

United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON
HOMELAND SECURITY AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6250

CHRISTOPHER R. HIXON, STAFF DIRECTOR
MARGARET E. DAUM, MINORITY STAFF DIRECTOR

June 19, 2017

The Honorable Ryan Zinke
Secretary
Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Mr. Secretary:

The Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs is conducting oversight of the Department's regulation of federally-recognized place names that may be considered to be racist or offensive. Even today, federal maps and documents recognize place names such as "Dead Negro Hollow," "Chinaman Trail," and "Dago Spring." We write to ask that the Department of the Interior review and take appropriate steps to address any remaining racist or offensive place names in use on federal maps or documents.

The U.S. Board on Geographic Names (Board) — an interagency commission led by the U.S. Geological Survey, an agency within the Department of the Interior — standardizes the names of locations and features used by federal entities.¹ The Board's Domestic Names Committee maintains a list of derogatory names that the Board has determined to be highly offensive or derogatory to a particular racial or ethnic group, gender, or religious group. The Board currently considers offensive or racist names on a case-by-case basis as it reviews requests for name changes.²

Reasonable people may find different terms offensive, and local opinions on place names may vary; however, it has been almost fifty years since the Board updated its list for universally-recognized offensive place names. We respectfully encourage the Department of the Interior to review the Board's policies and procedures on federally-recognized derogatory names to determine whether additional terms should be added to its list or whether the Board should conduct a proactive review of individual place names in federal use.

The Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs is authorized by Rule XXV of the Standing Rules of the Senate to investigate "the efficiency, economy, and effectiveness of all agencies and departments of the Government." Additionally, S. Res. 62 (115th Congress) authorizes the Committee to examine "the efficiency and economy of all branches and functions of the Government"

¹ U.S. Board on Geographic Names (BGN), <https://geonames.usgs.gov/>.

² Principles, Policies, and Procedures: Domestic Geographic Names (Chapter 3. Policy II. Name Changes), 1997, available at https://geonames.usgs.gov/docs/pro_pol_pro.pdf.

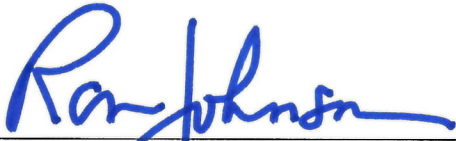
The Honorable Ryan Zinke

June 19, 2017

Page 2

If you have any questions about this matter, please ask your staff to contact Jerry Markon of the Majority Committee staff at 202-224-4751 or Hannah Berner of the Minority Committee Staff at 202-224-5065. Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Ron Johnson
Chairman



Claire McCaskill
Ranking Member