United States Board on Geographic Names

Standardizing Geographic Names for the Federal Government for 127 Years

Serenity Hill in Hualapai Valley, Mohave County, Arizona. Name approved by the BGN in May 2017.

Fiscal Year 2017: Annual Report to the Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke

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The BGN Annual Report was made possible by contributions from
Douglas Caldwell (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers), Leo Dillon (Department of State),
Andrew Flora (Department of Commerce/Bureau of the Census),
Brenda-Anne "B.C." Forrest (GPO), Tony N. Gilbert (GPO),
Elizabeth Kanalley (U.S. Forest Service), Maria McCormick (USGS),
Jimmy Nerantzis (NGA), Jacqueline Nolan (Library of Congress),
Matthew O'Donnell (USGS), Trent Palmer (NGA), Roger Payne (USGS, retired),
Jennifer Runyon (USGS), Gerry Walter (NGA), and Lou Yost (USGS).

BGN Annual Report design by Brenda-Anne "B.C." Forrest (GPO).

Cover Photography Credit: Serenity Hill in Arizona by Leia Landrock, used with permission.

Fiscal Year 2017
Annual Report to the
Secretary of the Interior

Published for the use of the U.S. Government

Washington, DC : 2017

MISSION STATEMENT

Introduction

The United States Board on Geographic Names (BGN) standardizes and approves geographic names for the Federal Government. The BGN's decisions involve names for domestic, foreign, Antarctic, and undersea features.

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 Publishing Office, the Library of Congress, and the Postal Service. Working conjointly with the Secretary of the Interior (SOI), the BGN reduces duplication of work, personnel, and authority among its member agencies.

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

The Ikhèenjik River, formerly Birch Creek, in Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge, Alaska. Name approved by the BGN in March 2017. Photograph from Wikimedia Commons.

DOMESTIC NAMES COMMITTEE

Actions, activities & issues

The Domestic Names Committee (DNC) standardizes the names of geographic features within the United States and its sovereign areas. In FY17, the Executive Secretary for Domestic Names was Mr. Lou Yost (U.S. Geological Survey) and the Chair of the DNC was Ms. Elizabeth K. Kanalley (Department of Agriculture/U.S. Forest Service). The DNC receives research and database support from the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS).

Actions

The DNC meets monthly and met 10 times in FY17. The May meeting was held in conjunction with the Council of Geographic Names Authorities (COGNA) annual meeting in Richmond, Virginia, and was hosted by the Virginia Board on Geographic Names.

The DNC's four Quarterly Review Lists comprised 158 new name and name change proposals. In FY17, the DNC considered 163 proposals, of which 121 new names and changes were approved, 41 were disapproved, and one was deferred.

Activities

The DNC's revised Principles, Policies, and Procedures (PPP) document is now in effect following approval by the Secretary of the Interior in December 2016. Implementation of the interim "Policy X: Tribal Names" is delayed pending the development of an implementation plan. In the interim, the 1997 policy on Names of Native American Origin will remain in effect. The PPP document is now available at the BGN website.

The DNC continued to assist other Federal agencies with geographic names. The USGS, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), and the General Services Administration (GSA) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) regarding the maintenance of geolocation codes in the Geographic Names Information System (GNIS).

The Secretariat participated in discussions with the interagency Wild and Scenic Rivers Steward Council and the USGS National Geospatial Program regarding efforts by the USGS to show these designated river sections on US Topo maps. The council asked the DNC staff to provide guidance on the standardization of the names of these entities, which are legislated. In response to a request from the U.S. Navy, the staff provided a dataset of hydrographic features in GNIS to support efforts to harmonize waterway names on maps and charts.

Continued on the next page.

DOMESTIC NAMES COMMITTEE

Actions, activities & issues continued

Activities continued

The DNC Executive Secretary and several members attended the 11th United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names and the 30th Session of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) held during the second and third weeks of August in New York, New York.

Issues

The DNC initiated efforts to implement the new interim Tribal Names policy. This policy aligns with Executive orders and Department of the Interior (DOI) policies acknowledging Tribal Sovereignty.

