

# United States Board on Geographic Names



*Instruction Manual for Geographic Names  
Proposal Submissions*

July, 2025

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## Page 1 of Proposal Form – Acknowledgment for Reviewing Materials

To complete the Domestic Geographic Name Proposal Form, you must first confirm you have read several key documents and agree to work with BGN staff. These include the DNC's [Guidance on Name Proposals](#), the USGS [What is the Geographic Names Information System \(GNIS\)?](#) webpages, and the DNC's [Principles, Policies, and Procedures](#). Additionally, if a geographic name appears in a published source, you must have already contacted The National Map staff by emailing [tnm\\_help@usgs.gov](mailto:tnm_help@usgs.gov), and been informed that a proposal to the DNC is necessary because the publication is not an authoritative source. It is crucial that you do not proceed with the form until these initial steps are completed.

## Page 2 of Proposal Form – Preliminary Questions

In this section, proponents will need to answer a series of preliminary questions. These questions determine if your proposal falls within the scope of the Domestic Names Committee (DNC). The DNC reviews proposals for natural geographic features (land or water), reservoirs, canals, channels, and unincorporated populated places. They **do not** review proposals for Census, Civil, Military, or incorporated Populated Places. Answering "Yes" to any of these preliminary questions means the BGN will not consider your proposal, and you should not complete the application.

## Page 3 of Proposal Form – Submission Details

Proponents should review the information on this page to understand how to submit their proposal once all required information has been completed. For any proposals requiring evidence such as landowner/trademark owner permission/approval of the proposal, a death certificate, obituary, or any additional supporting materials, please include with the submission package via email to [BGNExec@usgs.gov](mailto:BGNExec@usgs.gov), or by mail. Failure to provide the required evidence will result in the rejection of the proposal due to being incomplete. Proposals are considered incomplete and will be rejected if they do not follow the instructions throughout this manual and/or there is missing information, **It is critical that all proponents carefully review the proposal form prior to submitting to ensure that all checked boxes are marked with a response, each text box has a response that fully addresses each question, or it is marked with "Not applicable" or "NA" whenever relevant.** Staff will inform proponents if the proposal has been accepted or rejected. If accepted, the proposal will be processed and added to the Quarterly Review List. If rejected, the proposal will not be processed, and the proponent will have to resubmit a complete proposal form.

## Pages 4 and 5 of Proposal Form – Name Details

In this section, the proponent will enter the proposed name in the text box and indicate the type of proposal being submitted by checking only 1 of the 4 boxes. Depending on the box selected, the proponent is then directed to the next appropriate section to complete. The options are to name a feature with no official name in GNIS (requiring completion of Section A), to change or correct an official name in GNIS (requiring Section B), to change or correct the location of an official name in GNIS (requiring Section C), or to change or correct both an official name and its location in GNIS (requiring Sections B and C).

**Section A: New names.** The proponent must confirm that there is no official name in GNIS by checking the appropriate box. If “No” is checked for this question ONLY, BGN staff will reject the proposal due to incompleteness.

The proponent must provide answers in all text boxes. If the question is not relevant to the proposal, then please type in “Not applicable” or “NA”. Failure to provide responses in the text boxes, will result in the rejection of the proposal due to being incomplete.

**Section B: Name changes.** This section requires the proponent to provide the current GNIS name and its Feature ID (4-7 digits). To retrieve the current name and Feature ID, go to the [GNIS search tool](#) and enter the name of the feature. Proponents should take caution to ensure that they are retrieving the Feature ID for the appropriate feature. For example, entering the name “Mount Rainier” in the Name search field will result in 4 features. The appropriate Feature ID for the mountain, in the State of Washington, is 1533614 (Figure 1).

