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Trump Administration Actions: Geographical Naming

In President Trump’s second inaugural speech, he stated that his Administration would change the name of the Gulf of Mexico to the Gulf of America and return the name of Denali in Alaska to Mount McKinley. On January 20, 2025, President Trump signed the executive order (E.O.), “Restoring Names That Honor American Greatness” to rename those bodies and to guide future policy regarding the federal process for establishing geographic names.

Generally, the process for federal renaming of geographical features involves public petition to the U.S. Board on Geographical Names (BGN) for consideration on an individual basis. However, under previous Administrations, the Secretary of the Interior (Secretary) has issued secretarial orders (S.O.s) to change the name of geographic features for federal use, including for Denali in 2017 (S.O. 3337). Congress also has enacted legislation establishing or changing geographical names. This In Focus describes the BGN and its role in renaming federal geographic features, the E.O. and its potential implications, and potential issues for Congress. An issue for Congress is whether to adjust current authorities related to federal geographic names and, if so, what type of changes to pursue.

U.S. Board on Geographical Names

In 1947, P.L. 80-242 (43 U.S.C. §§364-364f) formally authorized the BGN. The BGN is composed of representatives of various federal agencies to establish and maintain uniform geographic name usage throughout the federal government. The Secretary, jointly with the BGN, is to provide for uniformity in geographic nomenclature throughout the federal government. The BGN is tasked with solving name discrepancies; approving new names; validating and recording existing names; and promulgating all official names. The BGN performs these duties through its committees, such as the Domestic Names Committee (DNC) and the Foreign Names Committee (FNC). **Table 1** describes these committee structures and duties. The committees meet to decide on geographic name issues, pursuant to their principles, policies, and procedures.

Any individual or agency may submit a proposal to the BGN to change an existing name; the proposal must include reasons why and a proposed replacement name. Under its current policy for domestic names, the DNC recognizes two classes of name changes: (1) those made to bring official federal usage into agreement with established local usage and (2) those made to eliminate potential name issues (e.g., names asserted to be offensive). DNC policies state that no decision will be made on any proposal that is also being considered by Congress. In its current policy, the FNC states that it does not encourage, but occasionally receives, geographic names proposals, which it addresses, as

appropriate. With some exceptions, the BGN considers name changes on a case-by-case basis.

Table 1. Information for Selected Board on Geographical Names Committees

Feature	DNC	FNC
Geographic Domain	Geographic names in the 50 states and in other areas under U.S. sovereignty, including U.S. territorial waters	Foreign geographic names, including oceans and seas but excluding Antarctica
Members	Departments of the Interior, Commerce, Agriculture, Defense, and Homeland Security; U.S. Postal Service; Government Publishing Office; and Library of Congress	Departments of Commerce, Defense, Homeland Security, and State; Central Intelligence Agency; Library of Congress
Official Database	Geographic Names Information System	Geographic Names Server
Agency for Staff Support	U.S. Geological Survey	National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency

Sources: DNC, Principles, Policies, and Procedures, December 2016; and FNC, Principles, Policies, and Procedures, September 2024.

Notes: DNC = Domestic Names Committee. FNC = Foreign Names Committee. Does not include BGN committees on Antarctic Names and Undersea Features. The BGN is not responsible for names applying to “offices or establishments” of federal agencies.

Executive Order Implementation

Gulf of America and Mount McKinley. Citing 43 U.S. Code §§364-364f, President Trump’s E.O. directs the Secretary to take all appropriate actions within 30 days to rename the respective features described in the E.O. as the Gulf of America and Mount McKinley. The E.O. directs the Secretary to then update the official geographic names databases (see **Table 1**) to reflect these renamings and remove all references to the previous names from the databases, consistent with applicable law. The E.O. directs the BGN to provide guidance to ensure all federal references, including on agency maps, contracts, and other documents and communications, reflect these renamings.

Geographic place names set forth by the BGN apply only to the standardization of federal publications. Administrative decisions by the BGN and other executive actions pertaining to geographic name changes do not apply in an international context. For example, the BGN has previously determined that the *Sea of Japan* is the appropriate standard

name for the body of water separating the Korean Peninsula and the Japanese Archipelago. However, the Republic of Korea historically has objected to the name and instead refers to this body of water as the *East Sea*. Similar disputes could arise surrounding the naming of the Gulf of America. To address such discrepancies, the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN)—an international body established by the U.N. Economic and Social Council—has issued a resolution indicating that “when countries sharing a given geographical feature do not succeed in agreeing on a common name ... the name used by each of the countries concerned will be accepted” (Resolution II/25). As such, depending on the context, one or both of the “Gulf of America” and “Gulf of Mexico” may appear on international maps or publications.