Tysons, formerly Tysons Corner, in Virginia. Name approved by BGN in October 2016. Photos: circa 1935, from Fairfax County Public Library Historical Photographs; and 2017 image by Joel D. Gray.

Plans are underway to hold listening sessions with inter-Tribal organizations and the National Congress of American Indians to introduce the revised Policy X and to invite Tribes to consult on the matter. These efforts will continue into FY18.

New proposals continue to challenge the DNC on the definition of offensive names. The DNC has received proposals to change the names of geographic features related to the Confederacy and the Civil War. Other words, such as “negro,” continue to draw mixed reactions.

Database of the Domestic Names Committee

GNIS is the official database for federally approved domestic names. At the end of FY17, GNIS contained 2,768,348 names associated with 2,275,617 features. In addition to the 163 names approved by the DNC in FY17, 647 new names and 323 new features were added, and 20,869 existing records were edited.

GNIS staff are in the process of collecting polygons for ridges, ranges, summits, and valleys. In FY17, the staff had collected polygons for these features in 50 U.S. national parks. BGN staff are linking scanned BGN case documents to GNIS records. So far, 32,127 cards have been attached.

To access GNIS, enter *https://geonames.usgs.gov* into a web browser and select “Search Domestic Names.”

FOREIGN NAMES COMMITTEE

Actions, activities & issues

The Foreign Names Committee (FNC) standardizes names for geographic features located outside the United States and its sovereign areas, as well as the names of oceans and seas. Mr. Trent Palmer (National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency) served as Executive Secretary for Foreign Names during FY17. The Chair of the FNC was Mr. Leo Dillon (Department of State). The FNC receives research and database support from the staff of the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA).

Actions

The FNC met three times in FY17 and considered and approved 44 staff recommendations. The Foreign Names staff at NGA developed, and the FNC approved, eight country policies. Country policies are reference documents that comprehensively address the linguistic and political situations affecting place name collection in a specific country. For FY17, policies for the following countries were approved: Belize, the Dominican Republic, France, Iceland, Samoa, Suriname, Sweden, and Tonga.

Activities

The 31st Conference of the BGN and the Permanent Committee on Geographical Names for British Official Use (PCGN) was held October 31 through November 4, 2016, at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC. The BGN's Foreign Names staff and the FNC maintain a close working relationship with the staff of the PCGN, jointly developing and/or approving the systems for romanization and agreeing on common foreign names standardization policies. The BGN/PCGN conferences are held approximately every 18 months with the location alternating between Washington, DC, and London, England.

Five BGN members from the Departments of Commerce, Defense, the Interior, and State participated in the 11th United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names, held at the United Nations Headquarters in New York, New York, in August 2017. BGN staff and members have held and continue to hold leadership positions in the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN).

Two members of the Foreign Names staff based at NGA visited the staff of the PCGN in London for a week-long technical exchange meeting in September 2017. Topics discussed included Burma, France, and the romanization of Hebrew.

Continued on the next page.

FOREIGN NAMES COMMITTEE

Actions, activities & issues continued

Activities continued

The Foreign Names staff has undertaken an inventory and scanning project to ensure that BGN meeting minutes and related documentation since 1947, the year of the re-establishment of the BGN in its present form, are complete and available for research and historical purposes.

In FY17 the Foreign Names staff at NGA had several internal opportunities to raise awareness and promote its work in support of the BGN. Beginning in August 2016 (FY16), and still ongoing, the events have included desk-side familiarization briefings for the NGA Director and Deputy Director, a briefing with agency senior leadership that was broadcast via video-teleconference to all NGA sites worldwide, a video-recorded interview, analyst profiles, and a new bulletin board.

Issues

None to report.

Database of the Foreign Names Committee

The Geographic Names Database (GNDB), hosted on the NGA website, is the single source for federally approved foreign names. At the end of FY17, it contained 12.4 million names associated with 7.7 million features. In FY17, 691,932 new names and 409,310 new features were added. Most of the names added to the database were for features in India, China, Pakistan, Mexico, New Zealand, Morocco, Iran, Switzerland, Kazakhstan, Cambodia, and Armenia.

To access the GNDB, enter *http://geonames.nga.mil/gns/html/* into a web browser.