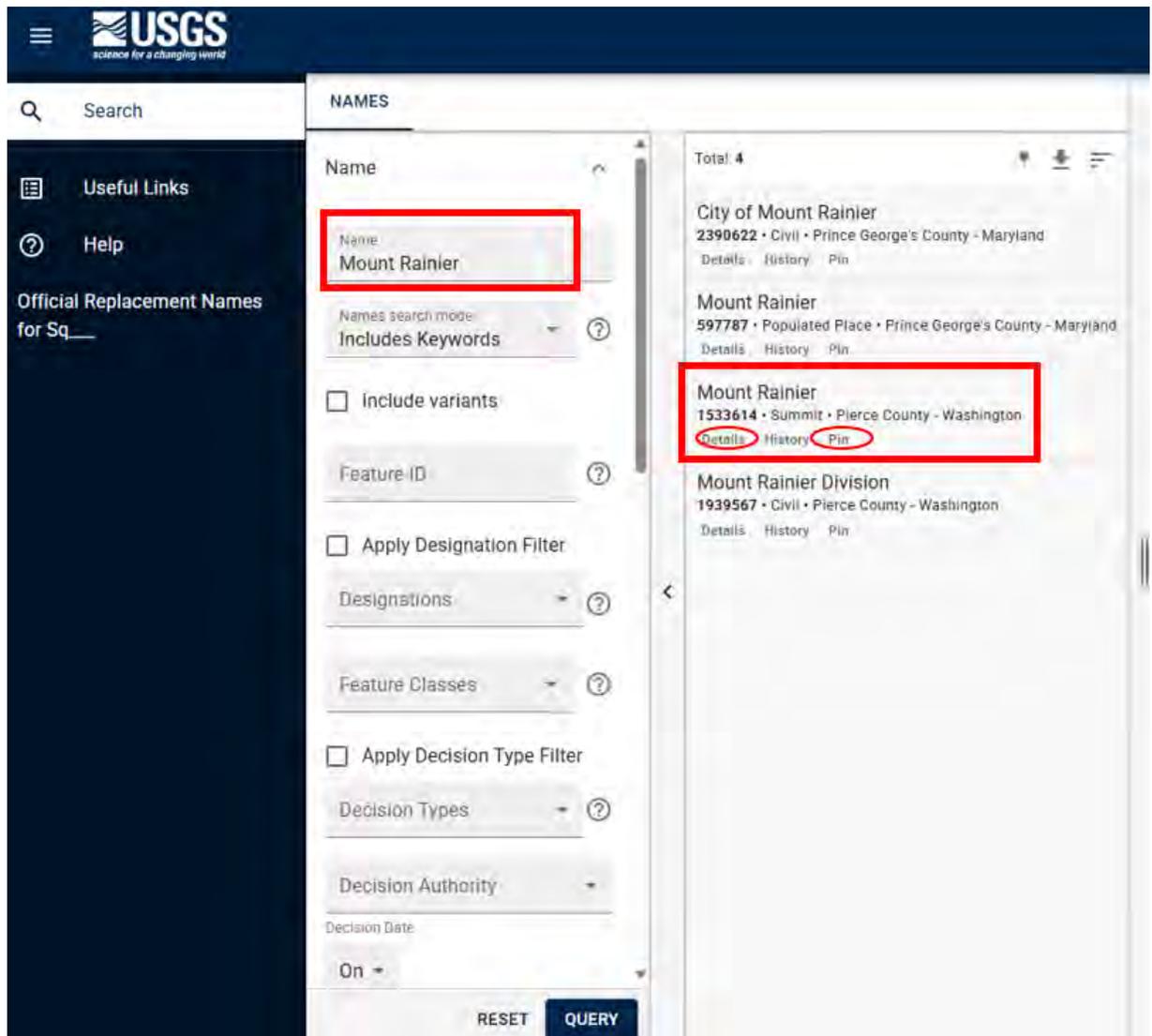
The proponent must then provide responses in the text boxes to address why the name should be changed for Federal use, what is the significance of the name, and why the new name is appropriate. For this section, responses entered into text boxes must be less than 300 characters in length.

The proponent must provide answers in all text boxes. If the question is not relevant to the proposal, then please type in “Not applicable” or “NA”. Failure to provide responses in the text boxes, will result in the rejection of the proposal due to being incomplete.

**Section C: Location changes.** This section requires the proponent to provide the current Feature ID (4-7 digits) and its coordinates in decimal degrees. To retrieve the Feature ID, go to the [GNIS search tool](#) and enter the name of the feature (Figure 1). Proponents should take caution to ensure that they are retrieving the Feature ID for the appropriate feature. For example, entering the name “Mount Rainier” in the Name search field will result in 4 features. The appropriate Feature ID for the mountain, in the State of

Washington, is 1533614. By clicking on “Details” (Figure 1), the proponent can locate the coordinates of the feature by scrolling down to the “Coordinates” section of the pop-up window (Figure 2). Enter the decimal degrees into the text box for the current coordinates.

The proponent must provide answers in all text boxes. If the question is not relevant to the proposal, then please type in “Not applicable” or “NA”. Failure to provide responses in the text boxes, will result in the rejection of the proposal due to being incomplete.



**FIGURE 1** THE SCREEN CAPTURE SHOWS ALL RESULTS FOR GEOGRAPHIC FEATURES THAT USE THE NAME "MOUNT RAINIER." PROPONENTS SHOULD TAKE CAUTION TO MAKE SURE THEY ARE RECORDING THE FEATURE ID OF THE APPROPRIATE GEOGRAPHIC FEATURE. IN THIS CASE, THE PROPONENT IS INTERESTED IN THE “SUMMIT”. CLICKING ON “DETAILS” WILL PROVIDE A SUMMARY REPORT OF ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ABOUT THE FEATURE. CLICKING ON “PIN” WILL MARK THE FEATURE ON THE MAP TO THE RIGHT (NOT PICTURED).

