



The United States Board on Geographic Names Getting the Facts Straight

The United States Board on Geographic Names (BGN) has been standardizing geographic names for the Federal Government for over 125 years. In its coordination role, the BGN eliminates duplication of effort and resources among Federal agencies, and promotes clear and unambiguous communication.

Accurate Description of the BGN

The United States Board on Geographic Names (BGN) approves and standardizes geographic names for the Federal Government. BGN decisions involve names for domestic, foreign, Antarctic and undersea features. As a coordinating body working with the Secretary of the Interior, the BGN reduces duplication of work, personnel, and authority among agencies. The BGN has promoted clear and effective communication throughout the Federal Government for more than 125 years.

Despite its history and accomplishments, there remains some confusion about the BGN's name, affiliation, and mission, which may lead to inaccurate reporting on the BGN and its activities. The purpose of this fact sheet is to identify and correct these common misconceptions.

The following sentence, which is a composite of statements from news articles and reports, appears to be similar to the accurate description above, but includes 6 inaccurate or misleading statements about the BGN in less than 25 words.

Inaccurate Description of the BGN

The U.S. Geological Survey's Board of Geographic Names is the Federal agency in charge of naming geographic features across the United States.

In the remainder of the fact sheet, we will correct the misconceptions found in this statement and clarify the name, affiliation, and mission of the BGN.

1. The BGN is a board, not an agency.

The BGN is sometimes incorrectly referred to as an agency. Rather, it is a board with a coordination and standardization mission. It is made up of representatives appointed from six Cabinet-level Departments (Agriculture, Commerce, Defense, Homeland Security, Interior, and State), as well as the Central Intelligence Agency, the Government Publishing Office, the Library of Congress, and the U.S. Postal Service. In addition to their normal work duties, BGN members work part-time on BGN activities and receive no additional compensation for these efforts.

2. The BGN operates under the Secretary of the Interior, not under the U.S. Geological Survey.

Public Law 80-242 (1947), codified at 43 U.S. Code (U.S.C.) §§ 364--364f, established the BGN in its current form. It dictates that the Secretary of the Interior operates conjointly with the BGN in the process of standardizing geographic names for the Federal Government.

There is some confusion regarding the relationship of the BGN to the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS). The USGS provides staff support for processing BGN domestic geographic names decisions and policies. Similarly, the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA) in

the Department of Defense provides staff support for processing foreign geographic names according to BGN policies and principles. The BGN is not under and does not report to either the USGS or NGA.

3. The BGN approves names for Federal use, but does not name features.

The BGN does not create names for geographic features, but approves or rejects names proposed by others, based on the Board's principles, policies, and procedures. For domestic names, anyone can submit a name for approval, including the general public, Federal, State or local governments, or Tribes. Foreign names are collected from national naming authorities and authoritative sources.

4. BGN decisions apply only to the Federal Government.

It is sometimes incorrectly assumed that BGN decisions on names apply to everyone in the United States. The BGN was formed to provide uniform geographic name usage in the Federal Government and its decisions only apply to the Federal Government. For the benefit of all, the BGN encourages cooperation and uniform usage of names with State, local, Tribal, and international governments, as well as the press and public, but BGN decisions are not binding outside the Federal Government.

5. The BGN standardizes foreign as well as domestic geographic names.

The BGN is sometimes mischaracterized as being involved only with names in the United States and its territories. The BGN standardizes geographic names worldwide for the Federal Government, including domestic names, foreign names, and names for oceans, seas, undersea features and Antarctic features. The BGN works closely with authorities in other nations, international geographic names organizations, and the United Nations to encourage global standardization of geographic names.

6. The correct name is the U.S. Board on Geographic Names.

Perhaps the most common error is to refer to the U.S. Board *on* Geographic Names incorrectly as the U.S. Board *of* Geographic Names. [Italics and bolding added to emphasize the difference]

Additional information on the U.S. Board on Geographic Names

BGN website
<http://geonames.usgs.gov/>

BGN brochures and fact sheets
[http://geonames.usgs.gov/
brochures_factsheets/index.html](http://geonames.usgs.gov/brochures_factsheets/index.html)

- An Introduction to the BGN
- BGN Information Resources
- Official Geographic Names for Federal Publications

Points of Contact

Domestic and Antarctic Geographic Names

Mr. Lou Yost
Executive Secretary, Domestic Names
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Foreign and Undersea Geographic Names

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CHAPTER 3. DOMESTIC GEOGRAPHIC NAMES POLICIES

Sec. 4 Common names are sometimes applied to two or more features in close proximity. Where it can be demonstrated that duplication has led to confusion, the BGN will consider a proposal to change an existing name (see Policy VII. Duplicate and Similar Names). The BGN may disapprove a name change proposal that duplicates another nearby name.

