



# Federal Actions to Address Offensive or Derogatory Geographical Names

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Some [stakeholders](#) have brought renewed attention to names of geographical features in the United States that they identify as offensive or derogatory and have called for accelerated processes to rename these features. Generally, the process for federal renaming of geographical features involves public petition to the [U.S. Board on Geographical Names](#) (BGN) for consideration on an individual basis, although Congress may enact legislation establishing or changing geographical names. On November 19, 2021, the Secretary of the Interior (Secretary) [signed](#) two secretarial orders (SOs) to establish processes to remove derogatory names from federal geographic features and land units.

- [SO 3404](#) formally identified the term *squaw* as derogatory and directed the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) to find federal geographic names bearing the term and to chair a Derogatory Geographic Names Task Force to recommend replacement names to the BGN.
- [SO 3405](#) directed the National Park Service (NPS) to form a discretionary Advisory Committee on Reconciliation in Place Names to broadly solicit, review, and recommend changes to derogatory federal geographic and land unit names.

This Insight describes the BGN process for renaming federal geographic features, the Department of the Interior's (DOI's) progress on executing the SOs, and potential issues for Congress.

## U.S. Board on Geographical Names

In 1947, P.L. 80-242 ([43 U.S.C. §§364-364f](#)) formally authorized the BGN, composed of representatives of federal agencies, to establish and maintain uniform geographic name usage throughout the federal government. The BGN, along with the Secretary, is tasked with solving name discrepancies; approving new names; validating and recording existing names; and promulgating all official names in accordance with its [principles, policies, and procedures](#). By law, the BGN is responsible for all domestic federally recognized geographic names except those applying to offices or establishments of federal agencies. In practice, the BGN focuses on the names of natural features and certain water resource features (e.g., canals, reservoirs) and does not rule on the names of cultural or man-made features (e.g., roads, trails, buildings).

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The BGN meets monthly to decide on geographic names issues, and its official decisions are recorded in the [Geographic Names Information System](#)—the official federal repository for place-names maintained by the USGS and BGN. The BGN’s [Action List](#) provides BGN decisions over the past year and the status of pending proposals, with generally hundreds of proposals [pending](#) at any time.

## BGN Process for Derogatory or Offensive Names

The BGN recognizes two classes of name changes: (1) those made to bring official federal usage into agreement with local usage and/or support and (2) those made to eliminate particular name problems (e.g., names asserted to be offensive). Any individual or agency may submit a proposal to the BGN to change an existing name that they consider offensive; the proposal must include reasons why and a proposed replacement name. With some exceptions, BGN considers name changes on a case-by-case basis.

## Progress of the Derogatory Geographic Names Task Force

In [response](#) to SO 3404, the USGS [identified](#) more than 660 geographic features with the term *squaw* in the name and developed a [list](#) of five candidate names for each feature based on nearby named geographical features. In February 2022, the USGS [published](#) two *Federal Register* notices in response to SO 3404:

- [Requesting](#) public comment on candidate replacement names for geographic feature names and
- [Providing](#) notice of tribal consultation sessions and comment.

The task force [received](#) over 6,600 public comments by the comment deadline and approximately 300 comments through tribal consultation. In July 2022, the task force provided its recommendations to the BGN, which has [60 days](#) to vote on them. Although some have [argued](#) this accelerated process may rename features out of line with local interests, the BGN has [noted](#) that any interested party can propose a subsequent name change through the standard BGN process following execution of SO 3404.

## Advisory Committee on Reconciliation in Place Names

In January 2022, pursuant to SO 3405, NPS [published a request for nominations](#) to the Advisory Committee on Reconciliation in Place Names. The committee is charged with developing a process to solicit, encourage, and assist proposals to the Secretary to change derogatory geographic names. In February 2022, [NPS filed a committee charter](#), which specified that the committee is to report to the Secretary through the Director of NPS and is to receive administrative and funding support from NPS. In addition to the 17 discretionary members, the charter specifies that 4 ex officio members representing the Departments of the Interior, Agriculture, Defense, and Commerce also are to serve on the committee. On August 9, 2022, Secretary Haaland [announced](#) the members appointed to the committee.

## Issues for Congress

In certain instances, recommendations for geographic name changes submitted to the BGN would require an act of Congress to effectuate such a change. In particular, the BGN generally does not have the authority to change geographic names of federal land units named and established by Congress. As a result, the newly established task force and committee may refer some of their recommendations to Congress for legislative consideration.

In addition, Congress may have a broader interest in how the BGN and SO processes are executed and may want to provide direction to the process, whether through oversight or legislation. For example,

Congress might consider the extent to which name changes consider various stakeholder perspectives, particularly when such changes deviate from present local usage. There may be interest in expanding or limiting the scope of what terms and names are considered under the SOs or in providing alternative administrative direction to the process. For example, the Reconciliation in Place Names Act (S. 2400/H.R. 4454), introduced in July 2021, would direct the Secretary to establish a similar committee to that established under SO 3405 to advise the BGN for renaming geographic features with names considered offensive or derogatory. The legislation also would define what constitutes an “offensive place name” and would establish various timelines and reporting requirements for consideration of potential geographic name changes.

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