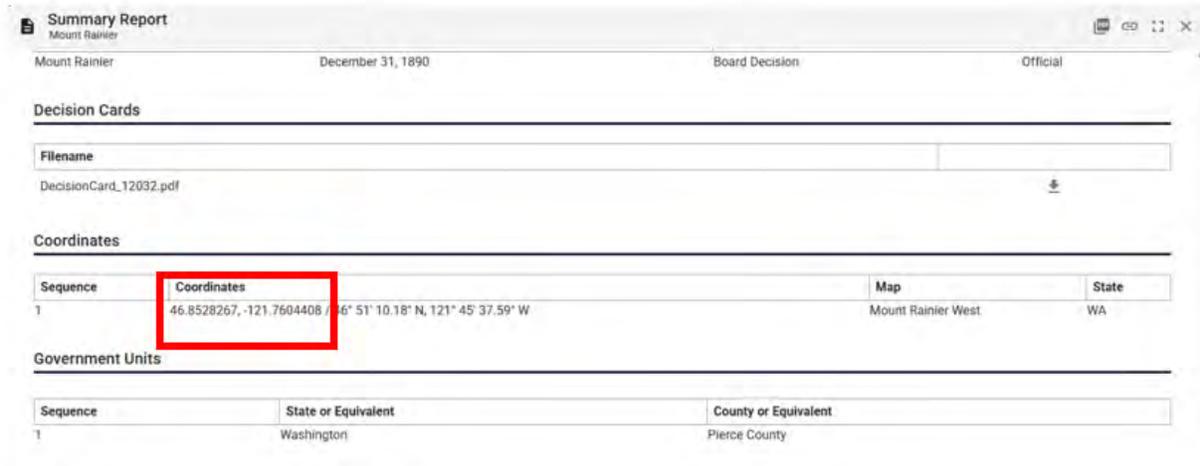
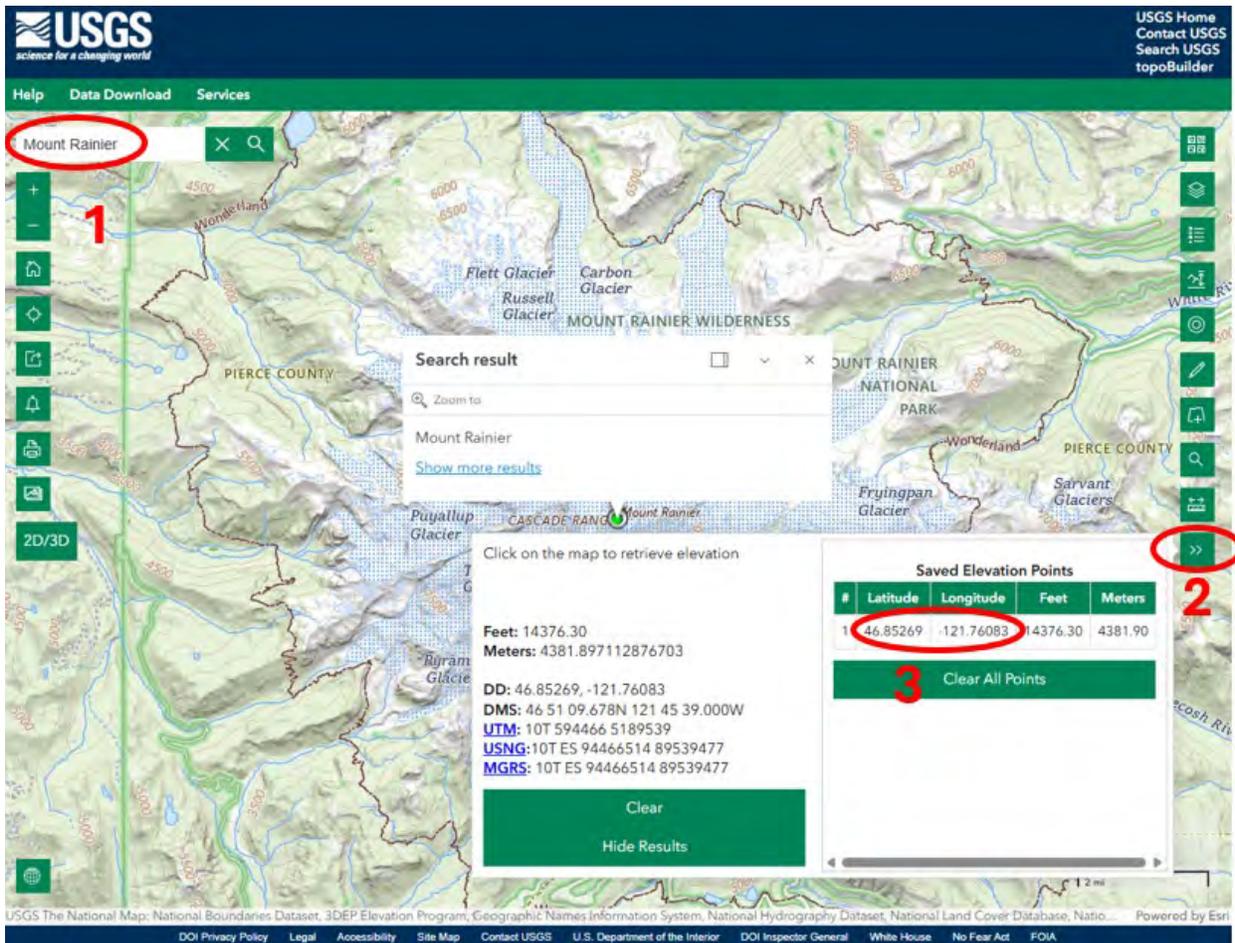


