

United States Board  
on Geographic Names  
**Annual Report**  
**To the**  
**Secretary of the Interior**  
**Fiscal Year 2014**

*Standardizing Geographic Names for the  
Federal Government Since 1890*

# Introduction

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. Working conjointly with the Secretary of the Interior (SOI), the BGN reduces duplication of work, personnel, and authority among agencies.

As an interagency coordinating body, the BGN includes members from the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Commerce, the Department of Defense, the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of the Interior, the Department of State, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Government Printing Office, the Library of Congress, and the Postal Service.

The BGN fosters clear and unambiguous communication within the Federal Government through its geographic names standardization efforts. It remains a model of coordination and cooperation, working closely with National Names Authorities, State Names Authorities, Tribes, and local communities, as well as international bodies that promote geographic names standardization.

## Domestic Names

Domestic Names Committee. The Domestic Names Committee (DNC) standardizes geographic names within the United States and its sovereign areas. In FY14, the Executive Secretary for Domestic Names was Mr. Lou Yost (U.S. Geological Survey) and the Chair of the DNC was Mr. Douglas Vandegraff (Bureau of Ocean Energy Management). The Domestic Names Committee receives research and database support from the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS).

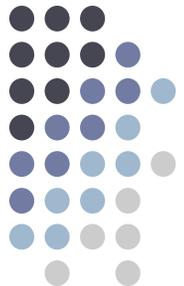
Actions. The DNC meets monthly and met 10 times in FY14. The April meeting was held in conjunction with the Council on Geographic Names Authorities (COGNA) Annual Meeting in Austin, Texas. DNC members participated in a State and Federal Roundtable and discussed issues and best practices common to both organizations.



### Tree Planting on Little Hoot Island

*The Domestic Names Committee approved the name 'Little Hoot Island' for a manmade island in the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge. The name reflects the hooting sounds of the migratory tundra swan cygnets who visit the island each October as they migrate to the Atlantic Coast.*

*Photo by Owen P. Johnson*



The DNC's four Quarterly Review Lists introduced 246 new name proposals. During the year 115 proposals were considered, 101 were approved, and 14 were disapproved.

Activities. A major accomplishment of the DNC this year was the successful review and approval of the *Interim Policy X: Tribal Geographic Names*, by the DOI Solicitor's Office and the Senior Policy Advisor for the Bureau of Indian Affairs. While the DNC regularly consults with Tribes on name proposals, the Interim Policy X will formalize this process and the relationship between the DNC and Federally-recognized tribes.

Issues. Funding limitations continued to impact the DNC in FY14. The USGS' National Geospatial Program (NGP), which houses and funds the DNC staff, has absorbed budget and staff reductions over the last several years. As a result, the NGP made the decision, with DNC concurrence, to suspend the collection and maintenance of selected manmade feature categories in the Geographic Names Information System (GNIS). This will affect features such as cemeteries, campgrounds, and dams. The NGP is adding a capability for agencies to collect and maintain these names in the GNIS as their resources permit.

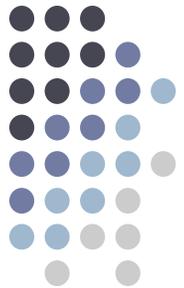
Database of Domestic Names The GNIS is the single source for Federally-approved domestic names. At the end of FY14, the GNIS contained 2,726,567 names associated with 2,268,566 features. In addition to the 101 names approved by the Domestic Names Committee, 12,578 new names and 672 new features were added and 9,315 existing records were edited. <http://geonames.usgs.gov/apex/f?p=gnispq>

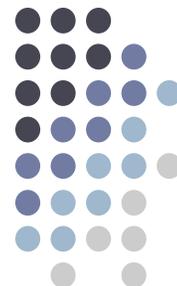
## Foreign Names

Foreign Names Committee. The Foreign Names Committee (FNC) standardizes names for geographic features located outside the United States and its sovereign areas, as well the names of oceans and seas. In FY14, the Executive Secretary for Foreign Names was Mr. Trent Palmer (National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency) and the Chair of the FNC was Mr. Leo Dillon (Department of State). The FNC receives research and database support from the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA).

Actions. The FNC meets quarterly and met four times in FY14. It addressed 48 staff recommendations, all of which were approved; this represents a 33% increase in staff recommendations over FY13. The FNC also approved six country policies (Austria, Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Macedonia, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey).

