong programs of national standardization are the best way to achieve international standardization, and this is still true today. We encourage the principle of univocity, to the extent possible, and that local use and acceptance is always of paramount importance although it is understood that many variables contribute to the standardization process, and that these vary greatly from country to country. Due process should always be employed when adjudicating or applying policies to controversial names issues and problems. National Names Authorities should be very proactive in educating representatives at all levels of government and the general public regarding the requirements and rewards of using standardized names. All countries should be encouraged strongly to develop national names databases that are properly maintained, and to provide public websites for promulgating these standard geographical names as well as principles, policies, and procedures. It is recognized that this may be more easily accomplished by some countries, and others through the UNGEGN Working Group on Training should provide the necessary assistance in database and website development. This has become even more critical today as the user community is ever widening as a result of the application of technology and the use of the Internet. Also, most country's are at some stage of development in offering a digital map series, and all must and generally do agree that standardized geographical names are a critical and required data layer necessary for digital maps and in support of a country's National Spatial Data Infrastructure. The goal is standardization of geographical names, not regulation.