

## Advisory panel wrestles with derogatory names

The Interior Department committee last week started with dissecting exactly what kind of place names are offensive.



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Interior Secretary Deb Haaland testifying before the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee. A committee created by Haaland is examining derogatory place names. | Kevin Dietsch/Getty Images

**GREENWIRE** | A new Interior Department advisory panel on place names has immediately confronted its most elemental challenge.

In its inaugural two days of meetings last Wednesday and Thursday, Interior's Advisory Committee on Reconciliation in Place Names dug into what, exactly, were the kinds of names that offend.

“We spent a lot of time pondering how to define 'derogatory' when it comes to place names,” panel member Aimee Villarreal, an assistant professor of anthropology at Texas State University, told E&E News.

Villarreal added that the 18-member committee considered whether to augment the definition with some additional guiding principles and a value statement, but it did not vote on the matter. The nomenclature stakes are far-reaching, as names deemed derogatory are likely to be targeted for revision.

“The very deep discussions we had about the impact of the definition of the word 'derogatory' is emblematic of the difficult work of the committee and reach of the work we will engage in,” said committee vice chair Rachel Pereira, adding that she is “ever the more confident that this committee will serve to advance our national goal of 'creating a more perfect union.’”

Pereira is a civil rights attorney and vice president of equity and inclusion at St. John's University.

The panel’s draft working definition says derogatory means a “disparaging or pejorative term used to label a group of people by race, religion, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation or other arbitrary characteristics in a disrespectful and demeaning manner.”

Interior Secretary Deb Haaland announced the committee in November 2021, and named its members last August. Its stated purpose is to “broadly solicit, review and recommend changes to derogatory geographic and federal land unit names.”

The committee will also develop a “process to solicit and assist with proposals to the Secretary to identify and change derogatory names,” according to Interior.

Its turf covers named topographic features, such as rivers and mountains, as well as federal land units owned by agencies like the National Park Service. It does not include named structures such as bridges and buildings.

“Our nation’s lands and waters should be places to celebrate the outdoors and our shared cultural heritage, not to perpetuate the legacies of oppression,” Haaland said in August, adding that the committee will “accelerate an important process to reconcile derogatory place names.”

The committee tapped as its chair Howard Dale Valandra, a member of the Tribal Land Enterprise Board of Directors with the Rosebud Sioux Tribe.

The federal renaming exercise is taking place on several fronts.

In September, the Board on Geographic Names approved replacement names for more than 650 geographic features that previously included the slur for a Native American woman the Interior Department now cites as “sq\_\_\_\_\_.” The name changes range from renaming a canyon in Arizona’s Mohave County to Red Rock Canyon to a creek in in Wyoming’s Teton County becoming Paateheya’ateka’a Naokwaide.

Haaland has announced Interior will stop using the offensive word in any "official-related communications," substituting it with "sq\_\_\_\_\_" instead ([Greenwire](#), Feb. 22).

Further exemplifying the work that still lies ahead, the Board on Geographic Names' Domestic Names Committee voted unanimously at its October meeting to rename "Negro Creek" in Oregon to "Jack Carson Creek."



#### YOUR ACCOUNT MANAGEMENT TEAM

Tejus Gangadhar

Sr. Business Development Associate, Pro  
tgangadhar@politico.com

Aaron Czarnopys

Account Executive, Pro  
aczarnopys@politico.com

