

OVERVIEW

The Rigs-to-Reefs Program within the Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement's Environmental Compliance Program focuses on coordinating and facilitating the conversion of appropriately decommissioned oil and gas platforms from operators to a designated state artificial reef program.

BACKGROUND

Shortly after an offshore oil and gas platform is installed, it becomes habitat to marine life and communities begin to grow. Throughout the 1970s, fishermen, divers, and coastal states expressed concerns about the removal of these structures heavily populated with marine life.

An increased interest in fishing at platforms, and widespread support for effective artificial reef development by coastal states, prompted Congress to sign the National Fishing Enhancement Act in 1984.

The Act recognizes the social and economic value in developing artificial reefs, establishes national standards for artificial reef development, provides for creation of a National Artificial Reef Plan, and for the establishment of a reef-permitting system.

BSEE RIGS-TO-REEFS PROGRAM

BSEE is responsible for permitting the placement and eventual removal of temporary energy-related facilities on the federal Outer Continental Shelf. When an OCS lease expires and/or development and production operations cease, companies are obligated to decommission and remove their facilities and clear the seabed of all obstructions.

In response to concerns from coastal states regarding the loss of marine life from decommissioned oil and gas structures, BSEE adopted a national Rigs-to-Reefs policy. Rigs-to-Reefs ensures that platforms converted to artificial reefs are created and maintained in a safe, responsible and environmentally sound manner.

ECP advances the BSEE mission to protect the environment through vigorous regulatory oversight and enforcement.



Operators must adhere to regulatory requirements for decommissioning of oil and gas platforms and submit a reefing proposal to the state and BSEE. Marine biologists in BSEE's ECP review the proposal and coordinate with the state and operator to ensure that all reefing requirements are met.

Complex, stable, durable, and clean platforms are generally candidates for reefing. After the proposal meets BSEE engineering and environmental standards, and the state receives the Army Corps of Engineers' reef building permit, BSEE grants the operator approval to convert the structure into an artificial reef.



The three methods generally used for removing and “reefing” a retired structure are:

1. **Partial removal:** The top portion of the structure is severed at a permitted navigational depth, typically 85-feet deep, and placed on the seafloor next to the base of the remaining structure. This method generally does not use explosives.
2. **Tow-and-place:** The structure is detached from the seafloor, either using explosives or mechanical cutting techniques, and then towed to the selected reef for deployment.
3. **Topple-in-place:** The structure is detached from the seafloor, either using explosives or mechanical cutting techniques, and then toppled onto its side.

Upon completion of decommissioning and reefing of the structure, the operator submits a removal report that includes a reef deployment survey and documentation of their offshore activities.

BSEE reviews the report for compliance with the reefing plan, applicable regulations, and other requirements, such as the state accepting the title and liability for the reefed structure.

BENEFITS OF RIGS-TO-REEFS

As of 2021, more than 600 platforms have been converted to permanent artificial reefs in the Gulf of Mexico.

- Platforms converted to artificial reef continue to provide hard substrate that creates habitat and shelter for a rich diversity of marine life.
- A typical eight-leg structure provides a home for 12,000 to 14,000 fish, according to a study by the Coastal Marine Institute.
- A typical four-leg structure provides two to three acres of habitat for hundreds of marine species.

Rigs-to-Reefs is a cooperation among coastal states, BSEE, the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management and other federal agencies.

The Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement, established in 2011, is a U.S. Department of the Interior agency. BSEE promotes worker safety, environmental protection and conservation of resources through regulatory oversight and enforcement of the offshore energy industry on the U.S. Outer Continental Shelf.