Activities. A working group of FNC members and staff continued to develop a Principles, Policies, and Procedures (PPP) document, which is expected to be complete in FY15. The FNC PPP will follow the general outline of the DNC PPP, but contain information specific to foreign names.





Issues. The FNC, the Foreign Names staff at NGA, and the British Permanent Committee on Geographical Names have been debating the advantages and disadvantages of applying romanization systems to geographic names in non-Roman script that are linguistically and scientifically rigorous versus using less rigorous romanized names that are commonly found in a given country or area.

An example is Lebanon, an Arabic-speaking country in which French-style romanized names are found on the ground, often inconsistently spelled. Recently, Arabic script place names have become available from official sources. Application of the U.S. BGN-approved romanization system for Arabic place names in Lebanon would result in more linguistically accurate and “reversible” spellings. However, these spellings are not likely to be the same as those seen by a visitor to the country or found in common media sources.

Database of Foreign Names. The Geographic Names Database (GNDB), hosted on the NGA website, is the single source for Federally-approved foreign names. At the end of FY14, it contained 9.8 million names associated with 6 million features. In addition to the names for 343 features approved in this reporting period by the Foreign Names Committee, 700,000 new names and 390,000 new features were added to the database and 962,000 existing names and 598,000 existing features were edited in the database. Most names were added in Mexico, China, Thailand, Iran, Macedonia, and Japan. <http://earth-info.nga.mil/gns/html/>.

## Antarctic Names

Advisory Committee on Antarctic Names. The Advisory Committee on Antarctic Names (ACAN) standardizes geographic names in Antarctica, an area with no permanent population and no officially recognized government. In FY14, the Chair of ACAN was Dr. Scott Borg (National Science Foundation). Mr. Roger Payne (USGS, retired) served as Secretary.

Actions. ACAN meets on an as-needed basis and met twice in FY14. It addressed 31 name proposals, all of which were submitted to the Full Board for a decision. Twenty-nine of the proposals were approved, as well as 8 other proposals submitted in FY13. Two proposals are pending a decision at the Board’s October 2014 meeting.

Activities. ACAN continued its efforts with the Polar Geospatial Center (PGC) at the University of Minnesota. There was a hiatus of about two years in active data checking for quality assurance in order for a web-based program to be designed, developed, and implemented. The new web-based system is expected to be operational in November 2014. This will allow ACAN members and staff, under the direction of the Executive Secretary, to conduct sophisticated data analyses for quality assurance. Approximately 1,000 enhancements have been reviewed and made by the ACAN staff. An additional 6,000 or so enhanced coordinates are ready for examination under the new tiered system of confidence. PGC is working on the remaining

7,000 coordinates.

ACAN implemented its FY12 commemorative naming policy for features in Antarctica, which requires that the honoree's contributions to exploration, research, or support be significant. During FY 13 and FY 14, the more stringent policy has been applied and has proven a significant improvement in weighing and deciding on proposed commemorative names in Antarctica. The committee has conducted an initial review and examination of other policies for naming in Antarctica and finds these existing policies to be functioning properly.

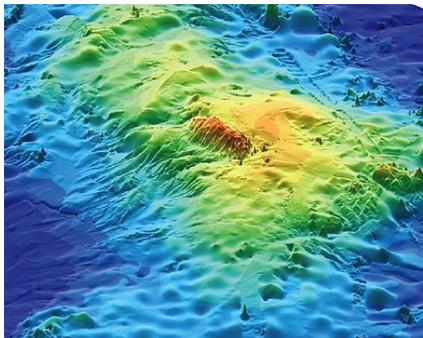
Issues. None.

Database of Antarctic Names The GNIS is the single source for Federally-approved Antarctic names. At the end of FY14, it contained 18,609 names associated with 14,110 features. <http://geonames.usgs.gov/apex/f?p=gnispq> and click on *Search Antarctica Data* link.

## Undersea Feature Names

Advisory Committee on Undersea Features. The Advisory Committee on Undersea Features (ACUF) standardizes geographic names for undersea features in offshore areas where there is no officially recognized government. In FY14, Mr. Gerry Walter (NGA) was the Chair and Mr. Jimmy Nerantzis (NGA) served as Secretary.