Sec. 5 The need to correct a name for historical accuracy may not always be sufficiently compelling to change the existing name. However, proposals to correct a misspelling of a historic or personal commemorative name will generally be given favorable consideration if the proponent presents convincing evidence that the name has been misspelled and should be changed.

Sec. 6 The BGN initiates name changes only in rare cases such as those involving certain derogatory names and changes in name applications.

Guidelines

When a name change proposal is received, the BGN investigates the background of the current name and solicits recommendations from any individual or Federal, Tribal, State or local authority that it determines might have an interest in the feature. The BGN carefully considers all relevant factors when reviewing a name change proposal, including the extent and distribution of usage, historical context, and lexical meanings.

In the event of a name change, the prior form appears in the permanent Geographic Names Information System (GNIS) record as a variant name (see Policy VIII. Variant Names).

Policy III. Commemorative Names

Human influence on the land has taken many forms. One of the more prominent forms has been the association of people's names with the landscape. This has resulted in the adoption of many personal names and nicknames for identifying geographic features, such as mountains and streams.

Sec. 1 The BGN will consider proposals to apply names or nicknames of deceased persons to geographic features in the United States and areas under its jurisdiction. The BGN will only accept proposals for names that are intended to honor a person or persons deceased at least five years. The BGN will disapprove names that could be construed to honor living persons.

Sec. 2 The person being honored should have had either some direct or long-term association with the feature, or have made a significant contribution to the area, community, or State in which it is located.

CHAPTER 3. DOMESTIC GEOGRAPHIC NAMES POLICIES

Sec. 3 A proposal commemorating an individual with outstanding national or international recognition may be approved even if the person was not directly associated with the geographic feature.

Sec. 4 A proposal to revise or eliminate an existing personal commemorative name will usually be disapproved unless the proponent presents a compelling justification.

Sec. 5 The BGN discourages the use of an individual's full name in a feature name. Exceptions are occasionally made to avoid ambiguity (see Policy IX. Long Names, Sec. 2).

Sec. 6 Commemorative name proposals must meet the same basic criteria required of other name proposals.

Guidelines

A proposal to commemorate an individual should include evidence of local support for the proposed name and its application. Such evidence may be in the form of letters from the appropriate governing authorities and local residents, as well as, where appropriate, from historical societies, service organizations, etc.

The proponent must provide biographical information about the intended honoree(s), including his/her full name(s), death date(s), and evidence of any association with the feature proposed for naming (e.g., any evidence of local civic contribution). If the intended honoree has not been deceased at least five years, the proposal will be returned to the proponent with a request that it be resubmitted once the waiting period has passed.

Examples of past decisions by the BGN have indicated "direct association" or "significant contribution" when the person being commemorated was:

- an early or long-time resident,
- a developer, restorer, or maintainer of the feature,
- a donor of land to local, State, Tribal, or Federal governments, and
- a person who played a large part in protecting the land for public benefit.

A person's death on or at a feature, such as in a mountaineering accident or automobile or plane crash, does not necessarily meet the "direct association" criterion.

CHAPTER 3. DOMESTIC GEOGRAPHIC NAMES POLICIES

Guidelines

Persons proposing to name an unnamed feature in a wilderness area should coordinate their proposal with the BGN member whose agency is responsible for the administration of the area. The administering agency will review new name proposals, and advise the BGN whether there is an overriding need. A final decision on the proposal will be made by the BGN.

Policy V. Derogatory and Offensive Names

The BGN's guiding principle for the names of places, features, and areas in the United States and its territories is to approve for official Federal use the names found in present-day local usage (see Principle II. Names in Local Use). An exception to this principle may occur when a name is derogatory or is shown to be offensive to a particular racial or ethnic group, gender, or religious group.

Because geographic names are part of the historical record of the United States, the BGN prefers to proceed cautiously with regard to the use of names in everyday language, as attitudes and perceptions of words considered to be offensive can vary among individuals and communities and can change connotation over time. Accordingly, the BGN will act on a case-by-case basis.

Two words, however, are considered derogatory by the BGN in all occurrences. In 1963, the Secretary of the Interior mandated the word "Nigger" in geographic names on Federal maps and other products be changed to "Negro." In 1974, the BGN mandated the word "Jap" in geographic names on Federal maps and other products be changed to "Japanese."

Sec. 1 The BGN will not consider a name proposal that includes the derogatory word "Jap" or the derogatory word "Nigger."

Sec. 2 The BGN will not make official for Federal use a locally used name that is determined by the BGN to be offensive to a particular racial or ethnic group, gender, or religious group.

Sec. 3 Proposals to change names considered to be offensive must meet the same basic criteria required of any other name proposal, and will be processed using the same procedures as any other name change (see Policy II. Name Changes).

Guidelines

Any individual or agency may submit to the BGN a proposal to change an existing name that they consider offensive. Such proposals should include reasons why the proponent believes the existing name is offensive. The proponent must offer an alternative name as part of the proposal, following BGN guidelines for name proposal submittals.

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