FIGURE 2 THE SCREEN CAPTURE SHOWS A PORTION OF THE SUMMARY REPORT WHEN "DETAILS" IS SELECTED FROM THE FEATURE. PROPONENTS SHOULD RECORD THE DECIMAL DEGREES INTO THE COORDINATES TEXT BOX ON THE PROPOSAL FORM.

## Pages 6 and 7 of Proposal Form – Location Details

**Location Details:** The "Location Details" section on pages six and seven requires specific information about the geographic feature. You need to identify the best-fitting GNIS feature type (up to 20 characters), noting that the DNC does not review proposals for Census, Civil, Military, or incorporated populated places. For a full list of feature types recorded in GNIS, please see [GNIS Domestic Names Feature Classes](#).

In the following text boxes, the proponent should provide coordinates based on the feature shape: highest point for elevated features (Pillar, Range, Ridge, Summit), mouth/lower end and source/upper end for linear features (Arroyo, Stream, Valley), or the approximate center for all other types. Coordinates can be found by navigating to <https://apps.nationalmap.gov/viewer/>. From this webpage, the proponent can enter the geographic name into the search bar on the upper left corner of the window, and then retrieve the coordinates by clicking on the double arrows on the right side of the window. The decimal degrees can be copied and pasted directly into the proposal form (Figure 3). Coordinates can also be found by selecting “Pin” from the feature search (Figures 1 and 4), or (for a name change) pulling up the feature Summary Report for the current official name of the feature (Figure 2). Please ensure that a response is recorded in each text box, and within the character limits allotted. If a response is not relevant, please enter “Not applicable” or “NA”. Failure to follow these instructions will result in the proposal being returned to the proponent due to being incomplete.



**FIGURE 3.** THIS SCREEN CAPTURE SHOWS THE NATIONAL MAP VIEWER AND HOW TO RETRIEVE THE COORDINATES OF A GEOGRAPHIC FEATURE. FIRST ENTER THE NAME INTO THE SEARCH BOX. THEN, CLICK ON THE DOUBLE ARROWS ON THE RIGHT, AND COPY AND PASTE THE COORDINATES MARKED BY THE #3 INTO THE PROPOSAL FORM.

