

# COGNA 2009 State /Federal Roundtable Minutes

## Thursday, September 10, 2009

The morning session was devoted to individually represented states summarizing geographic name activities in their state.

Oklahoma – Mr. Wayne Furr reported one case had been completed and one was pending. One county had sent in a proposal to rename a creek but on investigation the name in the GNIS was for the valley with the stream name added during the Phase II update without coordinates or other identifying information. The proposed name also appeared some 70 times throughout Oklahoma. A letter was sent to the County Commissioners explaining the problems asking for a different name and if the new name should be applied to both the valley and the stream. The Oklahoma Board has received no response.

Oregon – Mr. Champ Vaughn said the biggest Oregon focus is in replacement names for the squaw word. The Oregon Board has an interim committee that does all of the work then presents the information to the state board which meets only twice a year.

Missouri – Mr. Chris Barnett reported that the Missouri Board recently obtained statutory status as a board under the purview of the Secretary of State Office. This allows the MOBGN to receive grant monies to perform names activities. The MOBGN meets twice a year with generally 90 – 95 percent attendance of their 21 members who come from Federal and state agencies as well as academia and private individuals as well. Members are physically located in all areas of Missouri.

Colorado – Mr. Dave Wolfe reported that the Colorado Board exists at the State Archives. Their board recently adopted the first Colorado policy. The Colorado Board is conservative in applying new names. *See attachment.*

New Mexico – Mr. Bob Julian reported that geographic naming activity is typically slow for receiving proposals. He also mentioned that they are administering a GNIS Stewardship program. In addition, he reported that he had an inquiry from a U. S. Senator about naming a New National Conservation Area in New Mexico and was pleased that the senator was actually asking for directions about what type of name to use.

Utah – Mr. Dan White reported that Utah was busy with proposed names in the last year. A Native American Committee has been formed. This is not part of the Committee on Geographic names; it is a Legislative Liaison Committee to study a request from Utah Native Americans to eliminate the word Squaw from Utah names. Executive Secretary Susan Whetstone retired in February and was replaced by Arie LeeFlang of State History.

Idaho – Mr. Dan White reported that there were and are several geographic names being considered in Idaho. Mr. Michael Ciscell, Idaho Department of Water Resources became a new member of the Council

Wyoming – Mr. Dan White said that Wyoming holds their meeting by phone for members who cannot attend in person. Six proposals in Yellowstone National Park removed from the active list per Ms. Runyon's (U.S. Board) e-mail of April 16, 2009. One issue waiting on proponent to justify naming a feature within a wilderness area and one issue that has not been submitted to the U.S. Board due to waiting on response from the land owner.

Arizona- Ms. Julie Hoff said that the Arizona Board dealt with four names this year and thanked Mr. Chick Fagan, National Park Service, for establishing a naming committee in the Grand Canyon National Park. She also reported that the Board is dealing with their 10-year sunset review and changes to its statute.

Tennessee – Mr. Greg March indicated that as the new and only authority for Tennessee he is looking forward to establishing a multi-member committee and is asking for guidance.

Washington – Mr. Grant Smith indicated that the Washington Board was having problems with funding because of the state budget. All Washington Board staff has been eliminated and that they have no funding for meetings. The Washington Board is presently dealing with the Salish Sea proposal which also involves the Canadian Authorities. The Salish Sea is being recognized as an ecoregion.

North Carolina – Mr. Steve Strader mentioned that the North Carolina Board on Geographic Names (BGN) is a working group of the North Carolina Statewide Mapping Advisory Committee (SMAC) which is a sub-committee of the North Carolina Geographic Information Coordination Council (GICC) <<http://www.ncgicc.org>>. The board operates mainly through email and by phone. Geographic names activity in the state is relatively slow due to the small number of naming issues that come before the board. However, there is a significant local resolution Surface Waters Mapping Program in the state, <<http://www.ncstreams.net>>, for the statewide collection of surface waters at a local resolution. Phase 1, consisting of nineteen (19) counties in western North Carolina, has been completed. The Phase 1 data is in the process of being integrated into the National Hydrography Data Set (NHD). Geographic names data was not included in the Phase 1 collection. A clear path forward to add geographic names to the Phase 1 local resolution stream data has not been determined. The increase in named stream data in Phase 1 could be 600+ percent.

West Virginia – Mr. Paul Liston reported that West Virginia has responded to nearly a dozen proposed name changes.

Texas – Ms. Clare DeVaughan said that the Texas Board is very informal. They are currently dealing with a name change made to Austin's Town Lake. That name has been changed to Lady Bird Lake, but the problem is that Lady Bird Johnson died only two years ago. Clare also reported that the University of Alabama received the contract to update some records for Texas administrative features.

