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English

**United Nations Group of Experts on
Geographical Names****2025 session**

New York, 28 April – 2 May 2025

Item 5(b) of the provisional agenda *

Technical expertise: Geographical names data management**Updating the ISO 639 standard to record the language of
origin for Indigenous geographical names in Canada****Summary ****

An estimated 30,000 official geographical names in Canada have origins in multiple Indigenous languages and cultures. Efforts are ongoing by the naming authorities of the Geographical Names Board of Canada (GNBC) to research, restore and promote traditional names that reflect Indigenous heritage. Special effort is paid to record the Indigenous language of origin for these names accurately.

Natural Resources Canada (NRCan) maintains the Canadian Geographical Names Database on behalf of the GNBC. The database uses the ISO 639-3 standard to record the Indigenous language of origin for geographical names. Work to date by GNBC naming jurisdictions and NRCan has identified the language of origin for over 24,000 place names across Canada in over 75 Indigenous languages.

ISO 639-3 is a standardized nomenclature used to classify and represent all known human languages, including living, extinct, historic or constructed languages. There are gaps and dated terminology in the ISO 639-3 standard for certain Indigenous languages in Canada; the current standard does not accurately represent the broad diversity of Indigenous languages or the modern terms used to name them. NRCan and the GNBC Secretariat have worked with a linguist with expertise in Indigenous languages to consult with Elders, knowledge keepers, linguists, and experts, and prepare amendments and updates to the ISO standard. The goal of this work is to ensure that Indigenous languages, and the geographical names with roots in those languages, are respectfully and accurately represented in Canada and abroad.

The full report will include more information, including lessons learned, related to this process.

* GEGN.2/2025/1.

** The full report was prepared by Shannon Denny, Jean-Luc Fournier, Canada, Natural Resources Canada. The report will be available under document symbol GEGN.2/2025/96/CRP.96, in the language of submission only, at https://unstats.un.org/unsd/ungegn/sessions/4th_session_2025/