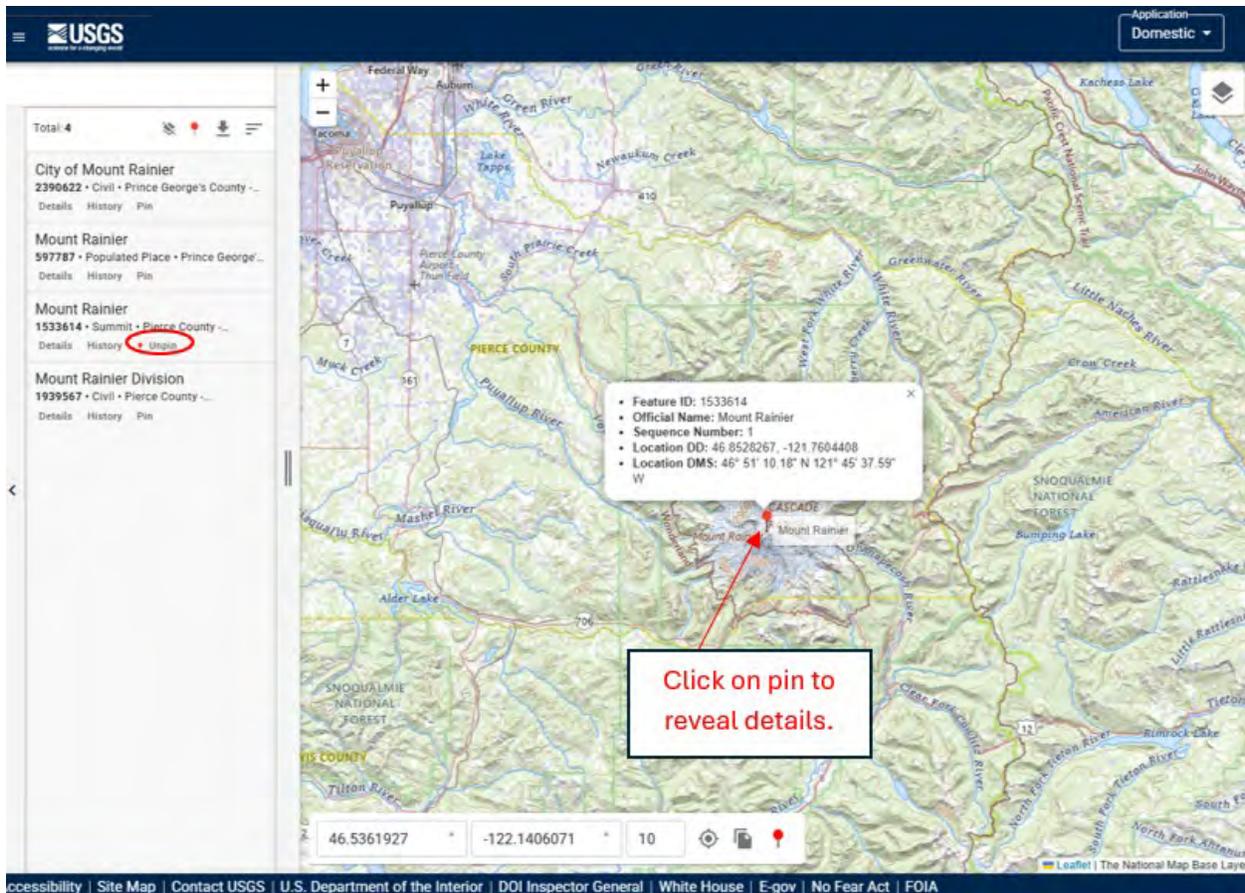


FIGURE 4 THE SCREEN CAPTURE SHOWS THE POPUP WINDOW FROM SELECTING “PIN” ON THE FEATURE SEARCH RETURNS FOR FEATURE ID 1533614. FROM THIS WINDOW, THE PROPONENT CAN RECORD THE DECIMAL DEGREE (DD) COORDINATES OF THE FEATURE AS WELL AS OTHER INFORMATION.

## Pages 7 Through 12 of Proposal Form - Policy Information

The "Policy Information" section covers various aspects of naming. To assist proponents in answering the questions throughout this section, please refer to the Principles, Policies, and Procedures (PPP) document, beginning on page 18. The PPP can be found at [USBGN Principles, Policies, and Procedures - Domestic Geographic Names](#). Additional resources are provided throughout the proposal and should be consulted, to the fullest extent possible. Proponents' submissions must provide evidence to support statements and claims made in the proposal form.

The proponent must provide answers in all text boxes. If the question is not relevant to the proposal, then please type in “Not applicable” or “NA”. Failure to provide responses in the text boxes, will result in the rejection of the proposal due to being incomplete.

## Pages 12 and 13 of Proposal Form - Proponent Details

This section requires contact information of the proponent. In the event any questions arise from the submission packet, or the Board on Geographic Names staff need to conduct a follow up on any of the details, this information will be required. Failure to respond to the staff within a reasonable amount of time will result in rejection of the proposal. Proponents are allowed to have someone submit a proposal on their behalf so long as written communication, acknowledging approval, and directly from the proponent is provided. This information must be received with the proposal submission package.

## Proposal Form

When proponents have read through all these instructions, they can download and complete [the proposal form](#).

## DO NOT PROCEED UNTIL COMPLETED

This document is for those interested in proposing:

1. A new name for a currently unnamed geographic feature, or
2. A change in name, spelling, or location of an existing name

The Domestic Names Committee (DNC) of the U.S. Board on Geographic Names (BGN) reviews proposals and makes decisions about geographic names for official Federal use.

I affirm the following:

- I have read through the DNC's [Guidance on Name Proposals](#) and the USGS [What is the Geographic Names Information System \(GNIS\)?](#) webpages **before** filling out this form.
- I have read the DNC's [Principles, Policies, and Procedures](#) **before** filling out this form.
- I have read through the **entire** proposal form to determine the necessary information needed for the proposal to meet the minimum requirements for review.
- I agree to work with BGN staff to answer any follow-up questions about my proposal.
- If the geographic name appears in a published source (e.g., book, journal, website):* I have contacted the staff of The National Map staff ([tnm\\_help@usgs.gov](mailto:tnm_help@usgs.gov)) to request that the name be added to the Geographic Names Information System, and The National Map staff has indicated that I need to submit a proposal to the DNC.

## DO NOT PROCEED UNTIL COMPLETED



# DO NOT PROCEED UNTIL COMPLETED

## Preliminary Questions

Is your proposal for a kind of feature outside the scope of the DNC's review?