California – Mr. Jeff Chambers introduced himself as the newest member of the five-member California Advisory Committee on Geographic Names. They meet twice a year and have several names on which to make recommendations at each meeting.

Hawaii – Ms. Reneé Lewis said that the Hawaiian Board meets monthly. They are still working on the diacritical marks corrections to Hawaiian names and have approximately 260 new names to be submitted.

South Carolina – Mr. Tom Voss indicated that geographic naming activity in South Carolina is relatively quiet. In South Carolina as new communities develop from empty lands that have not been previously named that currently without a formal State Geographic Names Board that it is difficult to establish a procedure that is effective and “official” for naming these communities. The other problem is when the “new guys” with money don’t like the historic name, ie Frogmore on St Helena Island became St Helena Island because the “new guys” didn’t think it was classy enough! SCDOT was directed to change the name on our map by the DOT Commission. The state now has a statewide GIS coordinator who is familiar with GNIS and geographic names.

Louisiana – Mr. Chris Critini, USGS Liaison to Louisiana reported that there are several new and historical feature names along the coast due to recent hurricanes.

Alaska – Mr. Bob Francis said that the Alaska Board meets four times a year. It is well organized and quite busy. There was a mention of the nearly 300 Native Alaskan names for populated places on which they are working.

South Dakota – Mr. Tom Gasque reported that the South Dakota state legislature authorized the creation of a board to be composed of six members.

Canada – Ms. Jocelyne Revie reported that the Geographic Names Board of Canada have (she undoubtedly did say have, but I’d use has and it was flagged by the grammar checker – we don’t do that in this country, and we’ve got this one right) held discussions about aboriginal names and syllabics used in names and to show on maps. She said that if a name is approved by a Province, then name is official and will be shown. They are working on spatial characteristics for features and inputting this information into databases.

The second part of the State/Federal Roundtable addressed several issues.

Issue – How has the recent economic downturn affected SNA? Is there any less money for staff? Has staffing of SNAs changed over the years?

Staff has been cut. Sometimes the work is all volunteer depending on the board members. Many board members pay their own way to state meetings as well as COGNA. Some board members pay for staff salaries.

Issue – The online form at [http://geonames.usgs.gov/document/domestic/name\\_form.htm](http://geonames.usgs.gov/document/domestic/name_form.htm) is unclear defining the process. Is there a sunset date on the proposal if the requester does not respond to emails? Should there be a link for States with an active naming authority?

There is a sunset date to emails sent to proponents due to an incomplete or unclear proposal and that is three or four months. Oregon wanted to know how soon an SNA finds out that a proposal is incomplete. The SNA is always copied on the reply to the proponent indicating the status of the proposal – whether it is complete and will begin the processing or if more information is needed before processing may commence.

Proposals to the U.S. BGN MUST be dealt with by the U.S. BGN, but the Board and staff hope that the appropriate SNA will work on it as well. However, regardless, the Domestic Names Committee must eventually vote on it.

State Names Authorities (SNAs) with web pages and e-forms should have links to the BGN.

Issue – Use of typically hypsographic generic terms to refer to hydrographic features. In your toponymic and physical geography opinion, do the generic terms wash, coulee, arroyo, and gulch refer to: A) the water body that flows from point A to point B; B) the land feature through which water flows from point A to point B; C) a single feature that is a combination, or encompasses both of the above? Is it possible for the name of a feature with the generic terms wash, coulee, draw, arroyo, or gulch to refer to: A) both features separately (in other words Green Draw flows through Green Draw); B) the combined feature since most of these generic types don't have water in them all the time?

The same generic can and does refer to different feature classes. SNAs can change feature classes if necessary. The same name could be applied to the hypsographic and the hydrographic features BUT if the name is not on an approved published source then the BGN process needs to be followed.

Issue – Clarification is needed as to which Federal agency or agencies have the authority to designate and name features such as post offices or populated places.

Unincorporated communities like crossroads or communities that have no governing body must go through the full naming process unless these are platted communities recognized by the county. No Federal agency has the authority to name a [natural] feature.

Issue – At the Federal level, when the U.S. Postal Service names features, are those feature names added to GNIS?

Yes, but only names of buildings. However, once a post office is named, the name is often used for the surrounding populated place locally.

Issue – On what basis should the Domestic Names Committee reverse the decision of SNAs? If we see consistency and the use of one name for one feature (univocity), then the DNC must set precedents and establish policies. However, who has the most reliable information in deciding dominant local usage or in judging conflicting claims about the local history or a region? How can we develop a better understanding of the common distinction between policy oversight and the implementation of those policies? At a recent COGNA Conference an agreement was made that if DNC was going to vote against the SNA's recommendation, the DNC would contact the chairperson of that SNA, and allow them one month (until the next DNC meeting) to bolster the State's position, clarify the minutes, and provide the DNC with more information. There have been DNC votes since that agreement where this notification and deferral (one month) has not happened. This should be revisited and a more firm commitment be made to this practice.