Similarly, BGN decisions are not required to be adopted for nonfederal domestic publications. For decades, the Alaska state government has used Denali in place of Mount McKinley on state publications and maps. The recent E.O. would not mandate changes to the usage of Denali by the State of Alaska. Private companies such as Google Maps and Apple Maps would similarly be unaffected by the E.O. Despite this, some nonfederal entities may choose to adopt BGN naming conventions moving forward.

BGN Membership. President Trump’s E.O. directs the Secretary and appropriate agencies to review appointments to the BGN. Within seven days of the E.O., each agency head with authority to appoint members to the BGN is to review their respective appointees and consider replacing those appointees in accordance with applicable law. The E.O. also directs the Secretary to review and consider additional appointments to the BGN to assist in fulfilling the directives of the E.O. Members of the BGN are to serve two-year terms but may be reappointed to successive terms (43 U.S.C. §364a).

Commemorative Naming and BGN Policies. President Trump’s E.O. directs the BGN to advance a policy to honor “the contributions of visionary and patriotic Americans in our Nation’s rich past” by “the naming of our national treasures.” The E.O. further specifies that the BGN “may update its principles, policies, and procedures as needed to achieve this policy.” Current DNC policies require commemorative name proposals to generally meet the same basic criteria required of other name proposals (i.e., limited to discrepancies between federal and local usage and/or elimination of particular name issues). In addition, DNC policy limits commemorative naming to individuals who have been deceased at least five years. As such, depending on the nature of BGN’s responses to the E.O., BGN current policies may or may not need to be updated. For example, if the BGN were to opt into considering naming proposals that would commemorate a living individual, or change an existing published name that has well-established local usage, its policies likely would need to be updated.

For features that cross the Canadian border, DNC policy mandates that the BGN coordinate such proposals with the appropriate foreign names authority pursuant to an agreement signed in 1989 (*Treatment of Names of Geographical Features Shared by the United States and*

Canada). No equivalent agreement with Mexico has been signed; however, current DNC procedures specify that the BGN should similarly coordinate proposals for features crossing the Mexican border with the relevant naming authority in that country (DNC, *Principles, Policies, and Procedures*, p.48).

Issues for Congress

In certain instances, recommendations for geographic name changes submitted to the BGN would require an act of Congress to effectuate such a change. In particular, the BGN generally does not have the authority to change geographic names of federal land units named and established by Congress. For example, in 1980, Congress changed the name of the national park and preserve where the mountain is located as Denali National Park and Preserve, from its earlier name of Mt. McKinley National Park (P.L. 96-487). The E.O. specifies that the park area surrounding Mount McKinley “shall retain the name Denali National Park and Preserve.” Considerations to change the name of this land unit would likely require an act of Congress.

At times, Congress also has directed the BGN to make certain name changes or has considered legislation to codify certain BGN decisions. For example, P.L. 117-358 directed the BGN to rename a volcanic peak in Alaska known as *Mount Cerberus* to *Mount Young* in commemoration of the late Representative Don Young. In addition, legislation has been introduced in multiple Congresses to address the naming of Mt. McKinley/Denali (S. 2272 in the 112th Congress, H.R. 402 in the 113th Congress, and S. 319 in the 114th Congress). Past Water Resources Development Acts also have renamed federal reservoirs, locks, and dams, which the BGN records, to commemorate certain public individuals. Legislation has been introduced in the 119th Congress to rename the Gulf of Mexico as the Gulf of America (H.R. 276).

Legislation introduced in previous Congresses have diverged in their intent and approaches related to adjustments of BGN authorities or directives. For example, the Reconciliation in Place Names Act (S. 2400/H.R. 4454), in the 117th Congress, would have directed the Secretary to establish a committee to advise the BGN on proposals for revising geographic feature names considered offensive or derogatory. The legislation also would have defined what constitutes an “offensive place name” and would have established various timelines and reporting requirements for consideration of potential geographic name changes. In the 118th Congress, the Preserve Geographic Names Act (H.R. 7303) would have removed the BGN’s authorization while retaining the overall authority of the Secretary to provide for federal uniformity of geographic names. Congress also previously has considered proposals to prohibit funding to the BGN in appropriations laws (e.g., H.Amdt. 1152/H.Amdt. 549 in the 118th Congress).

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