Yes  No

See the list of [GNIS Domestic Names Feature Classes](#). The DNC reviews proposals affecting the names of natural geographic feature (land or water), reservoirs, canals, channels, or unincorporated populated places (communities). The DNC does not review proposals for the following feature classes in GNIS: Census, Civil, Military, and Populated Places that are incorporated.

Is your proposal for a feature entirely outside the United States and its territories?

Yes  No

Is your proposal for a feature that is defined by private or public property boundaries?

Yes  No

Is your proposal only to name part of a larger complete geographic feature?

Yes  No

Is your proposal for a feature **entirely** within the exterior bounds of a federally recognized Tribe's reservation or trust lands?

Yes  No

Use the USGS [The National Map viewer](#), the USGS [Protected Areas Database of the United States \(PAD-US\) viewer](#), the [2020 Census Tribal Tract Reference Map](#), and the [Bureau of Indian Affairs Tract Viewer](#) to determine this.

*Exception: In the case of features entirely within the exterior bounds of a federally recognized Tribe's reservation or trust lands, the BGN will defer to the Tribe's government to determine the appropriate name for Federal use. A Tribe does not need to use this form but instead may make a request in writing on the Tribe's letterhead to the BGN either by email or regular mail (see addresses below).*

If the feature is already named, was the name established by congressional legislation, Executive order, Presidential proclamation, or directly by the Secretary of the Interior?

Yes  No

Is the U.S. Congress currently considering naming or renaming the feature?

Yes  No

Use [Congress.gov](#) to determine if any legislation is pending.

Does your proposed name contain one of the words considered derogatory by the Department of the Interior and the BGN?

Yes  No

See *Policy V of the BGN's Principles, Policies, and Procedures*.

Does the proposed name refer to anyone who either is still living or has been deceased for fewer than five years?

Yes  No

If you have answered "Yes" to any of the questions above, do not complete this application. The BGN will not consider your proposal.

## Domestic Geographic Name Proposal Form

The U.S. Board on Geographic Names (BGN) is responsible for standardizing the names of geographic features within the 50 States and in other areas under the sovereignty of the United States. The BGN retains the legal authority to promulgate all official names and locations of natural features (e.g. mountains, rivers, valleys), as well as canals, channels, reservoirs, and other select feature types.

This form is to propose a new name or name, spelling, or application change for a geographic feature for Federal use. A proponent should carefully review the proposal prior to submission to ensure that it is consistent with the BGN policies and accurate to the best of your knowledge. Please note all fields with a red asterisk are required prior to submitting this form.

The proponent should also be aware that the entire proposal – including personal identifying information and any associated correspondence – is in the public domain and may be made publicly available at any time.

Please refer to the instruction manual in order to complete this proposal form. Failure to complete this form properly will result in the proposal not being considered until corrections have been made.

The completed proposal can be submitted in two ways:

1. Download and email this form and supporting to: [BGNExec@usgs.gov](mailto:BGNExec@usgs.gov)
  - a. Save PDF with a file name that includes the proposed name.
  - b. Email the PDF as an attachment with a Subject line that includes the proposed name and State in which the feature is located.
2. Send by mail to:  
U.S. BGN Executive Secretary, Domestic Names  
12201 Sunrise Valley Drive, MS-523  
Reston, VA 20192

*Please note that materials submitted via US Mail will result in longer processing times.*

Please direct all questions and communication to [BGNExec@usgs.gov](mailto:BGNExec@usgs.gov).

## Name Details

What is the proposed name?

What type of proposal is this?

- to name a feature that has no official name in GNIS (complete Section A below)
- to change or correct an official name recorded in GNIS (complete Section B below)
- to change or correct the location of an official name in GNIS (complete Section C below)
- to change or correct an official name and the location of that name in GNIS (complete Sections B and C below)

### Section A: New names

I have checked GNIS to ensure that there is no official name.

Yes  No

Why does the officially unnamed geographic feature need an official name for Federal use? (300 characters max.)

What is the meaning and significance of this name? (300 characters)

Why is the name you are proposing appropriate for this officially unnamed feature? (300 characters)

Is the proposed name in published use?

Yes  No

If yes:

- Have you emailed [tnm\\_help@usgs.gov](mailto:tnm_help@usgs.gov) to request that the name be added directly to GNIS and been told that the name must be a BGN proposal because the publication is NOT an authoritative source?  Yes  No
- Provide evidence of published use. List sources and send as email attachments. (500 characters)

Is the proposed name in current local unpublished use?

Yes  No

If yes:

- Provide evidence of local use. List sources and send as email attachments. (500 characters)

Is there any local disagreement about the proposed name?

Yes  No

If yes:

- Explain any local disagreement. (500 characters)

## Section B: Name changes

What is the current GNIS name?

What is the current GNIS Feature ID?  
(7 characters)

Why should the name be changed for Federal use? (300 characters)

What is the meaning and significance of this name? (300 characters)

Why is the name you are proposing appropriate as a name change for this officially named feature?  
(300 characters)

Is the proposed name in published use?

