

Peak near Yosemite likely to be named for Olympic skier

By Michael Doyle, McClatchy Newspapers

WASHINGTON – Congress stretched the rules a bit by naming a Yosemite National Park-area mountain after the late Olympic star and longtime Mono County Supervisor Andrea Lawrence. And most everyone is cool with that.

Within days, President Obama is expected to sign the legislation designating a 12,240-foot peak near Yosemite and the Inyo National Forest as “Mount Andrea Lawrence.” The legislation that passed the House of Representatives and the Senate also happens to shed light on how politics and bureaucracy can sometimes compete in the naming of the American landscape.

“Conflict in naming geographic features (was), in fact, a serious detriment to the orderly process of exploring and settling this country,” the U.S. Board on Geographic Names noted in one extensive report.

Established in 1890, the U.S. Board on Geographic Names usually handles the official naming of natural features such as lakes, peaks and valleys. Sometimes, as with Congress designating Mount Andrea Lawrence, the board is bypassed.

Sometimes, the board’s own work gets surprisingly provocative.

Currently, for instance, the board is considering a proposal to designate two unnamed Arizona peaks as “Bosom Peaks.” The proponent explained to officials that “to a motorist driving Highway 64, they resemble exactly what the name proposes.”

In Northern California’s Placer County, an African American rancher wants to rename “Coon Creek” as “Hidden Falls Creek”

to shed racist connotations.

Florida residents are haggling over whether a barrier island should be called San Pablo Island or the more patriotically commemorative "Veterans Island."

In November, board meeting minutes show, officials discussed proposals to strip the name "squaw," which Native Americans consider derogatory, from a number of Oregon natural features. Unanimously, board members also rejected a proposal to rename Mill Branch in North Carolina's Ashe County as "Hippie Creek."

Besides considering name changes, the board sets policies that lawmakers can sidestep. One board policy is that a person must be deceased for at least five years before a commemorative naming proposal will be considered. Another policy discourages naming features in designated wilderness areas unless an "overriding need" can be demonstrated.

Congress, though, can also take matters into its own hands; particularly, as with the Mount Andrea Lawrence proposal renaming, when the honoree is locally renowned.

"Her passion and achievements were both larger than life, which is why I cannot think of a more fitting tribute than to name this majestic peak in her honor," declared Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif.

An alpine ski racer in the 1948, 1952 and 1956 Winter Olympics, Lawrence earned two gold medals and eventual election to the U.S. National Ski Hall of Fame before moving to Mono County on the east side of the Sierra Nevada. She was active in environmental protection efforts and served 16 years on the county's Board of Supervisors, establishing along the way the Friends of Mammoth and the Andrea Lawrence Institute for Mountains and Rivers.

Lawrence died March 31, 2009, at age 76.

By the usual standards of the U.S. Board on Geographic Names, advocates would wait until March 2014 before proposing the name. Instead, in April 2010, Boxer joined with Rep. Howard "Buck" McKeon, R-Santa Clarita, in introducing the Andrea Lawrence bill.

Wendy Sugimura, former mayor of Mammoth Lakes, said last week that "while not everyone agreed with Andrea, particularly on a political level," the naming of a mountain peak after her was appropriate because "she was responsible for so much preservation of the Mono County heritage."

Congress formally sent the bill to the White House on Monday, starting a 10-day clock for Obama to sign it.