

Outrage mounts over Gulf oil rig removal policy

By David Sikes

Wednesday, August 1, 2012

CORPUS CHRISTI — Outrage over the U.S. Department of Interior's wanton removal of retired oil and gas platforms in the gulf is finally approaching an appropriate pitch.

U.S. Rep. Blake Farenthold filed a [bill](#) this past week that would halt the removal by explosion and other means of these rich offshore havens for protected corals, fishes and other marine animals. Farenthold's simple and straightforward bill calls for a two-year moratorium until federal fisheries managers and the DOI can re-evaluate the destructive practice and examine the benefits of leaving the rigs in place.

This comes on the heels of a [letter](#) from the Congressional Sportsmen's Caucus to Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar also asking for a two-year moratorium on the DOI's destructive Idle Iron policy. In addition to Farenthold, the letter carries the signatures of 19 other members of Congress from both parties and 10 states.

Farenthold and Texas Gov. Rick Perry earlier sent separate letters to Salazar denouncing the policy.

Hopefully recent developments will stop the bleeding long enough for a reasonable review of this misguided policy, which requires all non producing rigs be removed from the gulf. In many cases these steel structures have been in place for decades providing shelter for hundreds of fish species and generating billions of dollars in recreational fishing and diving revenue.

These underwater ecosystems are well established with a biodiversity and abundance of life that rivals or exceeds that which is found on natural coral reefs. Texas Parks & Wildlife is funding a two-year study by the Harte Research Institute for Gulf of Mexico Studies to inventory the marine life on rigs at various depths. The study should conclude what we already know.

The Interior Department seems to stand alone in defense of its policy to rip these rich habitats from the gulf floor, leaving nothing behind. During the past two years about 475 oil and gas platforms have been removed and more than 200 additional rigs are scheduled for removal this year.

The list of vocal opponents includes the Coastal Conservation Association, Saltwater-Fisheries Enhancement Association, Environmental Defense, the Harte Research Institute for Gulf of Mexico Studies, renown oceanographer Sylvia Earle, the Gulf of Mexico Fisheries Management Council, the Port Aransas Boatmen and a growing number of federal legislators.

A federal bill called the Rigs to Reef Habitat Protection Act filed by U.S. Sen. David Vitter (R-La.), with a complimentary House version by Rep. Steve Palazzo (R-Miss.) also calls for platforms to be left in place if it is determined they harbor protected or valuable marine life. Currently there is inadequate evaluation prior to removal of what the Department of Interior ignorantly considers marine debris.

And recently the Congressional Sportsman Caucus, a bipartisan coalition of nearly 300 members of Congress representing nearly all 50 states submitted an amendment to the 2012 Farm Bill called the Sportsmen's Act of 2012. This included a provision that would have slowed the rampant destruction of platforms, while demanding the National Marine Fisheries Service (or NOAA Fisheries) assess the potential impacts of destroying these valuable artificial reef habitats. Unfortunately the amendment did not survive.

Earlier the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council began a process that could result in declaring fixed petroleum platforms and other artificial reefs with the greatest biodiversity as essential fish habitat. It could be late next year before a decision is final on this. If the rigs do achieve the status of essential fish habitat the Department of Interior would be forced to involve NOAA-Fisheries in each removal. I'm not sure how the conflicting policies of two federal agencies would be reconciled.

In June a coalition of marine conservation, tackle and boating industry groups called for a halt to the Idle Iron policy in its own letter to Salazar. And the Sportfishing and Boating Partnership Council, an 18-member committee established to advise the Department of Interior and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on recreational boating and fishing issues and aquatic resource conservation issues, also sent a letter to Salazar calling for a two-year moratorium on rig removals.

Let's hope this growing level of opposition and outrage for the policy is enough to overtake the Department of Interior's profound position of arrogance.

