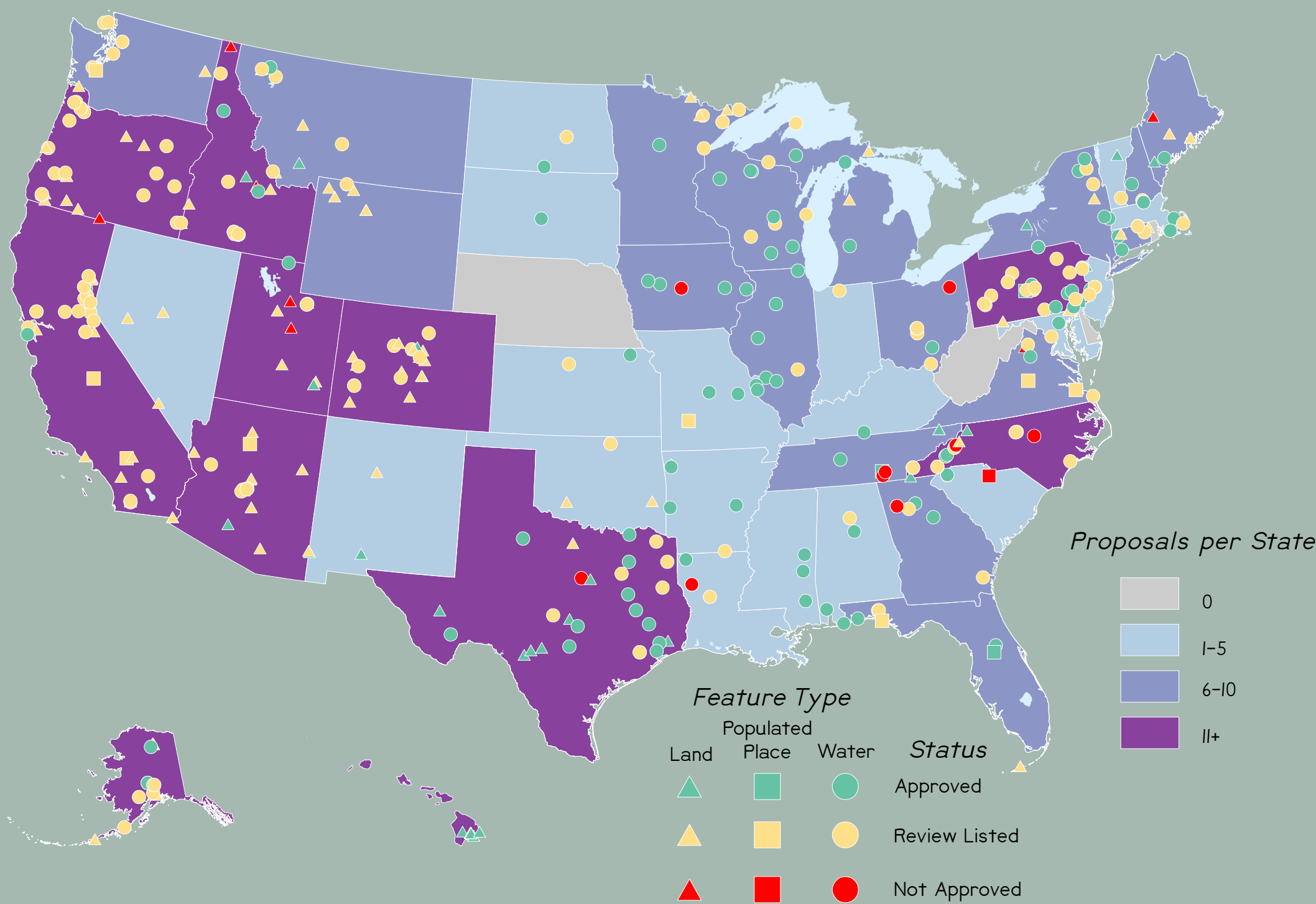


What's In A Name Change?