The DNC will do everything to agree with an SNA and may defer or phone an SNA but there will be no notifying an SNA that the DNC will go against an SNA

because it is not know until the actual vote occurs, and the DNC will not delay in making official the results of the DNC's vote.

Issue – How does the US Board define “historically significant”?

BGN has no definition BUT is reluctant to change a name for historical accuracy. US BGN is VERY RELUCTANT to change a name.

Issue – Are there guidelines for naming areas that might or might not be defined by natural boundaries?

[Question refers to a populated place that wanted a name XXX Valley which was located within part of a valley. The questioner wanted to know if there is anything like a boundary for natural features.]

No, but GNIS will be spatially enabled when it becomes integrated with The National Map, but even so, algorithms for defining natural features (especially hypsographic features) are vague or non-existent.

Issue – Features named by a local administrative authority. When a feature is named by a local administrative authority, lies entirely within one State, has been in local use for an extended time, and the name does not follow policies (as set forth in Principles, Policies, & Procedures), why is it not possible to place this name in GNIS as unofficial?

If a State administering authority names a natural feature that may differ from GNIS then this needs to be submitted to the US BGN. If the name is already in GNIS then the name would go in as a variant. If it is unnamed and violates the PPPs, then it can go into GNIS as XXX (not official)

Issue – Wild abbreviations I have known (with apologies to author Ernest Thompson Seton). This is in relation to the decision of DNC not to use the abbreviations for Saint, Mount, and African Methodist Episcopal in church names, even though these abbreviations are predominantly used by churches in this country. The perpetually punished apostrophe. This refers to the isolationist stance of the DNC with regard to the use of the genitive apostrophe.

For cultural features the DNC appears to be much more receptive to the genitive apostrophe according to Curt Loy. Abbreviations and acronyms MUST be spelled out because GNIS is a gazetteer and gazetteers' “official” form is spelled out. Administrative names can use the genitive apostrophe. If an acronym has become an accepted word then it doesn't have to be spelled out. Abbreviations can be used on maps and in published products but the official name is still spelled out.

Issue – Question about name change policy: Regarding the discussion about Ira Spring Mountain, what is the threshold to change an existing name for a feature? According to Principles, Policies, & Procedures, name changes may be requested “for commemorative

or other reasons important to the proposer.” However, the policies do not encourage changes and only mention changes in situations dealing with local usage, derogatory names, and duplicate names. How are commemorative name changes currently processed at the State level, and how should they be processed at the DNC level?

SNAs are reluctant to change commemorative names.

Issue – Problems & issues related to name duplication – what might not be confusing to local people might be confusing to Federal officials when asked to assist in an area such as response to an emergency such as Hurricane Katrina. There are differences in spelling *versus* pronunciation such as Longcreek and Long Creek, which are not considered duplicative by the DNC. In a different context, cities such as Chattanooga, Tennessee, are being sued because of a problem of similar sounding street names and that impact on 911 responses. If this is a documented matter of safety with street names, should it be considered a matter of safety with names under the purview of the DNC? Distance – according to Principles, Policies, & Procedures (published at the website) “Names proposed for unnamed geographic features that duplicate another name in the State or nearby in an adjoining State will not normally be approved by the U. S. Board on Geographic Names.” The Board has been using the standard of avoiding duplicate names within a county while rejecting names which are close in different counties. Recently, the Board denied a proposal for Davis Lake where the name was in use since the 1950s and was not considered ambiguous locally, although it was in the same county as another feature named Davis Lake approximately 11 miles distant. What should be the role of local usage *versus* larger safety problems in establishing duplication rules based upon distance? The many Peachtree names in Atlanta give local residents a headache! Is the problem the same for lakes and peaks? If the local folk indicate it is not confusing, can the DNC tell them it is confusing, or could be confusing? Or do local people really think of the consequences when they are asked to consider a name? Is the DNC’s job to put the possibility that name duplication can be problematic into the minds of the local folk, or should the DNC staff need to seek direction from 911 officials directly? What if recommendations of 911 officials differ from the County Commissioners? Do SNAs that contact counties ask these questions?

Should the DNC and SNA override local usage especially in case of safety issues? 911 names are mandated by the Feds. BGN staff should inform counties if a proposed name is a duplicate.

