

[EXTERNAL] U.S. BGN guidance: Cultural Sensitivity for Native American Names

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To: BGNEXEC, GS-N-MAC <bgnexec@usgs.gov>

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 1 attachments (164 KB)

Cultural Sensitivity for Native American Names.pdf;

Good afternoon toponymic colleagues,

In an effort to provide guidance to prospective proponents who would like to honor Native Americans through the application of a new feature name or name change, the BGN's Domestic Names Committee (DNC) has approved the use of the attached document entitled ***Cultural Sensitivity for Native American Names***. It was developed by the DNC's Special Committee on Native American Names and Tribal Communication.

Please note that the guidance does not replace the BGN's ***Policy X: Tribal Geographic Names***, and we will continue to provide a link to each Quarterly Review List to all federally recognized Tribes (and Tribal Historic Preservation Officers for whom we have contact information), inviting them to comment on any proposal in which they have an interest. This guidance is intended to point out to proponents that their proposal is more likely to be approved if there is evidence that they sought input from Tribal governments and/or experts in the Tribe's history and language. As the document notes, some (non-Tribal) proponents believe they are honoring a Tribe by proposing a name in their language or a name that commemorates an individual or Tribal group, but this may not always be the case.

We have added a reference to the guidance on the BGN's How Do I? page (see Q3. *How does the BGN address geographic names of interest to American Indian Tribes?*), or you can access it directly at <https://www.usgs.gov/us-board-on-geographic-names/cultural-sensitivity-native-american-names>. We will also add a link on the BGN's name proposal form.

The guidance does not preclude the BGN staff from proceeding with the proposal, i.e., conducting our research and usual outreach to interested parties, but hopefully it will remind a proponent to put some thought into their application. Any efforts to solicit Tribal input and responses received will be noted in the case summary when the proposal reaches the DNC's docket.

We invite State Names Authorities and Federal partners to apply this guidance as appropriate, and you are welcome to share the above links and/or incorporate the wording into your own procedures. This may be especially important for those SNAs who receive and process proposals before sending them on to the BGN. If a proposal is forwarded to us without evidence that Tribal input was sought, we may be required to follow up with the proponent to seek this additional information, which could 1) reveal opinions that could require a second review by the SNA, and/or 2) delay the BGN's final decision.

Thank you for your consideration and we hope you agree that this is an important additional step in recognizing and respecting the opinions of Native Americans as we consider the toponymy of our landscape. Please let us know if you have any questions.

~ Jenny

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Cultural Sensitivity for Native American Names

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The following is intended as guidance to prospective proponents who would like to honor Native Americans through the application of a new feature name or feature name change.

The proposal of a geographic name or name change is a serious undertaking. In proposing a new name intended to honor Native Americans, their language, or culture, the proponent takes on a primary responsibility for selecting a name that is as respectful as possible to the Native American people of that region.

In U.S. Board on Geographic Names (BGN) Policy X: Tribal Geographic Names, the BGN recognizes the autonomy of Tribes to determine names for geographic features located entirely on Tribal Trust lands.

However, for features not on Tribal lands, members of the public, organizations, and other local, State, Federal, and Tribal agencies may propose new names or name changes that the proponent believes will honor a specific Tribe or historic Native American individual(s), or that include words from a Native American language. To ensure that the proposed name is appropriate, the BGN strongly advises proponents to work with Tribal Leaders, Tribal Historic Preservation Officers, and/or Native American linguists or other expert(s) associated with the Tribe to determine the acceptability of the proposed name and application. Evidence of this authoritative validation should be provided with the proposal or at any time during the review process.

Proponents should also seek to obtain letters of endorsement from the governments (e.g., Tribal Councils) of any affected Tribes. A proponent's engagement with Tribal leaders may bring to light an alternative name that is more likely to be acceptable to the proponent and the Tribe(s).

Tribal contact information is available through the Bureau of Indian Affairs Tribal leader directory: <https://www.bia.gov/bia/ois/tribal-leaders-directory/>.

Despite the proponent's best intentions, there are many reasons why a proposed name may not be approved, including the following:

- 1) It is not culturally acceptable to name features after a specific Native American person or group
- 2) The application of the name is inappropriate for the type of feature
- 3) The application of the name is outside the area associated with the Tribe
- 4) The word from the Native American language is linguistically incorrect
- 5) The word from the Native American language has negative connotations or negative associations
- 6) Multiple Tribes with differing viewpoints may be involved
- 7) A Tribe may have concerns about changing an existing name or may propose an alternative name

When working with Tribes, the proponent should respect the authority, time, and priorities of Tribal leaders. The proponent should document any contacts and include that information with the proposal in communications with the BGN staff. Contact information should include the Tribe's name, the name and title of the contact person(s), phone or email contact information, and the date(s) of the contact.

Obtaining authoritative validation as to the proposal's acceptability is no guarantee that the proposed name or name change will be approved by the BGN, as many factors are considered during the BGN's review. However, not engaging with Tribe(s) may result in the ultimate rejection of the proposal. Proponents should also be advised that the geographic location may be home to a number of Tribes with differing ideas regarding the appropriateness of a name.

Note: The guidance provided here in no way replaces Tribal outreach covered in BGN Policy X, especially the requirement for Nation-to-Nation consultation. The BGN, as part of its normal outreach, will provide all federally recognized Tribes with a link to the Quarterly Review List, with an invitation to comment on any proposal in which they have an interest.