Guna Yala, formerly Kuna Yala, an indigenous region in northeast Panama. Name approved by the BGN in September 2017; map shown above.

ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON ANTARCTIC NAMES

Actions, activities & issues

The Advisory Committee on Antarctic Names (ACAN) standardizes geographic names in Antarctica, an area with no permanent population and no officially recognized government. In FY17, the Chair of ACAN was Dr. Scott Borg (National Science Foundation). Mr. Roger L. Payne (USGS, retired) served as Secretary.

Actions

ACAN meets on an as-needed basis, and met once in FY17 because fewer proposals were submitted during the year. At the meeting, the committee decided to recommend the approval of 43 name proposals, which were approved by BGN.

Activities

During the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN) conference, the Executive Secretary attended the meeting of the newly formed Working Group on Antarctic Place Names of the Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research's Standing Committee on Antarctic Geographic Information.

There was discussion regarding matters of organization and general topics of relevance to toponymic activities and the processes of application in Antarctica. The previous Guidelines to Naming in Antarctica document was discussed and examined. Future tools for efficient cooperation between countries were also discussed.

Issues

None to report.

Database of the Advisory Committee on Antarctic Names

The Geographic Names Information System (GNIS) is the official database for federally approved Antarctic names. At the end of FY17, it contained 18,680 names associated with 14,181 features.

To access Antarctic names in GNIS, enter *https://geonames.usgs.gov/antarctic/index.html* into a web browser and select "Search Antarctica Names."

ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON UNDERSEA FEATURES

Actions, activities & issues

The Advisory Committee on Undersea Features (ACUF) standardizes geographic names for undersea features beyond the 12-nautical-mile limit of the territorial sea of all nations. In FY17, Mr. Gerry Walter (National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency) continued to serve as Chair, and Mr. Jimmy Nerantzis (National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency) continued to serve as Secretary.

ACUF welcomed two new members to the committee: Dr. Kristin Ludwig (U.S. Geological Survey) and Ms. Amanda Williams (Department of State).

NOAA Papahanaumokuakea Marine National Monument, in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, spans 582,578 square miles, shown at left.

Actions

ACUF meets on an as-needed basis and met two times in FY17. Seven name proposals were submitted to and approved by the Full Board.

- Afa'maolek Seamount; coordinate: 16° 18′ 55″N, 144° 57′ 08″E.
  Submitted by Mr. Leighton Rolley, Schmidt Ocean Institute.
- Falkor Deep; coordinate: 12° 31′ 51″N, 144° 55′ 100″E.
  Submitted by Mr. Leighton Rolley, Schmidt Ocean Institute.
- Agard Seamount; coordinate: 25° 31′ 25″N, 173° 39′ 56″W.
  Submitted by Dr. Daniel Wagner, NOAA Papahanaumokuakea Marine National Monument.
- Kaunana Seamount; coordinate: 27° 01′ 05″N, 177° 15′ 45″W.
  Submitted by Dr. Daniel Wagner, NOAA Papahanaumokuakea Marine National Monument.
- Rooney Seamount; coordinate: 27° 00′ 40″N, 176° 51′ 35″W.
  Submitted by Dr. Daniel Wagner, NOAA Papahanaumokuakea Marine National Monument.
- Okeanos Explorer Seamount; coordinate: 25° 21′ 37″N, 178° 25′ 30″W.
  Submitted by Dr. Daniel Wagner, NOAA Papahanaumokuakea Marine National Monument.
- Savaqatigiik Seamount; coordinate: 81° 31′ 34″N, 134° 28′ 48″W.
  Submitted by Andy Armstrong, NOAA Joint Hydrographic Center, University of New Hampshire, Durham, New Hampshire; Larry Mayer, Center for Coastal and Ocean Mapping, University of New Hampshire, Durham, New Hampshire; and David Mosher, Natural Resources Canada, Canadian Geological Survey–Atlantic, Bedford Institute of Oceanography, Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, Canada.

Continued on the next page.

ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON UNDERSEA FEATURES

Actions, activities & issues continued

Activities: International Coordination

ACUF continued to work closely with the General Bathymetric Chart of the Oceans (GEBCO) Sub-Committee on Undersea Feature Names (SCUFN), the international counterpart to the BGN/ACUF.