Issue – How can COGNA facilitate the creation of a State Board in States that only have one or two people acting as the State Names Authority? Can COGNA do anything when a strong chair or executive secretary of State Boards leaves and the Board seems to become weakened, less responsive, and without direction; or the strong chairman does not involve the [State] board in [State Board] decisions?

The Executive Secretary of COGNA could write letters to State governments and legislatures to support reappointments or re-establishments and creations of SNAs. COGNA could create a subcommittee with members from well established and organized

state boards. The FGDC 50 States Initiative has grants to develop strategic plans within a state to develop geographic programs.

Issue – How long should it take for SNAs to process proposals? For one particular proposal, one member of that particular SNA has indicated that “one will take as long as one needs.” How long should the DNC and its staff wait for a recommendation from the SNA before proceeding? Should the rules be different for “formal” SNAs with meeting schedules *versus ad hoc* SNAs, that is, ones with single advisors or multiple advisors that do not coordinate, etc?

Give SNAs at least a year BUT remind them if they take too long.

Issue – How do SNAs interact with their local governments to get their input?

Answers were very mixed.

Issue – How do SNAs decide what types of features they name? Do they name natural features only, or a mix of natural and manmade features? Does the SNA’s organic instrument (Executive Order or statute), define what it can name?

Answer from states is mixed.

Issue – The Roman alphabet: use of diacritical marks and other special marks in geographic names. DNC now accepts all marks in any Roman alphabet as well as some special writing marks. There are proposals for geographic names in indigenous languages that use characters not in the Roman alphabet – what is the policy?

SNAs want to know what characters constitute the Roman alphabet. They want to get a definition of syllabics.

Issue – Must tribal nations, as sovereign nations, submit new name proposals and changes to state boards first, or can they submit directly to the US Board?

Either way. If a feature is totally on Federally recognized Tribal lands, then the SNAs are informed as an interested party and asked for an opinion due to their toponymic experience and expertise. It is likely that if a State recommends something contrary to that of the Tribal Council, the SNA recommendation would perhaps not be followed.

Minutes taken by Jane Messenger

*Attachment: Colorado New Geographic Name Policy*

**BACKGROUND.** Historically, features were named because there was a need to refer to the feature for navigation or other reference purposes, and applying a name to a feature was more concise than describing the feature in other ways, such as its latitude/longitude or other descriptive means. Lately there has been considerable interest in using natural features to memorialize a name, and names are being applied to features not because the feature needs a name but because the name needs a feature. A common example of this practice has been commemorative names, in which the name of a person is applied to a feature.

The US Board on Geographic Names (USBGN) has standards for the recognition of names commemorating a specific person that have been used successfully for some time. They require a definite association between the person to be commemorated and the feature that will carry the name. For persons of national or international fame, there need not necessarily be an association between the person and the feature, but most commemorative names are for locally known persons whose names are applied to locally known features.

Beyond commemorating noteworthy persons, there have recently been a number of proposals to commemorate wholesome and worthwhile concepts, ideals, organizations, events, etc. Local public approval of these name applications is almost automatic, but it is probable that the public is merely acknowledging the worthiness of the subject of the name, with far less thought given to its appropriateness as a geographic name. Opposing these geographic name applications can be politically uncomfortable, as it can be construed as opposing the subject matter.

Furthermore, the mountains of Colorado, many which remain unnamed, are a magnet for new name proposals. People with an admirable name in search of a feature to carry the name find Colorado to be a bountiful source of suitable (to them) features.

The Colorado Board on Geographic Names believes that it should be conservative in approving new names for unnamed features or changing the name of an existing feature. It believes there should be good reason to name or rename such features beyond the fact that the subject of a name is admirable. Given that the proposals described above usually do not have a direct association with the feature to be named/renamed, it would be helpful to establish other criteria for judging the suitability of these proposals so that simply proposing such a name does not guarantee approval. This policy addresses that issue. It does not apply to proposals to recognize feature names that are in public use but which have not yet been recognized as official by the USBGN.

**POLICY: NAME PROPOSALS COMMEMORATING CONCEPTS, IDEALS, ORGANIZATIONS, GROUPS, EVENTS, ETC., AND NATIONALLY FAMOUS PERSONS.**

The Colorado Board on Geographic Names will approve a proposal to name an unnamed

feature for, or to change the name of a feature to, concepts, ideals, and other intangibles, and events, organizations and persons that have broad public appeal or fame outside the state of Colorado only if the proponent demonstrates either (1) a direct association between the name and the feature, or (2) approval of the name application by the general public both within and outside the state of Colorado. Proponents are encouraged to also demonstrate that naming a geographic feature is the most suitable way to commemorate the subject and that the subject has not already been suitably commemorated by other means, such as monuments, named institutions, etc.

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