



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 120 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 120 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 six inaccurate or misleading statements about the BGN in less than twenty-five 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 Printing 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

- 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

U.S. Geological Survey

523 National Center

Reston, Virginia 20192-0523

Phone: 703-648-4552

E-mail: lyost@usgs.gov

Foreign and Undersea Geographic Names

Mr. Marcus Allsup

Acting Executive Secretary, Foreign Names

National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency

7500 GEOINT Drive, Mail Stop: N62

Springfield, Virginia 22150-7500

Phone: 571-557-6225

E-mail: marcus.w.allsup@nga.mil