

FactSheet 16: Proposing a New Name or a Name Change for a Geographic Feature in the U.S.



Prepared by the Maryland Geological Survey ♦ 2300 St. Paul Street ♦ Baltimore, MD 21218

The Maryland Geological Survey is sometimes asked how to go about officially naming a geographic feature, such as a stream, lake, wetland, or hill. There is an established authority and a set procedure to follow for proposing a name or a name change to such features.

The **U.S. Board on Geographic Names (BGN)** is authorized to establish and maintain uniform geographic name usage throughout the Federal Government. It is part of the U.S. Geological Survey, and its decisions are binding on all Federal agencies. The individual States generally follow suit. Any person or organization, public or private, may make inquiries or request the Board to render formal decisions on proposed new names, name changes, or name conflicts.

If you want to propose a name or name change, start by going to the Board's website at <http://geonames.usgs.gov/bgn.html>. There, you will find several links to follow.

- [principles, policies, and procedures](#): The Board has developed principles, policies, and procedures governing the use of both domestic and foreign geographic names as well as underseas and Antarctic feature names. Although established to serve the Federal Government as a central authority to which all name problems, name inquiries, and new name proposals can be directed, the Board also plays a similar role for the general public.

The full document is 47 pages long, and one should be generally familiar with the content. Perhaps the most important parts are:

- Chapter 1, Introduction
- Chapter 4, Guidelines for proposing names
- Chapter 4, Procedure for a name for an unnamed feature
- [Propose a new name or a name change](#): This link takes you to the forms you will need to complete your proposal. There is a choice of an online version or a pdf version to print and complete later.
- [Review active dockets](#): Your proposal will be placed on a docket for review by all interested parties.
- [Read minutes of the monthly meeting](#): Minutes of the Board's Domestic Names Committee's meetings are available.

Once a name is established, it is entered into the Geographic Names Information System (GNIS). The GNIS contains information about almost 2 million physical and cultural geographic features in the United States and its territories. The Federally recognized name of each feature described in the database is identified, and references are made to a feature's location by State, county, and geographic coordinates. The GNIS is our Nation's official repository of domestic geographic names information. Anyone may search the database by going to <http://geonames.usgs.gov>, then clicking on "Query GNIS."

Communications concerning the Board, domestic geographic names, or names in Antarctica should be addressed to:

Roger L. Payne
Executive Secretary
U.S. Board on Geographic Names
U.S. Geological Survey
12201 Sunrise Valley Drive
523 National Center
Reston, Virginia 20192