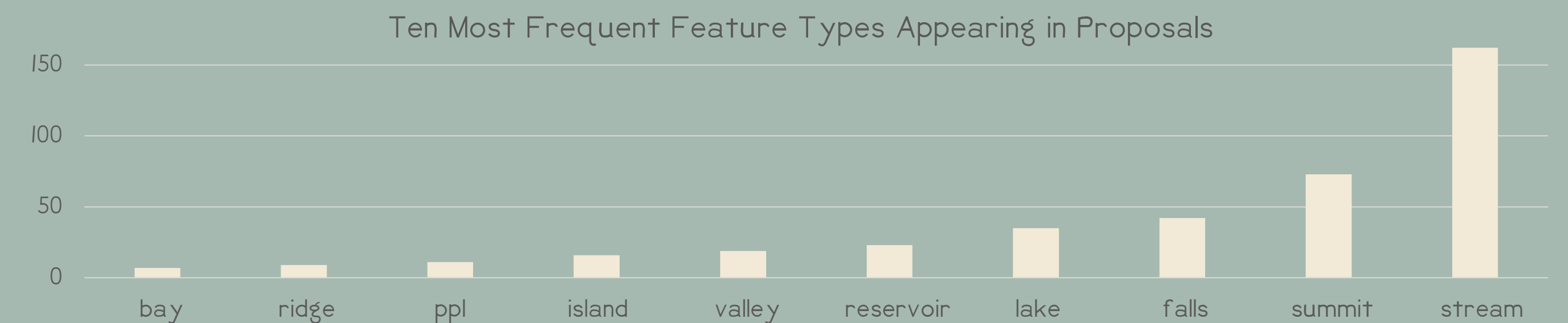
Adjusting Official Toponyms in the United States

Toponyms, place names, are pretty important! How do you know where you're going if you don't know what "where" is? Who decides what place names show up on the map? Who decided that New York is New York, or Buffalo, Buffalo? What if I want to call it something else? What if a place doesn't have a name yet? What if it's got a name but that name contains a derogatory term?

Who's in charge here?