Although the ACUF Chairman and Secretary frequently attend and participate as official Observers and U.S. Representatives, the ACUF did not attend the annual SCUFN working group meeting held October 2–6, 2017, in Genoa, Italy.

Issues

None to report.

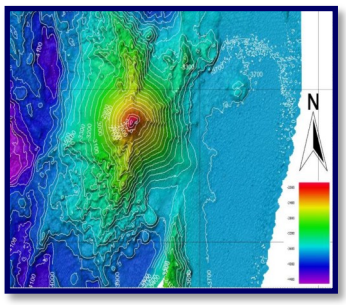
Database of Undersea Feature Names

The Geographic Names Database (GNDB) is the single source for approved undersea feature names. At the end of FY17, it contained 10,091 names associated with 5,172 undersea features.

To query data, select *http://geonames.nga.mil/namesgaz/;* for "Country Name," select "Undersea Features"; then, select "Search Database."

Details of the Afa'maolek Seamount Undersea Feature

"Afa'maolek" is the Chamorro word for "cooperation." Chamorro is the spoken language of the Chamorro people indigenous to Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands. The word communicates the close working relationship between the research vessel (R/V) Falkor (Schmidt Ocean Institute) and the research vessel Okeanos Explorer (NOAA) for coordinating surveying and sharing of data. The word also honors the local indigenous language and culture.



Afa'maolek Seamount, from the R/V Falkor multibeam sonar survey data.

- Afa'maolek Seamount; located in the northern Pacific Ocean, between the Northern Mariana Islands and the Mariana Trough.
- Coordinate of center point: 16° 18′ 55″N, 144° 57′ 08″E.
- Total Relief: approx. 2,352m; max depth, approx. 4,228m; min depth, 1,876m.
- Submitted by the Schmidt Ocean Institute, Mr. Leighton Rolley.

Continued on the next page.

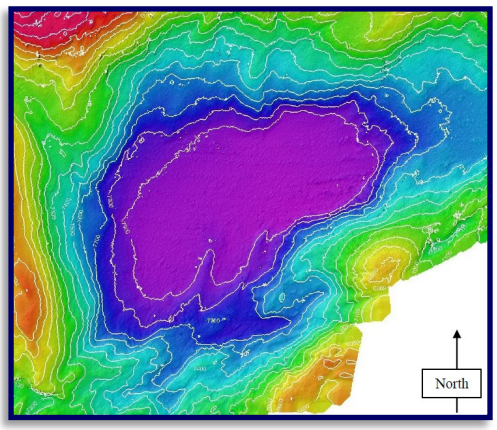
ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON UNDERSEA FEATURES

Actions, activities & issues continued

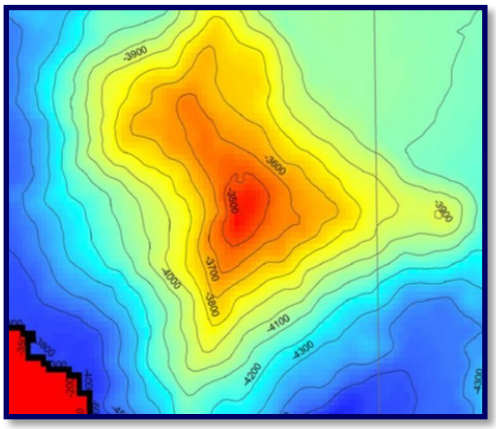
Details of the Falkor Deep Undersea Feature

Falkor Deep is named for the research vessel Falkor that was used for research and surveying of the undersea feature.

- Falkor Deep; located in the northern Pacific Ocean, between Guam and the Mariana Trench.
- Coordinate of center point: 12° 31′ 51″N, 144° 55′ 100″E .
- Total Relief: approx. 1,300m; max depth, approx. 8,000m; min depth, approx. 6,700m.
- Submitted by the Schmidt Ocean Institute, Mr. Leighton Rolley.



Falkor Deep, from the R/V Falkor multibeam sonar survey data, shown above.



Agard Seamount, from the R/V Falkor multibeam sonar survey data, shown above.