Yes  No

If yes:

- Have you emailed [tnm\\_help@usgs.gov](mailto:tnm_help@usgs.gov) to request that the correction or change be made directly in GNIS and been told that the correction or change must be a BGN proposal because the GNIS name was NOT an error from the original authoritative source?
- Provide evidence of published use. List sources and send as email attachments. (500 characters)

Yes  No

Is the proposed name in current local unpublished use?

Yes  No

If yes:

- Provide evidence of local use. List sources and send as email attachments. (500 characters)

Is there any local disagreement about the proposed name change?

Yes  No

If yes:

- Explain any local disagreement. (300 characters)

## Section C: Location changes

What is the current GNIS Feature ID? (7 characters)

What are the current coordinates in GNIS?

Why should the location be changed for Federal use? (300 characters)

Is the proposed location in published use?  Yes  No

If yes:

- Have you emailed [tnm\\_help@usgs.gov](mailto:tnm_help@usgs.gov) to request that the correction or change be made directly in GNIS and been told that the correction or change must be a BGN proposal because the GNIS location was NOT an error from the original authoritative source?  Yes  No
- Provide evidence of published use. List sources and send as email attachments. (500 characters)

Is the proposed location in current local unpublished use?  Yes  No

If yes:

- Provide evidence of local use. List sources and send as email attachments. (500 characters)

Is there any local disagreement about the proposed location change?  Yes  No

If yes:

- Explain any local disagreement. (500 characters)

## Location Details

What GNIS feature type best fits the feature? (20 characters)

*Review the [list of GNIS feature classes and their definitions](#). Please note that the DNC does not review proposals to name or rename Census, Civil, or Military features. The DNC does not review proposals to name or rename incorporated populated places.*

Provide information about the feature's location:

- If the feature is elevated (GNIS classes Pillar, Range, Ridge, Summit), what are the coordinates of the highest point? (50 characters)
- If the feature is linear (GNIS classes Arroyo, Stream, Valley), what are the coordinates of the mouth/lower end and the source/upper end? (50 characters)

- If the feature is not elevated or linear (all other GNIS classes), what are the coordinates of the approximate center? (50 characters)
- In what State or States is the feature located?
- In what county/counties or equivalent(s) is the feature located?
- In what incorporated city/town/township/borough is the feature located? *Use the USGS The National Map viewer to determine if the feature is within an incorporated place.*(50 characters)

Describe the full shape and extent of the feature (length, width, height/elevation, shape, and general extent as applicable) (300 characters)

Who owns or manages the land containing the feature? *Use the USGS [Protected Areas Database of the United States \(PAD-US\)](#) viewer to determine the land manager.*

What is the name of the landowner(s) or manager(s)? (300 characters)

If private landowners or managers are involved, provide evidence by email that they are aware you are submitting a proposal to the BGN. (500 characters)

What is your interest in the name of this feature? (300 characters)

## Policy Information

### [Names Considered or Established by Congress or the President](#)

Was the feature's name established by Executive order or Presidential proclamation?  Yes  No

Was the feature's name established by congressional legislation?  Yes  No

Is the feature currently being considered for naming or renaming by Congress?  Yes  No

*Use [Congress.gov](#) to determine if any legislation is pending to name or rename the feature.*

## Name Changes

Is the proposal to change an existing name in GNIS?

Yes  No

If yes:

- Why should the name be changed? (300 characters)

- Is the proposed change to bring official Federal usage into agreement with well-established local usage and/or with present-day local support?  Yes  No  
If yes, provide evidence of this by email attachments.

- Is the proposed change to eliminate a name that is duplicative, confusing, or was established on the basis of incorrect information?  Yes  No  
If yes, provide evidence of this by email attachments.

- Is the official name in GNIS the name of a person or family?  Yes  No

If yes, why should this name be changed? (300 characters)

## Commemorative Names

Is the proposed name the name of a person or family?

Yes  No

If yes:

- Has the person or persons been deceased for more than five (5) years?  Yes  No
- Could the proposed name be construed to refer to a living person?  Yes  No

If yes, who? (300 characters)

- Provide a brief biography of the person(s) including birth and death dates. (350 characters)

Provide a death certificate, link to an official obituary in a local newspaper, and/or other evidence of the date of death in supporting documentation by email.

