

WHY STREAM NAMES MATTER

Ditch vs. creek, stream, river etc.

Calling it a ditch encourages people to treat it like a ditch, while calling it a stream encourages us to respect all functions it serves (e.g. for water supply, recreation, flood prevention, fish & wildlife).

Streams were not called ditches in early historic times. After the Saline and Salt Fork were modified to facilitate drainage, people began calling them ditches and treating them like drains and sewers. Americans reversed that trend in 1972, passing the Clean Water Act “to restore and maintain the chemical, physical and biological integrity of the Nation’s waters”. The term “drainage ditch” is a holdover from an earlier era, implying that drainage can come at the expense of other important functions that are now protected by the Clean Water Act of 1972: e.g. drinking water supply; fishing; wading; wildlife habitat; boating and other water-based recreation.

The Upper Salt Fork Drainage District has argued in court that drainage should take precedence over other uses. When riverside landowners objected to plans for clear-cutting and dredging, the District’s lawyer tried to influence the judge by getting an expert witness to say that a drainage ditch is an “open sewer”. The expert refused, but this illustrates the kind of subtle message conveyed by calling the Salt Fork River a drainage ditch.

As every subdivision developer knows, the aesthetic appeal of names (even streets and streams) can add market value to adjoining properties.

State and federal policies

The proposal would end decades of conflicting, confusing, and incorrect names that have been used locally over the years. It complies with the policies set by the responsible federal agency, the U.S. Board of Geographic Names. It also has been endorsed by the Illinois Geographic Names Authority.

The long history of confusing and conflicting names can be resolved by action of the Board, which assigned the official name to the Salt Fork River many years ago, but not yet to these two tributaries.

When a stream is modified to facilitate a particular use such as drainage or navigation, it does not trigger a name change. Changing Mississippi River to Mississippi Ditch would implicitly denigrate other uses like recreation and water supply, which must also be protected under the law. The Saline and Salt Fork are simply modified streams, just as the Mississippi and Illinois are modified rivers.

Historical accuracy

The Upper Salt Fork has 7 different names on various maps and publications currently in use. The “Saline” is also known by several different names, including its historic “Branch of Salt Fork” and even today West Branch of Salt Fork which appears on old deeds, and various versions of Saline Ditch, Saline Branch Ditch and more commonly Saline Branch Drainage Ditch.

Preserving the earliest historic names is important because they help tell the story of the area’s discovery and exploration.

Opposition to the proposal

Groups like the Farm Bureau are opposing the change because they claim that drainage should have supremacy over other legitimate uses.

Some fear any change in the status quo because they are comfortable with “traditional” operating and maintenance practices. However as we learned from the ammonia spill that killed 115,000 fish in the Saline and Salt Fork, the “best practice” of previous decades is not necessarily “best practice” today.

Others fear that a name change has legal implications imposing tougher water quality standards or restrictions on maintenance practices. No laws or regulations are affected by renaming.