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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, return the name of Denali in Alaska to Mount McKinley, 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 (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, its committees’ DNC and FNC stated policies, the E.O. and its potential implications, and issues for Congress. An issue for Congress is whether to adjust authorities related to federal geographic names and, if so, what type of changes to pursue.

## U.S. Board on Geographic 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. **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.

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. Under its 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 or duplicate names). DNC policy states that no decision will be made on any proposal that is also being considered by Congress. In its 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 proposals on a case-by-case basis.

**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 respective features described in the E.O. as Mount McKinley (Section 3) and Gulf of America (Section 4). The E.O. directs the Secretary to then update the Geographic Names Information System (GNIS) to reflect these renamings and 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 renaming of the Gulf of America.

On January 24, 2025, the Department of the Interior announced implementation of these renamings. On February 7, 2025, the Secretary of the Interior issued S.O. 3423 directing the BGN to immediately rename the Gulf of Mexico to the Gulf of America and to update the GNIS to appropriately reflect the change. The GNIS now lists the

name as the Gulf of America. As of February 11, 2025, no S.O. regarding renaming Mount McKinley has been publicly released, and the GNIS lists Denali.

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 UN 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 publications. For decades, the Alaska State government has used “Denali” in place of “Mount McKinley” on state publications and maps. The E.O. would not mandate changes to the usage of “Denali” by the State of Alaska. Similarly, the E.O. would not require private company applications, such as Google Maps and Apple Maps, to adopt the changed names. Nonfederal entities may choose to adopt BGN naming conventions moving forward.

**BGN Membership.** BGN members are to 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 11, 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 requires commemorative name proposals to generally meet the same basic criteria required of other name proposals. In addition, DNC policy limits commemorative naming to individuals

who have been deceased at least five years. Depending on the nature of BGN’s responses to the E.O., BGN policies may or may not 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, 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 would 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.” Considerations to change the name of this land unit would likely require an act of Congress.

At times, Congress has directed the BGN to make certain name changes or has considered legislation to codify certain naming 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 (e.g., S. 2272 in the 112<sup>th</sup> Congress, H.R. 402 in the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress, S. 319 in the 114<sup>th</sup> Congress). Past Water Resources Development Acts also have renamed federal reservoirs, which the BGN recorded in the GNIS, to commemorate certain public individuals. Prior to E.O. 14172, legislation was introduced in the 119<sup>th</sup> Congress to rename the Gulf of Mexico as the Gulf of America (H.R. 276).

Previous Congresses have diverged in their intents 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 117<sup>th</sup> 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 policies for consideration of potential geographic name changes. In the 118<sup>th</sup> 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 118<sup>th</sup> Congress).

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