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Trump Administration Actions: Geographic Naming

On January 20, 2025, President Trump signed Executive Order (E.O.) 14172, “Restoring Names That Honor American Greatness,” to change the name of the Gulf of Mexico to the Gulf of America, reinstate the name of Mount McKinley in Alaska from Denali, and guide future policy regarding the federal process for establishing geographic names.

Generally, the process for federal naming or renaming of geographic features involves public petition to the U.S. Board on Geographic Names (BGN) for consideration on an individual basis. The BGN performs its duties through committees, such as the Domestic Names Committee (DNC) and the Foreign Names Committee (FNC). Additionally, under previous Administrations, the Secretary of the Interior (Secretary) has directed the name change of geographic features for federal use, including for Denali in 2017 (Secretarial Order [S.O.] 3337). Congress also has enacted legislation establishing or changing geographic names. This In Focus describes the BGN and its role in federal nomenclature of geographic features, the E.O. and its implementation and potential implications, and issues for Congress.

U.S. Board on Geographic Names

In 1947, P.L. 80-242 (43 U.S.C. §§364-364f) formally authorized the BGN. The BGN comprises representatives of various federal agencies. The Secretary, jointly with the BGN, provides 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. **Table 1** describes the DNC and FNC committee structures and duties. The committees meet to decide on geographic name issues pursuant to their principles, policies, and procedures.

With some exceptions, the BGN considers name proposals on a case-by-case basis. Any individual or agency may submit a proposal to the BGN to change an existing name or to establish a new name for unnamed features; however, FNC policy states that it does not encourage proposals for foreign geographic names. When the FNC does receive foreign name proposals, “FNC staff and the Committee addresses them, as appropriate.” For domestic names, DNC policy 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 or duplicate names). DNC policy states that no decision will be made on any proposal that is also being considered by Congress.

Table 1. Information for Selected Board on Geographic Names (BGN) 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; 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.

Executive Order Implementation

Gulf of America and Mount McKinley. Citing 43 U.S.C. §§364-364f, President Trump’s E.O. directs the Secretary to take all appropriate actions within 30 days to rename the features described in the E.O. as Mount McKinley (Section 3) and Gulf of America (Section 4). The E.O. then directs the Secretary to update the Geographic Names Information System (GNIS) to reflect these renamings and to remove all references to the previous names, 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 the Gulf of America renaming.

On February 7, 2025, the Secretary issued S.O. 3423 directing the BGN to rename the Gulf of Mexico to the Gulf of America and to update the GNIS to appropriately reflect the change. The GNIS and the Geographic Names Server now list the name as the Gulf of America. On February 14, 2025, the Secretary issued S.O. 3424 directing the BGN to reinstate the name Mount McKinley and update the GNIS. The GNIS now identifies the summit as Mount McKinley. The S.O. also directs department entities to work with Alaska Native entities and nonfederal

organizations to “pursue adopting names for landmarks to honor the history and culture of Alaskan people.”

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 necessarily 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 United Nations 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). Thus, 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 entities. For example, the E.O. does not require private company applications (such as Google Maps and Apple Maps) or other nonfederal entities to adopt the changed names; however, some nonfederal entities have chosen to do so or generally defer to GNIS nomenclature. Whether or to what degree nonfederal publications adopt the name changes resulting from E.O. 14172 has raised issues and concerns both domestically and internationally.

BGN Membership. BGN members serve two-year terms but may be reappointed to successive terms (43 U.S.C. §364a). Section 2 of the 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 BGN members was to review their respective appointees and consider replacing those appointees in accordance with applicable law. The E.O. directs the Secretary to review and consider additional BGN appointments to assist in fulfilling the directives of the E.O. As of February 20, 2025, CRS has not identified announcements regarding changes to BGN membership.

Commemorative Naming and BGN Policies. Section 1 of the 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.” Section 5 states that the Secretary may solicit input regarding additional commemorative naming and is to recommend action to the Assistant to the President for Domestic Policy. Section 2 further specifies that the BGN “may update its principles, policies, and procedures as needed to achieve this policy.”

DNC policy generally requires commemorative name proposals to meet the same basic criteria required of other name proposals. DNC policy also limits commemorative

naming to individuals who have been deceased at least five years. 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, DNC procedures specify that the BGN should coordinate proposals for features crossing the Mexican border with the relevant naming authority (i.e., Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía).

Issues for Congress

In certain instances, geographic name changes require an act of Congress. 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 to Denali National Park and Preserve, from its earlier name of Mount 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.” Changing the name of this land unit would likely require an act of Congress.

At times, Congress has directed the BGN to make name changes or has considered legislation to codify certain geographic names. 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 Mount McKinley/Denali (e.g., S. 2272 in the 112th Congress, H.R. 402 in the 113th Congress, S. 319 in the 114th Congress). On February 13, 2025, legislation was introduced to, once again, designate the mountain as Denali (S. 573). Also, apart from E.O. 14172, the House of Representatives passed H.R. 276 on May 8, 2025, which, if enacted, would codify the name Gulf of America for federal use.

Previous Congresses have differed in their 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 policies 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 Secretary’s authority 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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