- What was the person's direct or long-term association with the feature? (350 characters)

- If applicable, what was the person's significant contribution to the community, area, or state around the feature? (350 characters, next page)

- If applicable, what was the person's outstanding national or international recognition? (350 characters)

- Is the proposed name the full name of a person?  Yes  No

- If yes, why should their full name be used? (350 characters)

### Wilderness Area Geographic Names

Is the feature in a Federal wilderness, wilderness study area, or proposed wilderness? (for new names only)  Yes  No

*Use the USGS [Protected Areas Database of the United States \(PAD-US\)](#) viewer to determine if the feature is located in a wilderness or wilderness study area; note that proposed wildernesses in National Park Service lands are not included in PAD-US.*

If yes, what is the overriding need to name the feature? (300 characters)

### Derogatory and Offensive Names

Does the proposed name contain one of the words considered derogatory by the Department of the Interior and the BGN?  Yes  No

Does the proposed name include a word that is derogatory or offensive to a particular racial or ethnic group, gender, or religious group?  Yes  No

For name changes only: The BGN does not determine if a word is derogatory or offensive. Does the current official name contain a word considered derogatory or offensive?  Yes  No

If yes, why do you think the word is derogatory or offensive? (300 characters)

How does the proposed name relate to the current official name? (300 characters)

### Duplicate and Similar Names

Is the proposed name the same as a nearby official name recorded in GNIS or an unofficial name in local use?  Yes  No

If yes, how far away is the duplicate name? (50 characters)

Is the proposed name similar to a nearby official name recorded in GNIS or an unofficial name in local use?  Yes  No

If yes, how far away is the similar name? (50 characters)

### Variant Names

For name changes only: Is the proposed name more suitable as a variant recorded in GNIS rather than for consideration as an official name change?  Yes  No

### Diacritics

Does the proposed name contain diacritics?  Yes  No

If yes, Are the diacritics listed in [Appendix G](#) or could they be formed by characters in Appendix G? (Please note that additional characters have been approved for use)

Yes  No

### Long Names

Is the proposed name overly long?  Yes  No

If yes, why is the long name appropriate? (300 characters)

### Tribal Geographic Names

Is the feature entirely on lands under the jurisdiction of a Tribe?  Yes  No

*Use the USGS [The National Map viewer](#), the USGS [Protected Areas Database of the United States \(PAD-US\) viewer](#), the [2020 Census Tribal Tract Reference Map](#), and the [Bureau of Indian Affairs Tract Viewer](#) to determine if the feature falls on Tribal lands.*

Is the feature partially on lands under the jurisdiction of a Tribe?  Yes  No

If yes, which Tribe?

Are you a member of a federally recognized Tribe?  Yes  No

If yes, which Tribe?

Are you submitting this proposal on behalf of a Tribal government or Tribal Historic Preservation Officer?  Yes  No

If yes, provide their name and contact information, and attach evidence they endorse this proposal.

Does the proposed name honor or refer to Native Americans, their language, or culture?  Yes  No

If yes, review, follow, and respond to the [Cultural Sensitivity for Native American Names](#).

### Commercial Names

Is the proposed name related in any way to a business, product, or enterprise (including schools and non-profits)?  Yes  No

If yes, is the primary purpose of the proposal to promote or publicize a business, product, or enterprise?  Yes  No

How long has the business or enterprise been associated with the feature? (20 characters)

If no, what is the evidence that the name is not being used for this purpose? (500 characters)

Could the proposed name be construed to be associated with, promote, or publicize a business, product, or enterprise?  Yes  No

If yes, explain how and why. (300 characters)

Is the name or any part of it trademarked?  Yes  No

If yes, does the trademark owner give permission to allow the name to be applied to a geographic feature?  Yes  No

If yes, provide evidence of this by email attachments.

## Animal Names

Is the proposed name the name of a pet, service animal, or work animal?  Yes  No

If yes:

- Has the animal been deceased for more than five (5) years?  Yes  No
- Could the proposed name be construed to refer to a living person?  Yes  No

If yes, who? (100 characters)

- Provide a brief biography of the animal including a death date. (500 characters)

Provide evidence of the date of death in supporting documentation by email.

- What was the animal's direct or long-term association with the feature? (300 characters)

- If applicable, what was the animal's significant contribution to the community, area, or region around the feature? (300 characters)

## Proponent Details

Provide your contact information.

Name

Email address

Mailing address

Phone number

Are you representing any group, organization, elected body, or any other entity and submitting the proposal on behalf of them with their knowledge and support?  Yes  No

If yes, send written communication (email, letter) showing that the group knows about this and supports the proposal by email.

Are you a member of any group that is or could be an interested party in the name of this feature?  Yes  No

If yes, send written communication (email, letter) showing that the group knows about this and supports the proposal by email.

Are you completing this form for someone else? If so, that person will be recorded  Yes  No as the proponent.

If yes, provide their contact information

Name

Email address

Mailing address

Phone number

## ***“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 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. Therefore, HBGN is reaching out now to invite the community to submit testimony and comments or provide more information about the proposed name change. The Board also invites you to bring your questions and concerns about the Board on Geographic Names, its authority, and its mission to its June 2025 meeting. For more information about the Board, visit our website (<https://planning.hawaii.gov/gis/hbgn>) or see the information provided below.

We look forward to a meaningful and respectful discussion on this important topic.

# 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](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](mailto:gis@hawaii.gov)