

Gulf Coast Oil Platforms: Save the Rigs?

A federal program urges the fast removal of “idle iron” oil and gas platforms in the Gulf of Mexico. But in an unexpected twist, some environmentalists want the rigs to remain as a home for fish.



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This year, it's likely more than 100 offshore structures in the Gulf of Mexico will be removed as part of a Department of the Interior plan. There are 650 nonproducing oil and gas platforms, known in the industry as “idle iron,” listed for removal “as soon as possible”—i.e. within five years of the end of production or a year of losing the lease—under Interior’s directive. Historically, companies seldom removed an idle structure until the lease for the area where it was located expired.

Having companies clean up after themselves sounds like a good idea, but many recreational fishermen, scuba divers, scientists, and fishery managers aren't happy about it. Turns out, some of the 2,500 multileg platforms that pepper the Gulf of Mexico have become [de facto artificial reefs](#). According to [Bob Shipp](#), University of South Alabama’s Department of Marine Sciences, the platforms have transformed the entire ecosystem. Some marine species are attracted to platforms for shelter or food, but others—sea fans, sponges, algae, and reef fish—spend their entire life cycle on these structures. What’s more, some species have increased in number because of the platforms.

Typically, platform removal involves using explosives on each of the support legs. These blasts kill fish and other marine life, says Clint Moore, a vice president for corporate development at [ION Geophysical Corporation](#) and former oil and gas representative to the [Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary Advisory Council](#). The [federal Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement](#) estimates that removing a platform kills 800 fish on average. Fishermen put the number in the tens of thousands.

Brent Casey, a fishing charter boat captain in Port Aransas, Texas, says that even the government's low figure means a single platform removal kills an entire year's catch limit of red snapper. "In another three years, there won't be anywhere to fish off of Port Aransas, no reef habitat," Casey says.

Rather than remove a structure, under federally endorsed but state-run Rigs-to-Reefs programs, companies can convert platforms to a designated artificial reef. These artificial reefs are an important part of conserving marine habitat, says Dale Shively, manager of the program for Texas. Yet as of 2009, only 2 percent of decommissioned platforms in less than 100 feet of water and 38 percent of those between 101 and 200 feet of water were officially reefed—generally meaning moved (but not all; some are toppled in place). Drew Hunger, manager of decommissioning for Houston-based [Apache Corporation](#), one of the largest operators in the Gulf, blames a restrictive and lengthy permitting process.

Another problem with the Rigs-to-Reefs program: reefed platforms must be toppled or dropped to a depth of at least 85 feet beneath the water surface, but before reefing, most marine creatures are living on the part of the structure at depths of about 60 feet or shallower.

Louisiana Senator David Vitter introduced legislation last year that would leave the platforms where they are if protected—or valuable—marine life was found on or around them. Mississippi Representative Steve Palazzo filed a similar bill. Neither is likely to make it out of committee this session. [As California has discovered in establishing its own rigs-to-reefs regime](#), the politics of decommissioning platforms attracts schools of opposing viewpoints, too.

John Hoffman, CEO of Houston-based [Black Elk Energy](#), recently founded nonprofit [Save the Blue](#) to encourage reefing by using funds normally spent on platform decommissioning and removal to provide insurance and ongoing maintenance for the structures as reefs. (The organization is still getting its legs.)

On the other hand, it may not always be a bad idea to remove idle platforms: Improperly capped or poorly maintained wells can leak, and storm damage can cause spills. Platforms may disrupt sargassum mats—important habitat for a number of marine species, according to Emma Hickerson, a research coordinator at the Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary; and the structures have been demonstrated to serve as stepping-stones for invasive species.

But [Paul Sammarco](#), a professor at Louisiana Universities Marine Consortium, counters that, while platforms can facilitate the spread of invasive species, those species would proliferate without the platforms, too. Invaders spread via the hulls and ballast water of thousands of ships traveling these waters every year, and the larvae of some species travel long distances naturally.

Given the controversy, and with so much at stake, re-evaluation of the pace of platform removal seems a reasonable request, and one that has been made by a number of groups, including the Gulf Coast Fishery Management Council; Coastal Conservation Association, which represents recreational anglers; and the Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary Advisory Council.