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The Law of Naming Places in Minnesota

The legislature, in recent years, has considered bills that proposed to change the names of cities and natural resources place names. Some, but not all, of these bills have become law. This is a summary of state law on changing geographic names and the obstacles.

State Constitution

The legislature can't enact special laws to rename geographic places. Pertaining to the prohibition of special legislation, [article XII, section 1](#), of the Minnesota Constitution says: "The legislature shall pass no local or special law authorizing . . . changing the names of *persons, places, lakes or rivers* . . ." (emphasis added). The article does allow the legislature to enact general laws on these topics.

State Statutes

[Minnesota Statutes, Chapter 83A, State Geographic Features](#)

This chapter gives the authority to determine the correct and most appropriate names of the lakes, streams, places, and other geographic features in the state to the Commissioner of Natural Resources.¹

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¹ Minn. Stat. ' 83A.02.

[Minnesota Statutes section 83A.02](#) makes the commissioner the state representative of the U.S. Geographic Board, so that there is no conflict between the state and federal designations of geographic features in the state. After the DNR commissioner has given a name, it becomes official in all maps, records, documents, etc.²

[Section 83A.04](#) prohibits a county board from establishing or changing the name of a lake, river, or other body of water without the written approval of the DNR commissioner. Additionally, a name *which has existed for 40 years* may not be changed under this statutory chapter.³

[Sections 83A.05](#) and [83A.06](#) set out the process where a water body name that has existed for less than 40 years may be changed, including:

- number of legal petitioners (15 legal voter-residents);
- petition inclusions;
- time of hearing set by county board;
- petitioners' bond and hearing notice; and
- name determination by board.

The county board may not duplicate names of existing bodies of water. A name, again that has existed for less than 40 years, must be approved by the county board if it determines it is in the permanent, best interest of the affected county.⁴

Federal Authority

Public Law 80-242 established the U.S. Geographic Board in 1947. The membership of the board is made up of one representative from eight different federal agencies and institutions, although other federal representatives may be added as needed. The purpose of the board is to formulate principles, policies, and procedures to be followed with reference to both domestic and foreign geographic names, and to decide the standard names for official use.

The establishment of the board originally stated: “The existence of a body of standardized geographic names, widely available on a national basis, but related strongly to local usage, makes a large contribution to savings and efficiency in the operation of government, business and industry, communications, and education.”

The Commissioner of Natural Resources, through the Division of Waters, works closely and cooperates with the U.S. Geographic Board on any name changing. There is usually little dissent between the state and the U.S. Board regarding what a geographic feature is named, although it can happen.

² [Minn. Stat. § 83A.03.](#)

³ [Minn. Stat. § 83A.05.](#)

⁴ [Minn. Stat. § 83A.07.](#)

[Minnesota Statutes section 83A.02](#) mandates there should be no conflict between the state and federal geographic name designations. However, if Minnesota considers an appropriate name, it doesn't have to be accepted federally. Thus, federal maps and records may refer to the feature by a different name.

Minnesota Legislation

Bills have been introduced in the legislature recently that have proposed geographic and municipal or township name changes. In 1995, a law was enacted that changed the geographic names of 19 features with the word "Squaw" to other nonderogatory names in 11 different counties. ([Laws 1995, chap. 53](#))

[Laws 2000, chapter 253](#), allowed the Crow Wing County Board to change a township name, without complying with statutory petition requirements, after receiving a township board of supervisors' resolution to do so.⁵

[House File 819 of 2001](#) authorized the Wright County Board to change the name of a body of water without meeting the statutory approval of the DNR. This bill had a hearing, but was laid over and didn't address the constitutional prohibition of geographic name changing mentioned on the first page.

[House File 2425 of 2001](#) would clarify [Minnesota Statutes section 83A.02](#) on having a derogatory name on any state geographic feature and allow the DNR the flexibility to change this kind of name, but the bill was not enacted.

⁵ Both [Minnesota Statutes, chapter 379](#), and [Minnesota Statutes section 413.02](#), provide for towns and cities to change their names upon petition by legal voters and a process and affirmative vote by residents at any general or special election. Readers may remember in 2000 that the voters of St. Augusta changed their name to the city of Ventura, only to go back six months later to become the city of St. Augusta again.