



April 17, 2023

The Honorable Jeff Merkley  
Chair  
Senate Interior Appropriations  
Room S-128, The Capitol  
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Lisa Murkowski  
Ranking Member  
Senate Interior Appropriations  
Room S-128, The Capitol  
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Mike Simpson  
Chair  
House Interior Appropriations  
H-307 The Capitol  
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Chellie Pingree  
Ranking Member  
House Interior Appropriations  
H-307 The Capitol  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Deary Chair Merkley, Ranking Member Murkowski, Chair Simpson, and Ranking Member Pingree:

As leaders of the bipartisan Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas state legislative sportsmen's caucuses, we are writing to express our strong support for including report language in the Fiscal Year 2024 Senate and House Interior Appropriations Bill to minimize the loss of valuable fisheries habitat and angling access opportunities in the Gulf of Mexico (Gulf). Specifically, we are requesting that you include report language that will facilitate the conversion of decommissioned Outer Continental Shelf (OCS) oil and gas platforms to permanent artificial reefs under the Rigs to Reefs program.

Once installed, OCS oil and gas platforms become an essential part of the Gulf's marine ecosystem, enhancing fisheries productivity through providing important nutrient-assimilating habitat in areas otherwise dominated by mud and sand bottoms. In fact, a March 2020 report funded by the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management and the Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement found that as much as 45% of the estimated Gulf-wide biomass of greater amberjack, a species currently under a Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Gulf Council) rebuilding plan, is found on OCS oil and gas platforms. In a presentation to the Gulf Council's Science and Statistical Committee, the study authors stated that, "Platform removals are likely having, and will likely have, significant adverse impacts on local fisheries, especially those offshore of Louisiana and Mississippi."

In addition to the ecosystem services they provide, these platforms become fishing destinations vital to recreational and commercial fishing along the Gulf and contribute significantly to the region's economy. From the recreational fishing perspective alone, there are approximately 2.6 million anglers in the Gulf

who contribute \$13.5 billion to the annual economy and create more than 100,000 jobs. Unfortunately, of all the platforms installed over the last 70 years, little more than 20% remain and many more are slated for removal in the next 1-3 years. With regards to the safety of a well that has been plugged and abandoned, there is no difference between a platform that is reefed versus a platform that is removed.

To preserve this valuable habitat for fish, corals, and other aquatic species, we need specific instructions by Congress to allow operators the necessary time to enter into the program on a voluntary basis. Under existing regulations, once an oil or natural gas platform operating on the OCS is no longer producing oil or gas, companies have one year to remove the structure. However, due to the planning required and the coordination with state fish and wildlife agencies, it is often challenging to secure the required permits and agreements to donate a decommissioned platform or other structure to the Rigs-to-Reefs program within that time frame.

Therefore, we urge that report language, similar to what is proposed below, be included in both the House and Senate Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies appropriations bill:

*Rigs to Reefs.—The Committee strongly supports the Rigs to Reefs program in cooperation with the States and NOAA for its habitat conservation value for fish, corals, and other marine animals. The Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement is encouraged to utilize the program to the maximum extent possible and pause any decommissioning orders or civil penalties for entities that declare and demonstrate a desire to participate in the Rigs to Reef program and can exhibit that any such platform: (i) is not a risk to marine navigation or the environment; and (ii) that any oil and gas wells connected to the offshore infrastructure have been plugged and abandoned or otherwise secured in a safe manner.*

Oil and gas platforms have contributed significantly to the highly regarded recreational fishing opportunities the Gulf affords for anglers across the country. We urge you to include this language so that we can ensure the maximum number of platforms remain in the Gulf as valuable fish habitat, and the vibrant Gulf Coast economy centered on recreational fishing opportunities will continue to prosper for future generations.

Sincerely,

Senator Clay Scofield  
Alabama Legislative Sportsmen's Caucus

Senator Jack Williams  
Alabama Legislative Sportsmen's Caucus

Representative Danny Crawford  
Alabama Legislative Sportsmen's Caucus  
NASC Executive Council

Representative David Standridge  
Alabama Legislative Sportsmen's Caucus

Senator Stewart Cathey  
Louisiana Legislative Sportsmen's Caucus

Senator Gary Smith  
Louisiana Legislative Sportsmen's Caucus

Representative Vincent Pierre  
Louisiana Legislative Sportsmen's Caucus

Representative Jerome Zeringue  
Louisiana Legislative Sportsmen's Caucus  
NASC Executive Council

Representative Scott Bounds  
Mississippi Legislative Sportsmen's Caucus  
NASC Executive Council

Representative Karl Gibbs  
Mississippi Legislative Sportsmen's Caucus

Representative Ernest Bailes  
Texas legislative Sportsmen's Caucus