Details of the Agard Seamount Undersea Feature

A commemorative name in honor of Mr. Louis K. "Buzzy" Agard, Jr., 1924–2015, Mr. Agard served for many years as a member of the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council and was instrumental in the creation of the Papahanaumokuakea Marine National Monument.

- Agard Seamount; located in the northern Pacific Ocean, western Hawaiian Ridge, approx. 35nm SE of Neva Shoal.
- Coordinate: 25° 31′ 25″N, 173° 39′ 56″W.
- Total Relief: approx. 1,194m; max depth, approx. 4,600m; min depth, approx. 3,406m.
- Submitted by Dr. Daniel Wagner, NOAA Papahanaumokuakea Marine National Monument.

Continued on the next page.

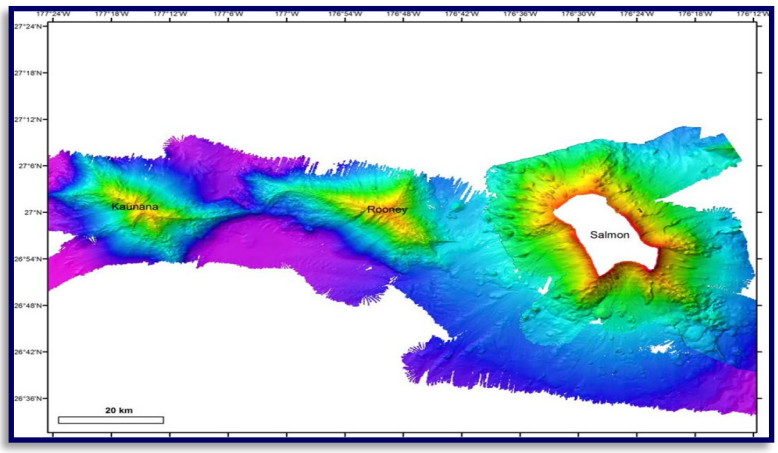
ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON UNDERSEA FEATURES

Actions, activities & issues continued

Details of the Kaunana Seamount Undersea Feature

"Kaunana" is the Hawaiian word for "discovered," and the undersea feature is named in honor of the NOAA ship Okeanos Explorer.

- Kaunana Seamount; located in the western Hawaiian Ridge in the northern Pacific Ocean, approx. 70nm south of Midway Island.
- Coordinate: 27° 01′ 05″N, 177° 15′ 45″W.
- Total Relief: approx. 3,966m; max depth, approx. 4,900m; min depth, approx. 934m.
- Submitted by Dr. Daniel Wagner, NOAA Papahanaumokuakea Marine National Monument.



Kaunana Seamount, shown as the far left gold section; and the Rooney Seamount, shown as the center gold section; obtained from the R/V Okeanos Explorer multibeam survey data.

Details of the Rooney Seamount Undersea Feature

A commemorative name in honor of Dr. John Rooney, 1960–2016, Dr. Rooney devoted his life to studying deep-water geology and geomorphology, leading many expeditions that mapped the waters around the islands of Hawaii and other places in the Pacific.

- Rooney Seamount; located in the western Hawaiian Ridge in the northern Pacific Ocean, approx. 80 miles south of Midway Islands.
- Coordinate: 27° 00′ 40″N, 176° 51′ 35″W.
- Total Relief: approx. 4,051m; max depth, approx. 4,700m; min depth, approx. 649m.
- Submitted by Dr. Daniel Wagner, NOAA Papahanaumokuakea Marine National Monument.

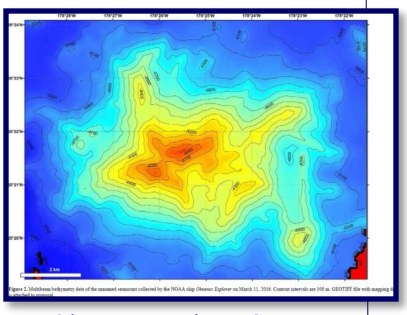
Continued on the next page.

ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON UNDERSEA FEATURES

Actions, activities & issues continued

Details of the Okeanos Explorer Seamount Undersea Feature

- Okeanos Explorer Seamount; located in the northern Pacific Ocean, Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, approx. 170nm south of Midway Islands.
- Coordinate of least depth: 25° 21′ 37″N, 178° 25′ 30″W.
- Total Relief: approx. 1,436m; max depth, approx. 5,330m; min depth, approx. 3,894m.
- Submitted by Dr. Daniel Wagner, NOAA Papahanaumokuakea Marine National Monument.



Okeanos Explorer Seamount, from the R/V Okeanos Explorer multibeam survey data, shown above.

Bathymetry Sources: Esri, DeLorme, GEBCO, NOAA NGDC, and other contributors, shown at left.

Details of the Savaqatigiik Seamount Undersea Feature

"Savaqatigiik" means "cooperation" in the Inupiak dialect of Alaska. Savaqatigiik Seamount was discovered on a U.S.-Canadian collaborative mission with support from the native community. The name represents the cooperation and collaboration needed to discover the feature as well as respect for the native community.

- Savaqatigiik Seamount; located in the Northern Canada Basin, Arctic Ocean.
- Coordinate of least depth: 81° 31′ 34″N, 134° 28′ 48″W.
- Total Relief: 1,132m; max depth, 3,770m; min depth, 2,638m.
- Submitted by Andy Armstrong, NOAA Joint Hydrographic Center, University of New Hampshire, Durham, New Hampshire; Larry Mayer, Center for Coastal and Ocean Mapping, University of New Hampshire, Durham, New Hampshire; and David Mosher, Natural Resources Canada, Canadian Geological Survey-Atlantic, Bedford Institute of Oceanography, Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, Canada.

SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON COMMUNICATIONS

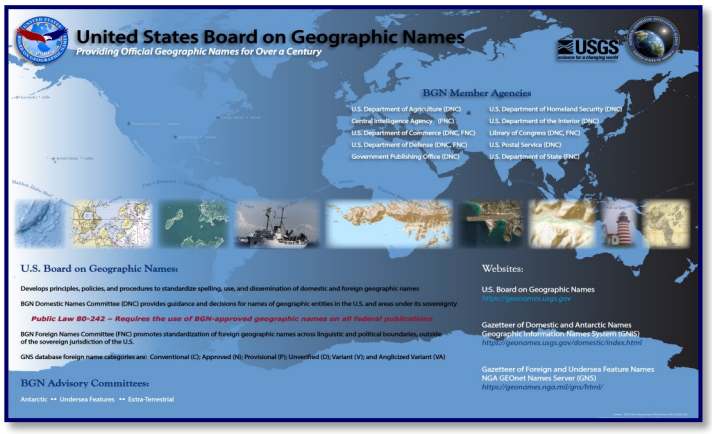
Activities

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 three times in FY17. The SCC was chaired by Mr. Douglas Caldwell (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers) and Ms. Jacqueline Nolan (Library of Congress). Ms. Brenda-Anne "B.C." Forrest (Government Publishing Office) served as Vice Chair.

Activities

The SCC approved a reformatted version of the 2016 DNC Principles, Policies, and Procedures (PPP) document that conforms to the Government Publishing Office (GPO) style manual, for use electronically. Also, the current version of the PPP, which lists the heading, "1997 Policy X. Tribal Geographic Names (Interim)," provides a web link to "Policy X. Names of Native American Origin" that has been extracted from the 1997 version of the PPP. BGN members are developing an implementation plan for "Policy X. Tribal Names (Interim)." Editorial changes to the PPP are handled by the SCC, through its interest in BGN documents and informational materials, while retaining the content and meaning approved by the Secretary of the Interior.

In FY17, the SCC prepared a promotional poster about the BGN that members used in Federal presentations at national and international events. The poster detailed BGN's 10 member agencies, two standing committees, three advisory committees, and related database websites (poster is shown at right).



The SCC continues to edit a publication chronicling the DNC's history from 1990 to 2015. This publication will supplement Donald Orth's original publication, "United States Board on Geographic Names, 1890–1990 100 Years of Service, Diary of Actions, Policies, and Events: 1890–1990." Based on the minutes of DNC meetings, the publication documents key events, decisions, and policies. Publication is expected in 2018.