Actions. ACUF meets on an as-needed basis and met 3 times in FY14. Four name proposals were submitted to and approved by the Full Board.



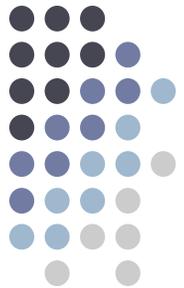
### TAMU Plateau - Undersea Feature

*The Full Board approved the ACUF-recommended name TAMU Plateau. This feature is located in the northwest Pacific Ocean and was named for the Texas A&M University research team that discovered the formation. The 145 million year old feature is believed to contain the world's largest single volcano.*

*Photo by the International Ocean Discovery Program*

Activities. ACUF approved edits to the Geographic Names Database (GNDB) for NGA's review of all names in the South China Sea.

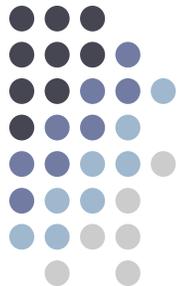
ACUF worked closely with the General Bathymetric Chart of the Oceans (GEBCO) Sub-Committee on Undersea Feature Names (SCUFN). The committee approved an additional 42 names from a previous SCUFN meeting in an effort to coordinate names between the ACUF and this international naming body. These names are pending Full Board approval.



ACUF also worked with ACAN to ensure that names in the Antarctic were in the proper Undersea or Antarctic database based on their interpretation of policies related to geographic responsibility.

Issues. None.

Database of Undersea Feature Names. The GNDB is the single source for approved undersea feature names. At the end of FY14, it contained 10,201 names associated with 5,032 features. <http://earth-info.nga.mil/gns/html/> and click on *Undersea Features* links.



## Communications

Special Committee on Communications. The Special Committee on Communications (SCC) focuses on outreach initiatives, specifically related to the BGN and geographic names. The SCC meets on an as-needed basis and met four times in FY14. The SCC is chaired by Ms. Meredith Westington (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration).

Activities. FY14 was marked by two notable focuses of SCC outreach: education and celebration. The SCC assisted the Geography Educators Network of Indiana (GENI) with the development of a lesson plan on geographic names. The SCC members provided feedback to GENI and suggested a number of supplemental learning activities involving geographic names.

The BGN was established on September 4, 1890, and the SCC began planning for the its 125th anniversary celebration in September 2015. The current celebration plans include a week-long special exhibit on geographic names and a one-day symposium at the Library of Congress.

## Full Board

Full Board. The Full Board consists of voting members from six Cabinet-level departments, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Government Printing Office, the Library of Congress, and the Postal Service. Mr. Douglas Caldwell (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers) served as Chair of the Full Board in FY14. The Full Board, which is scheduled to meet quarterly, met twice in FY14.

Activities. The BGN leadership met with Ms. Anne Castle, the Assistant Secretary for Water and Science (ASWS), to brief the BGN's activities and establish a liaison with the ASWS. Mr. William Lukas (USGS Liaison to the ASWS) will serve as the BGN's liaison. The BGN Bylaws were forwarded to the ASWS for review prior to final approval by the SOI.

Issues: Staff reductions and resource constraints continue to hamper the BGN's ability to fully address the demand for standardized geographic names. As a result,

the BGN will scale back its collection and maintenance of selected manmade features in the United States starting in FY15. Ongoing modernization efforts of outdated technology will improve names production, but not completely offset the loss of staff. In addition, international coordination activities have been reduced.



## Resources

Web Site. The BGN maintains a web site at <http://geonames.usgs.gov/>. The web site contains links for Domestic, Foreign, Antarctic, and Undersea Feature Names, as well as a member directory and brochures/fact sheets. Links to other resources, such as Principles, Policies, and Procedures, Review Lists, Meeting Minutes, Frequently Asked Questions, Romanization Systems, and the GNIS and GNDB can also be found on this site.

Credits. The cover includes images (clockwise from the upper left): Jean-Pierre Dalbéra (Notre-Dame de Paris), the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and National Science Foundation (West Mata Undersea Volcano), Dave Munro—National Science Foundation (Iceberg Near Antarctic Peninsula), and the National Park Service (Shenandoah National Park).

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Douglas R. Caldwell".

Douglas R. Caldwell  
Chair  
United States Board on Geographic Names