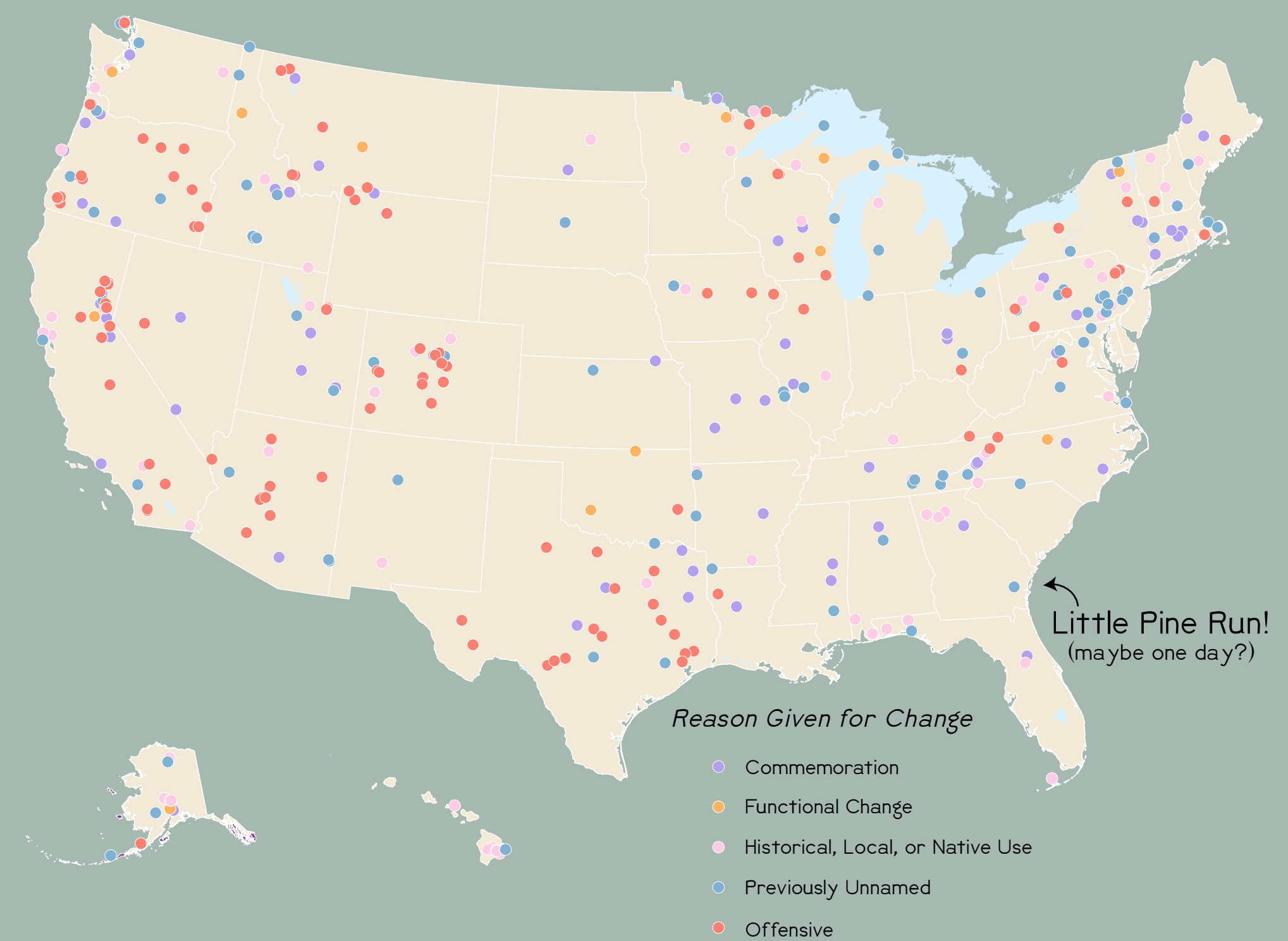


In the United States, it's the US Board of Geographic Names (BGN). The BGN was established in 1890 and given authority to resolve any "unsettled questions regarding geographic names," which was extended in 1906 "to standardize all geographic names for Federal use," and today exists as a council of experts charged with "solving name discrepancies, approving new names, validating and recording existing names, and promulgating all official names!" Which...okay sure, sounds good, but what does that look like, in practice, in 2022? Let's take a look at the last year in BGN proposals. According to the latest Action List, a list of all active proposals and decisions made over the last 12 months, the BGN logged 458 proposals. Of these 139 were approved, 22 not approved, and the remaining 297 are review listed, which basically means that the board hasn't made a decision yet.

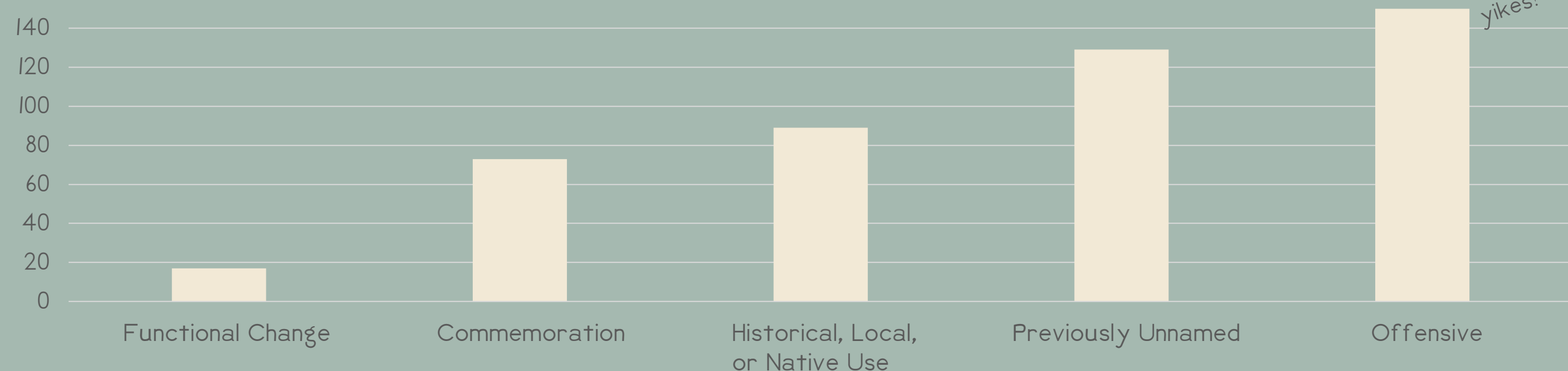


Why do names change?

