

“ISLAND OF HAWAI‘I” OR SIMPLY “HAWAI‘I?”

In March of 2024, members of the Hawai‘i Board on Geographic Names (“HBGN”) expressed a desire to discuss the official name of the largest island in the Hawaiian Archipelago, the “Island of Hawai‘i.” Members proposed a review of the name, given that it is the only island in the Hawaiian Archipelago whose name includes the phrase “Island of.” Simply put, members wanted to consider changing the Primary Name to “Hawai‘i,” in line with with the naming convention of the other islands, e.g., Maui, O‘ahu, etc. However, discussing a name change first requires it to be on the Board’s agenda for a future meeting. Thus, in the April 2024 Notice of Meeting and Agenda for the HBGN, Agenda Item 5 called for a "Discussion and decision on Island of Hawai‘i."

Subsequently, the Office of Planning and Sustainable Development received many emails and phone calls from the public seeking clarification regarding Agenda Item 5. Concerns were expressed over the lack of notice of the issue, disquiet about what naming options were being presented, who was making the proposed change, and under what authority. It was not surprising that the public was disturbed by the news given the lack of information about the circumstances that gave rise to Agenda Item 5. Indeed, many members of the public expressed concern that they did not even know who or what the Hawai‘i Board on Geographic Names was or to what end it was acting.

At the Board's April 2024 meeting, there were many attendees who wished to comment, both in person and virtually. Board members spent the early part of the meeting explaining the circumstances surrounding the discussion and addressed most of the concerns. Moreover, the Board made clear that the decision will only directly affect State agencies as it is only empowered by statute to affect the name the State government uses on its maps and in its documents.

Promising to provide more information about this decision and others in due course, HBGN has since considered a number of options to increase public involvement in its decision making process. Thus, HBGN is reaching out now to provide more information about the proposed name change and about the Board and its authority, and providing an opportunity to submit testimony, comments, and concerns prior to discussing the proposed name change at its June 2025 meeting.

ABOUT THE HAWAI'I BOARD ON GEOGRAPHIC NAMES

A. What is HBGN?

The Hawai'i Board on Geographic Names (the "Board" or "HBGN") was established by Act 50 of the 1974 Hawai'i State Legislature. Act 50 states that "*the board shall designate the official names and spellings of geographic features in Hawaii...*" The purpose of an official name is to assure uniformity in the use and spelling of geographic feature names by State agencies and to allow the State and the public to communicate unambiguously about places, reducing the potential for confusion. State agencies are required to use the names approved by the Board on all maps and documents.

HBGN is modeled after the US Board on Geographic Names (US BGN), a federal body created in 1890 and established in its present form by Public Law in 1947 to maintain uniform geographic name usage throughout the Federal Government. The US BGN maintains the authoritative Geographic Names Information System (GNIS) database that identifies the official Primary Names of geographic features approved by the US BGN that federal agencies are required to use.

B. Who Sits on the Board?

Under Hawai'i Revised Statutes §4E-1, the Board serves without compensation and consists of the following persons or their representatives:

- The Chairperson of the Board of Land and Natural Resources;
- The Chairperson of the Office of Hawaiian Affairs;
- The Chairperson of the Hawaiian Homes Commission;
- The Director of the Office of Planning and Sustainable Development;
- The President of the University of Hawai'i;
- The State Land Surveyor; and
- The President of the Bernice P. Bishop Museum.

C. Names

When considering a feature name, the Board consults a number of printed and online resources, including *Place Names of Hawaii* (Pukui, Elbert & Mookini, 1974), *Atlas of Hawaii, Third Edition* (Juvik and Juvik, 1998), nupepa.org, kipukadatabase.com, and wehewehe.org, and often consults with cultural advisors and community members as well.

1. Variant and Alternate Names

Variant Names are names for a feature that may be spelled differently or may have different origins or meanings from the Primary Name. Generally, they can be found in the historical record

but are not in common use today. An Alternate Name is one whose use and spelling is as widely or nearly as widely accepted as the Primary Name by members of the community. The Board makes a distinction in its decision making between the Primary Name and these other names.

Both Variant Names and Alternate Names are listed as part of the Primary Name record in the GNIS database, and there are rules governing their use by federal agencies. For State agencies an Alternate Name is an official name and may be used interchangeably with the Primary Name in State maps and documents. However, this designation is equivalent to a Variant Name for federal agencies, which are required to use the Primary Name listed in the GNIS.

2. Diacritical Marks

In the late 1990s, the Board began a project to review the spelling of each Hawaiian place name shown on the United States Geological Survey (“USGS”) quadrangle maps for proper use of diacritical marks – ‘okina and kahakō. This ongoing project involves reviewing each of the over 10,000 names that appear on the quadrangle maps and in the GNIS and adding ‘okina and kahakō, as appropriate. At this point, the Board has reviewed all of the names appearing on the USGS quadrangle maps and is currently reviewing additional names that appear in the GNIS. The Board has adopted a policy of adding diacritical marks only when there is solid evidence that there should be an ‘okina or kahakō. There are many instances where no decision has been made, and the Board has advised the USGS to leave the name without any diacritical marks until further research can be conducted.

3. Spelling

When determining the spelling of names, the Board generally follows conventions developed by ‘Ahahui ‘Ōlelo Hawai‘i in 1978. *Place Names of Hawaii* (Pukui, Elbert & Mookini) is considered a primary source for determining the appropriate use of ‘okina or kahakō in individual place names. The Board has deviated from these sources when other experts have provided alternative spellings or pronunciations. In those instances, the priorities for determining names and their spellings were:

- First priority: Native Hawaiian-speaking members from the community where the geographic feature is located;
- Second priority: Members from the community where the geographic feature is located whose command of the Hawaiian language is reliable;
- Third priority: Members who were born and raised in the community where the geographic feature is located; and
- Additionally: People with a cultural or familial connection to the area where the geographic feature is located.

In 2014, the Board sought to further standardize and document decision making criteria regarding the use of ‘okina and kahakō in Hawaiian place names. The HBGN style guide was completed in January of 2015, revised in February 2016, and can be found online at:

https://files.hawaii.gov/dbedt/op/gis/bgn/Guidelines_for_Hawaiian_Geographic_Names_v1.1.pdf

4. Name Changes

Members of the public can initiate naming new features, such as Ahu‘ailā‘au, formerly known as Fissure 8, or recommending a name change for a feature by filling out a Name Change Form found online at:

<https://files.hawaii.gov/dbedt/op/gis/bgn/BGN%20How%20to%20Submit%20a%20Proposed%20Name.pdf>

Once submitted, the Board will consider the proposal at a future meeting where it will discuss the recommendation, the reason for the change, and the evidence provided and will conduct its own research and consider testimony provided at the meeting before rendering a decision.

All Board meetings are public and open to public participation.

D. How Can You Find Out More?

- Learn more about HBGN on our website:

<https://planning.hawaii.gov/gis/hbgn/>

- Listen to meeting recordings or read the meeting minutes:

<https://planning.hawaii.gov/gis/hbgn/hbgn-meeting-minutes/>

- View the meeting packets and agenda for upcoming meetings:

<https://planning.hawaii.gov/gis/hbgn/hbgn-meeting-materials/>

- Email us at:

gis@hawaii.gov