BGN COMMITTEES
And department members

Full Board (Standing)

Chair: Tony N. Gilbert
Government Publishing Office

Vice Chair: Leo Dillon
Department of State

Executive Secretary for Domestic Names:
Lou Yost
U.S. Geological Survey

Executive Secretary for Foreign Names:
Trent Palmer
National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency

Executive Committee (Standing)

Chair: Leo Dillon
Vice Chair, BGN Full Board
Department of State

Members:

Tony N. Gilbert
Chair, BGN Full Board
Government Publishing Office

Lou Yost
Executive Secretary for Domestic Names
U.S. Geological Survey

Trent Palmer
Executive Secretary for Foreign Names
National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency

Elizabeth K. Kanalley
Chair, Domestic Names Committee
U.S. Forest Service

Leo Dillon
Chair, Foreign Names Committee
Department of State

Domestic Names Committee (Standing)

Chair: Elizabeth K. Kanalley
U.S. Forest Service

Vice Chair: Andrew H. Flora
Bureau of the Census

Foreign Names Committee (Standing)

Chair: Leo Dillon
Department of State

Vice Chair: Bruce Johnson
Library of Congress

Advisory Committee on Antarctic Names (Advisory)

Chair: Dr. Scott Borg
National Science Foundation

Secretary: Roger Payne
USGS, retired

Advisory Committee on Undersea Feature Names (Advisory)

Chair: Gerald Walter
National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency

Secretary: Jimmy Nerantzis
National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency

Representative to International Astronomical Union

Rose Hayward, Secretary
U.S. Geological Survey

Special Communications Committee

Chair (until July): Douglas Caldwell
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

Chair (in July): Jacqueline Nolan
Library of Congress

Vice Chair: Brenda-Anne C. Forrest
Government Publishing Office

Department Members For October 2015–2017 Term

Department of Agriculture
(Domestic Names)
Member: Emilee Blount
U.S. Forest Service

Central Intelligence Agency
(Foreign Names)
Member: R. David Wert

Department of Commerce
(Domestic Names and Foreign Names)
Member: Tara Wallace
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

Department of Defense
(Domestic Names and Foreign Names)
Member: Douglas Caldwell
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

Government Publishing Office
(Domestic Names)
Member: Tony N. Gilbert

Department of Homeland Security
(Domestic Names)
Member: Eric Berman
Federal Emergency Management Agency

Department of the Interior
(Domestic Names)
Member: Michael Tischler
U.S. Geological Survey

Library of Congress
(Domestic Names and Foreign Names)
Member: Ralph Ehrenberg

U.S. Postal Service
(Domestic Names)
Member: Gail L. Milton

Department of State
(Foreign Names)
Member: Leo Dillon

For a complete list of BGN Members and Deputy Members, see http://geonames.usgs.gov/domestic/member_directory.htm.

FULL BOARD
Activities & issues

The Full Board of the U.S. Board on Geographic Names is composed of voting members from six Cabinet-level departments, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Government Publishing Office, the Library of Congress, and the Postal Service. Mr. Tony N. Gilbert (Government Publishing Office) served as Chair of the Full Board in FY17. The BGN Full Board is scheduled to meet on a quarterly basis, and in FY17 met two times.

Activities

The Full Board of the BGN continues to serve our Nation by maintaining and promoting the standardization of geographic names in cooperation with international naming authorities, State Names Authorities, American native entities, and local communities.

Issues

Reduced staff and resources hamper the BGN's ability to fully address the demand for standardized geographic names. Due to budget and travel restrictions, the ability to coordinate names standardization activities has been limited.

RESOURCES
For your information

To access the BGN website, enter *http://geonames.usgs.gov* into a web browser. The website contains links for Domestic, Foreign, Antarctic, and Undersea Features Names, as well as a member directory, brochures, and fact sheets. Links to other resources, such as the Principles, Policies, and Procedures document, Review Lists, Meeting Minutes, Frequently Asked Questions, the GNIS database, and the GNDB database, can also be found on the BGN website.

Twin Falls in Rockingham, Vermont.
Name approved by BGN in October 2016.
Photography by Peter Bergstrom.

Tony N. Gilbert, Chair
United States Board on Geographic Names