Names change for all kinds of reasons. Sometimes a proposal is submitted to commemorate a notable person from the area. Sometimes it's to correct a long-incorrect spelling or some other perfunctory reason. Sometimes the change is that the feature never had an official name. Sometimes the name contains a term that the maker of this infographic is not going to type out here. The landscape is littered with names and they're changing all the time. To choose one at random, that dot near Savannah, GA? If the board approves, that'll be a new name, Little Pine Run, for an unnamed feature. It's about three tenths of a mile long, it arguably doesn't need a name. That's what a lot of these features are, though. Judgement calls. Because naming affects more than just the map.

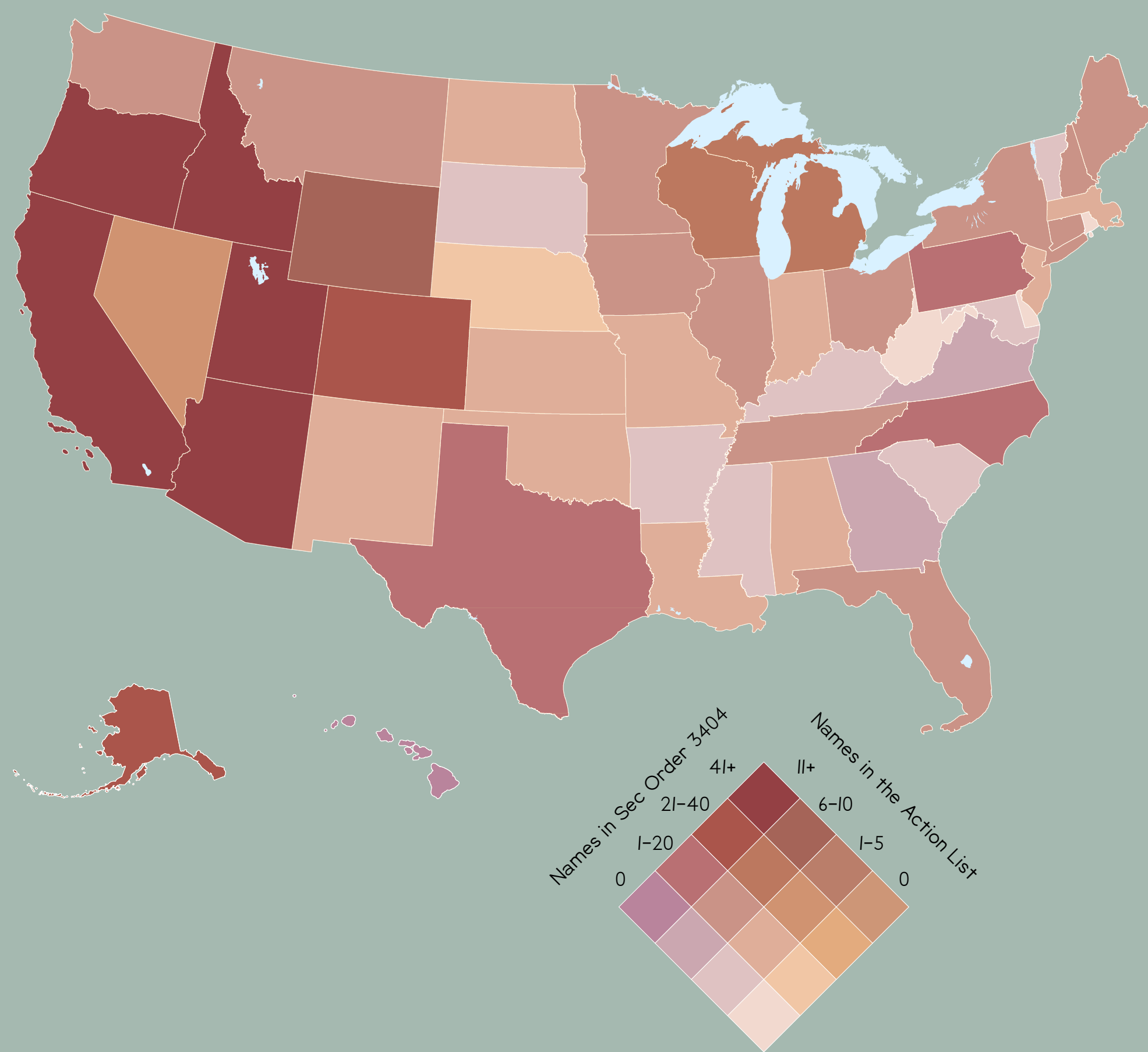


Count of Reasons Given for Change

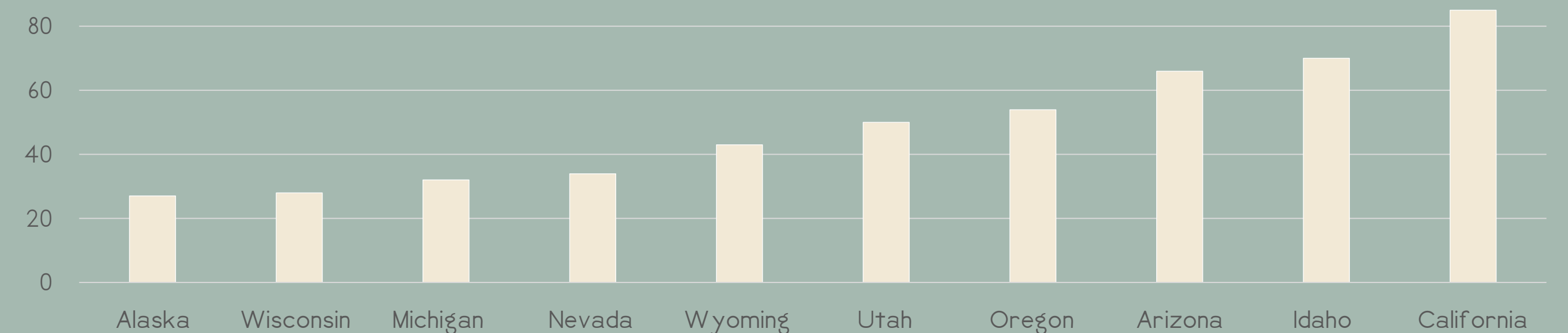


Why does it matter?

Names have power. Names have agency. Giving a place a name lends meaning to both the location and what you call it, and just as a name can honor it can cause harm. This fall Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland, an enrolled member of the Laguna Pueblo tribe, issued Secretarial Order 3404, declaring that one specific derogatory adjective won't be found on the landscape any longer. She's ordered the creation of a task force dedicated to sweeping the term 'sq___' from Federal lands, following the precedent set by previous Secretaries to remove other pejoratives from the map and replace them with better terminology. Many of the offensive terms on the Action List contained this term and some others, but it didn't include all of them: the list covered by Sec Order 3404 identifies 664(!) toponyms containing that slur, from Maine to Hawai'i.



States with the Most Toponyms in the Sec Order 3404 List



What can I do about it?

Do you know a feature that doesn't have an official name? Or an official name that contains an offensive term? How about a feature that your community agrees should be given a commemorative name? The process all starts with submitting a proposal to the BGN, procedures for which can be found at <https://www.usgs.gov/us-board-on-geographic-names>

Credits

Cartography, text, and charts by Victoria Johnson-Dahl

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Data: USBGN/GeoNames, Department of the Interior, and Natural Earth

¹Quoted text from the USBGN Domestic Names Committee Principles, Policies, and Procedures document, available at https://geonames.usgs.gov/docs/pubs/DNC_PPP_DEC_2016_V.2.2.pdf